

MARKETPLACE

THE DUET CONCERTINA

"Well, I beg to report I sold the 80-keyed Wheatstone (5 octaves, very heavy—only rest on the KNEES—playable in any key and sounded like a church organ). I let it go for next to nothing, worth today much more than I got for it, viz. £15. Sorry to part with it but felt I would never master it—although I didn't practice every day as one should do and I had it 40 years.... It is an instrument which has gone out of fashion, but there are cheap anglos of 30 or 20 keys which are only toys."

*R. Ison
Dorchester, England*

"With this set-up one can play all the modern harmonies and chords, and is not restricted to only those accompaniment chords provided by the accordion bass side, for example.... It can be used in ensemble playing, and can play violin, flute and other parts as well as lower parts, such as those for the viola, and even the cello and bassoon (on larger models)."

*Dr. Silas Wesley
Berkeley, California*

On my long hunt for the elusive Duet concertina I have obtained help and information from many obscure but valuable sources. Mr. Ison was referred to me by a concertina



The author with the magnificent 81-key Wheatstone McCann Duet.

enthusiast in California. He proved to be a talented caricaturist who illustrated his aerogrammes with portraits of "Bobbies" and other English folk faces. Dr. Wesley's commentary I discovered in a case together with the big Wheatstone Duet illustrated in this article.

The Duet concertina has fascinated me since I began to admire free reed instruments. I fancied a self-contained concertina, capable of playing melodies and accompaniments simultaneously. My first concertina proved to be just that sort, a rosewood-ended 55-key Lachenal McCann Duet.

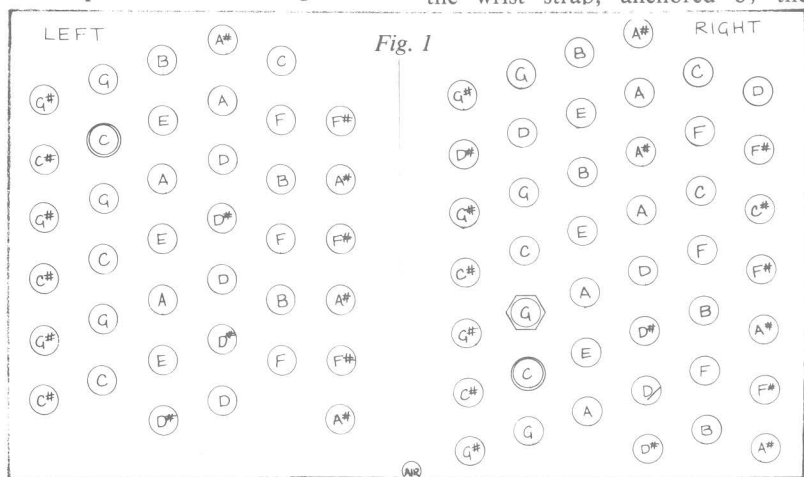
Simply put, the Duet system is identical in operation to the more familiar English and Anglo-system concertinas, except that the keyboards are arranged to facilitate

the playing of two part music ("duet"). Neither the English nor the Anglo systems permit this, since in the former, the notes of any scale will be played alternately on left and right ends, and in the latter, the diatonic nature of the instrument limits the number of suitable playing keys. The McCann Duet is fully chromatic on both left and right ends, the higher octaves appearing on the right hand, the lower octaves on the left. A cross-over exists of one-half to one and one-half octaves, depending on the size of the instrument. These notes appear as the highest pitched notes in the left hand and the lowest pitched notes in the right hand. This may be seen by examining the relative position of middle C on the right and left sides of the Wheatstone in Figure 1.

The Wheatstone illustrated is a huge 81-key instrument, more than ten inches in diameter and weighing several pounds. The full range of the

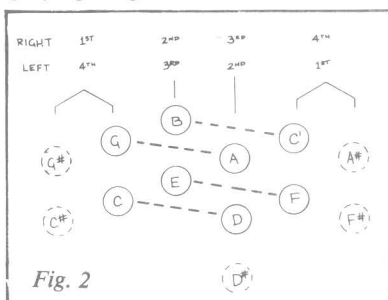
Duet keyboard is exemplified by this concertina. Middle C is located toward the bottom of the right hand and near the top of the left hand. Smaller Duets with fewer keys lack the notes at the top of the right hand, the bottom of the left hand, and are reduced in the number of crossed-over notes which appear on both ends. The most common Duet sizes are the 48 and 55-key instruments, on which the right hand range normally begins at G as shown by the hexagon in Figure 1, although they sometimes begin at middle C. Duets exist with as few as 30-odd keys, but the 48 to 72-key instruments, growing larger and heavier with each increment of range, seem to be most popular. I now use a 55-key Wheatstone which starts at middle C in the right hand, and it has the advantages of smaller size and lighter weight while possessing sufficient range in both hands.

The McCann Duet is held through the wrist strap, anchored by the

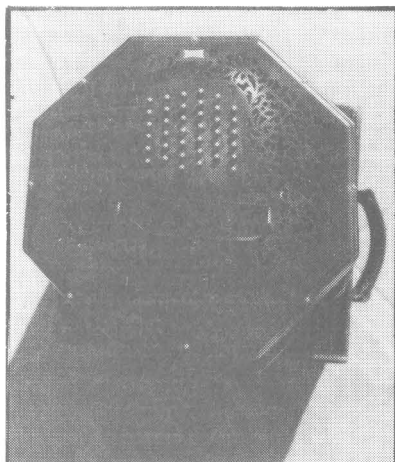


Keyboard Pattern for the 81-key Wheatstone McCann Duet Concertina, s/n 29524. Middle C is indicated by the double circle, and the hexagonal G indicates the usual starting place for 48 and 55-key right hand keyboards.

thumb, and played with all four fingers, the index and fourth fingers bearing responsibility for two rows of keys each. (Figure 2). Although the keyboard is presented vertically, it is actually considered horizontally, as the scales in any key proceed roughly across one "row" and then across the next "row" higher. The staggering of keys to accommodate the natural curve of the hand obscures this horizontal orientation, but Figure 2 illustrates a portion of the C major scale, in which the fingers walk from C (first finger, right hand) to D (third finger), up to E (2nd finger), F (4th finger), up to G (first finger), A (third finger), up to B (2nd finger) and C octave (4th finger). Two notes appear in each horizontal "row", and the fingers are ordered 1-3-2-4 for maximum flow. Other scales operate similarly, but not identically. Chords can easily be obtained, and complex chords beyond basic majors and minors are within the scope of the keyboard. It is possible to play the Duet with a harmonic "flourish", though that style of playing is "gone out of fashion."

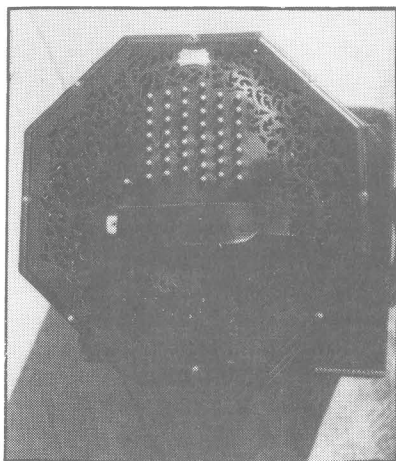


One octave section of the McCann keyboard showing placement of the fingers of each hand and the horizontal "row" arrangement of scales (i.e. the C major scale shown here).



Wheatstone McCann Duet, left hand keyboard.

The original Duet fingering system is attributed to Wheatstone and was included in his Patent No. 10041 of 1844.¹ The original instrument apparently had 24 keys, set out in the key of G major. Patent 10041 shows four additional Duet systems, the largest a chromatic eight-row instrument. McCann's Patent No. 4752, from 1884, covers an improved Wheatstone keyboard of 39-58 keys. This system is in most common use—Lachenal Duets frequently bear McCann's patent number on the underside of the palm rest—but many modified Duets exist. There seem to have been frequent attempts to smooth the flow of fingering: the Duet is not considered to be as graceful as the English system nor as quick, since all melody is played on one or the other hand, rather than alternating melody from right to left hand as is done on the English system concertina. The Duet can play more intricate and more complete music than the English or Anglo con-



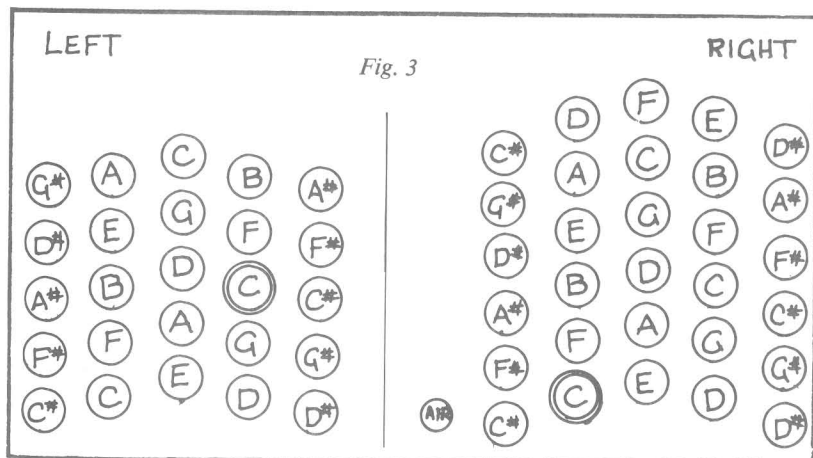
Wheatstone 81-key McCann duet, right hand keyboard.

tinias, which are harmonically limited by placement of notes, and in the Anglo, by diatonic tuning.

For some time I taught myself scales and accompaniment chords in the keys of C, G, F and D, and met

no other Duet players until a friend introduced me to Michael Pratt at the 1976 San Diego (California) Folk Festival. To my amazement, Michael pulled from his duffle bag a Lachenal Duet identical to mine. He, too, was self-taught and without knowledge of other players. We struck up a fine friendship which led me to Vancouver where we now both play Duets on the odd occasion when we have the opportunity.² Michael began as a ballad player, weaving light accompaniments under his fine singing voice, while I played a more rhythmic style which reflected a number of years experience playing stringed instruments. We have gradually come to adopt each other's style until we are reasonably proficient at both!

Bernie Evans in Alberta is the only other Duet player in Canada with whom I am familiar, though there certainly must be others. Bernie plays a Triumph system Duet—a favourite



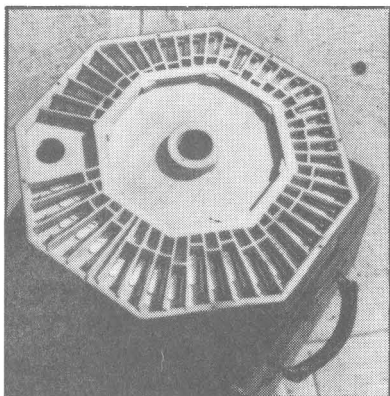
Keyboard Pattern for a typical 55-key Triumph Duet Concertina. Middle C is indicated by the double circle. Note there are only five vertical rows. Placement of notes is quite different from that of the McCann design.

of Salvation Army street musicians—which is similar in concept to the McCann system but employs only five vertical rows of keys on each hand. (Figure 3). English system players seem to find the transition to Triumph Duet easier than to McCann, but the Triumph instruments are more rare.

A third type of Duet, made by Jeffries, resembles the Anglo concertinas produced by that company, but sound unison notes on intake and exhaust of the bellows, as is common to all Duets. These instruments are not fully chromatic but rather play around a “home key”. They are most rare, both in Canada and in England.

One must remember that the Duet was not originally a folk instrument. Like the English concertina, it began its career as a parlour instrument and soon graduated to the English music hall stage where it was successfully adapted to many types of music. The Honri Family and others made a livelihood for many years on the popular stage in Great Britain, and the instrument's most senior exponents continue to play in the heavily harmonized, flowery musical styles that were then popular.

Sadly, the Duet concertina is no longer built. There are too few demands from players for such an instrument. H. Crabb of London (158 Liverpool Road, Islington, London N1 1LA, U.K.) reportedly offered to build one recently, but the cost would have exceeded \$1500 and the waiting period was quite long. Most second-hand Duets are still in England, though I've found them in such unlikely places as Los Angeles and Oakland, California, in Mas-



Intake side of the right hand reed pan. Leather pads prevent accidental sounding of identically pitched exhaust reeds mounted on opposite side of the wooden pan.

sachusetts, and in Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia. The most reliable source is **Hobgoblin Music**, Box 5311, South San Francisco, CA 94080, USA. Cody Grundy, the manager there, is connected with Hobgoblin Music in West Sussex. He obtains used Duets from England and can have one shipped if he has none in his current stock. You can expect to pay \$300 upwards—a prime, professional instrument may command \$800 to \$1000.

Free Reed Records, of Derby, England, formerly offered some excellent Duet concertina players within their catalogue, including Tommy Williams (a McCann player of the “old school”) and Bob Roberts, the “Rampin’ Cat”, playing his Jeffries Duet. They, too, are out of business, but still you may be able to obtain some of the recordings. Try writing to Neil Wayne, Free Reed Records, Belper, Derby, DE5 1A2, England. Nor is



The largest reed in this 81-key instrument, the low A#, was too large and required too much air to be mounted directly on the pan. Wheatstone's constructed a separate air chest on the inside of the left hand reed pan to hold the one reed. This rarity caused a lot of excitement when the concertina was first opened for inspection!

any printed instruction available for the McCann Duet, as far as I know. A Salvation Army tutor for the Triumph system is available from Hobgoblin. It's *The Salvation Army Tutor for the Triumph Concertina* (London: Salvationist Publishing & Supplies Ltd.) The hymnals are not of interest to the folk player but there is information on scale and chord construction and fingerings. This material is *not* transferrable to the McCann or other Duet systems. Readers wishing more information on the McCann or other Duet concertinas are invited to write the author, 1124 South Dyke Road, New Westminster, B.C. V3M 5A3, Canada.

Robert L. Webb

1. K.V. Chidley, "The Duet Concertina—Its History and the Evolution of its Keyboard," *Free Reed*, 17 (Jan-Feb 1974), pp. 15-17.
2. Michael has recently organized a once-monthly concertina night in Vancouver, B.C. All concertina players, Duet, English and Anglo systems, are invited to swap and learn tunes. Mike may be contacted at (604)253-5410 for more information.



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