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Yo, Ho, Ho and – What’s That Squeezy Thing?

By

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Pirates of the Carribean – Curse of the Black Pearl: “You best start believin’ in ghost stories, Miss Turner...you’re in one.” And Elizabeth runs out the door only to be confronted by the ghostly crew of the Black Pearl – including a fiddler and another musician playing some handheld instrument with a lot of bellows.

Pirates of the Carribean – Dead Man’s Chest: In a tavern in Tortuga, the sailors’ brawl is accompanied by a guitar player and another one of those funny squeezy-bellows instruments!

What *is* that thing?

It’s called a concertina, and it seems to be as much a staple of Hollywood – and especially Disney – seafaring movies as swash, buckle, and hardtack.

But what *is* it? According to my favorite T-shirt, a concertina is a “free reed instrument, commonly played by depressing buttons on opposite sides of hand operated bellows. [It is] frequently played in Celtic, British, and American folk music.”¹ To add some detail, the bellows are usually made of paper, canvas or glove leather, and the ends where the buttons sit are made of carved wood – sometimes with silver or brass overlay. The ends are also usually hexagonal in shape, but occasionally older octagonal concertinas can be found.

Unlike the commonly known saxophone or clarinet wooden or grass reeds, concertina “reeds” are made of steel, copper, or brass. The term “free reed” refers to the fact that only one end of the reed is attached to the instrument via the reed pan. The other end is allowed to vibrate “freely,” which makes the sound. In contrast, saxophone and clarinet reeds are firmly connected, not only to the instrument in question, but also to the inside of the musician’s mouth, and can only vibrate slightly, not move. The concertina is a small, relatively lightweight cousin in the heavy piano accordion, melodeon (button accordion), and bandoneon (used primarily in tango music) “free reed” family.

There are two major types of concertina, the English and the Anglo-German. The English concertina usually has fifteen to twenty-four buttons per end and each button, when pressed, produces one note. The instrument is held by a leather thumbstrap and a metal pinkie rest. The English is considered a “diatonic” instrument – and contains all the accidentals, or sharps and flats, needed to play any key within the musical range of the instrument.

The Anglo-German concertina usually has between five and twenty buttons per end and each button, when pressed, produces two notes – which note is determined by which direction the bellows are moving at the time, in or out. The instrument is held by means of a strap that goes across the back of the player’s hand. The Anglo-German is considered to be a “chromatic” instrument, much like a harmonica, in that the two tones of any given buttons are a half-step

¹ Thomas J. Norulak T-shirts at www.Norulak.com.

apart, and depend upon air direction as to which is sounded. The Anglo-Germans also tend to have fewer available accidentals, and usually only play in the keys of G, C, and D.

Based upon these distinctions, it looks to me as if a German-Anglo concertina was used in both *Pirates* movies.

Concertinas at the Movies

In addition to the two *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies to date (and I and my fellow concertina enthusiasts will be scrutinizing *Pirates of the Caribbean III* very carefully for yet another sighting!), Hollywood's love of concertinas at sea date back well over fifty years, as concertinas have been spotted in the following nautical films:²

Moby Dick (Gregory Peck), 1956

Hornblower, 1951

A Night to Remember (an early film about the Titanic), 1958

North to Alaska, 1960

The Princess Comes Across, 1936

20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, 1954

Disney seems particularly enamored with the little squeezebox, and has incorporated it into more landlubber classics such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, (1937), *Pinnocchio*, (1940), and *Mary Poppins*, (1964). There's even a pirate playing a concertina in the original inspiration for Captain Jack Sparrow and his compatriots, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* Disney park ride.³

The use of a concertina and incorporation of sea shanties in *Moby Dick*, in particular, presents a particularly amusing bit of anachronism. Whaleboat crews likely did not sing shanties or play musical instruments when in active pursuit of their prey. Whales happen to have very good hearing, and are also smart enough not to sit around and wait for a noisy bunch of drunks with harpoons to show up and kill them, especially if the whales can hear them coming!⁴

Concertina History

So are concertinas historically accurate instruments for pirates and their ilk? Sadly, no. Charles Wheatstone applied for a patent for what is, essentially, the English concertina in London in early 1829. He started making them in his shop within a year of that date. An instrument that looked and played somewhat like an Anglo-German concertina but of a large rectangular rather than a small hexagonal shape, was beginning to be made in Germany at about the same time. Charles Jeffries began to manufacture, also in London, what is today considered the best Anglos (some time in the last hundred or so years, the "German" has been dropped from the name) ever made, in 1870.⁵ These dates are at least three generations away from what is considered the "Golden Age of Piracy" (1600-1725).

² For a complete list of American and foreign films where concertinas or accordions have been spotted and/or heard in the soundtrack, go to www.mediarare.com/MRFilmsq.html.

³ A photo of which can be seen at <http://themeparks.about.com/cs/disneyparks/l/blpotc12.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cowan, Joel, "A Brief History of the Jeffries Concertina." *Concertina & Squeezebox* Vol 1, No. 2 (Spring 1983), p.6.

Also, the English concertina was very expensive; gilt-patterned bellows papers were common, as were ends made from exotic woods like ebony. Many Wheatstone English concertinas, in fact, were bought for wealthy Victorians who, it is presumed, had nothing better to do with their time than to learn how to play classical music on their new instrument. Early English concertina tutorials consist mainly of classical pieces re-worked for concertina, piano, and sometimes harp. Several diaries of the time mention evening recitals in a friends' home that included the (English) concertina in a list of instruments played. If there is any place more visually removed from the wet deck of a pirate ship or a filthy seaside tavern, than a Victorian drawing room, I cannot think of it.

Fortunately, from the moment the Anglo concertina began to be produced in London, it was much cheaper than its English counterpart – so much so that it was considered inferior by English concertina aficionados. Certainly, no classical composer ever created a piece for Anglo concertina and orchestra. Also, the Anglo never suffered from the restriction of legitimacy that kept the English concertina out of the hands of the working class and subsequent folklorists for over a century. The Anglo, at least, was the concertina of the people, right from the very beginning, even if it was basically unknown to Western Europe until the mid 1800's.

However, the potential concertina-playing re-enactor should not despair at this abundance of evidence that his or her instrument of choice is a complete anachronism and should be abandoned for the sake of historical purity. The Chinese invented a free reed instrument contained in a gourd, called a "sheng." The sheng's invention is generally ascribed to the emperor Nyu-kwa who reigned in approximately 2500 BCE.⁶ The sheng was mentioned in European literature well into the seventeenth century.⁷ Some time around the late 18th century, a Danish doctor and acoustician, Professor Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein was experimenting with the combination of free reeds. He built speech machines that could say "papa" and "mama" using free reeds of brass, copper and steel.⁸ Not exactly *Sailor's Hornpipe*, but at least it was a start!

Of course, from its description, a sheng looks nothing like a contemporary concertina. But think about this: a 17th century guitar didn't look exactly like today's Gibson.

Free Reeds at Sea

Experts are pretty evenly divided as to whether concertinas really were that common aboard ship – once they were invented, of course. Master concertina player Gerard OhAllmuirhain has stated in several lectures on the history of the concertina that "one of the reasons the concertina became popular in the west of Ireland is that it was sold by ships chandelries at the ports of emigration i.e. Limerick."⁹ This would seem to confirm that cheap German concertinas, at least, were sold to seamen aboard sailing ships in the mid to late 19th century.¹⁰

Others argue that the innate inability of paper bellows and copper or brass reeds to survive in the perpetually damp conditions of a ship argue that the concertina was the instrument most likely to be voted unable to survive a sea voyage.¹¹

⁶ Author Unknown, "The Free Reed: A History, Part One" reprinted in *Concertina & Squeezebox* No. 12 (Fall 1985), p. 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p.14.

⁹ Concertina.net Forum discussion, dated January 13, 2005.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Towsley, John, "The Instrument of the Sea." *Concertina & Squeezebox* Vol. 1, No.3 (Summer 1983) p.22.

However, there is one concertina among the musical instruments that make up part of the collection at the Greenwich Maritime Museum in England. It was made by George Jones, which means it was probably made between 1850 and 1900.¹²

Stuart Frank, former director of the Kendall Whaling Museum, recounts a story of how he was once called upon to make some basic repairs to a much beloved Anglo (vintage 1910) belonging to a retired Irish sailor named T.J. Moran. This Anglo had replaced, years earlier, Moran's first concertina which was given to him as a child growing up in the Irish district of Liverpool by a retired sailor...¹³

Helen Allen sailed on board her husband's whaling bark *Merlin* and kept a diary during a four-year voyage (1868-72).¹⁴ Even though the crew of the *Merlin* was not particularly musical – probably because they were smart enough not to make so much noise as to scare away the whales! – but when in harbor apparently there were many parties with the crews of other ships that included music and dancing.¹⁵ “His cooper brought his accordion [sic] (German) & played very well for us, Saturday evening.”¹⁶ “I got the accordion [sic] and the mate of the Brig played.”¹⁷

Concertina Music

Whether one is sailing in the 17th century or the early 20th century, life on a ship for long voyages is really quite boring. Yes, there are chores, but not all of them need to be performed all day, every day. Consider how many Articles from various pirate captains regulate leisure time, including this one from the Articles of Bartholomew Roberts:

XI. The musicians to have Rest on the Sabbath Day, but the other six Days and Nights, none without special favour.

Let us look at this Article for a moment with an eye toward debunking those who would say that simple, stringed instruments like fiddles were the only instruments that were ever aboard a pirate ship: if Roberts had meant “fiddlers” he would probably have *said* “fiddlers.” The word “musicians” implies, to me at least, that there was a variety of musical instruments to be found aboard ship – even, or especially, on a pirate ship. Possibly even a concertina, if the pirates were plundering and pillaging in the middle to the end of the 19th century.

When playing the Anglo concertina, as I know all too well, it is sometimes necessary to change bellows direction every other note or so in order to get the correct tone from the button you press. An illustrative example for the non-concertinist: middle C and the D one step up (think *do* and *re*) are sounded by playing the same button – but the bellows are *pushed* if you want to play a C and *pulled* or *drawn* if you want to play the D. This required frequent change in bellows direction gives the music played by an Anglo concertina a particular “lift” that is very desirable for traditional Irish music. And as long as the Irish have been traveling the world by sea, their music has traveled with them.

¹² Concertina History at <http://www.hobgoblin-usa.com/info/faqconcertina.htm>.

¹³ ¹³ Frank, Stuart M., “Concertinas Around Cape Horn.” *Concertina & Squeezebox* Vol.2, No 2. (Spring 1984), p.13.

¹⁴ Webb, Robert Lloyd, “Free Reeds Aboard the Whaleships.” *Concertina & Squeezebox* No. 17 (1989), p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

So what sort of traditional Irish tunes would the musically talented pirate play for his shipmates to while away the hours and maybe even dance to? How about tunes like:

Ships in Full Sail (jig)
Da Full Rigged Ship (jig)
The New Rigged Ship (jig)
The Pirate Ship (reel)
On the Ship (jig)
The Sailor's Hornpipe (hornpipe)
The Sailor's Wife (jig)
The Sailor on the Rock (reel) (marooning?)
The Drunken Sailor (hornpipe) (makes a great audience sing-along)
The Rambling Sailor (reel)
Connie the Sailor (jig)
Jack's the Lad (hornpipe)
Crossing the Minch (hornpipe)
Pirate's Dream (hornpipe)¹⁸

Today, many concertina players seem determined to perpetuate the link between their chosen instrument and the sea. Every summer, Mystic, Connecticut hosts the Mystic Seaport Festival¹⁹ featuring seafaring music from “America, Ireland, Italy, Australia, Canada and Africa, in the classic musical tradition of the golden Age of Sail.” There is a photograph on the home page of the website that features one of the regular bands at this event. One of the band members is holding a, you guessed it, a concertina!

So there you have it, the facts as preserved by the British Patent Office, and the fiction perpetuated by Hollywood. But don't let historical accuracy get in the way of a rollicking good time – the concertina is a fascinating instrument capable of playing many diverse styles of music. Besides, your audience and fellow re-enactors expect it. I bid you happy squeezing!

Author's Note: I invite anyone interested to finding out more about concertinas to join me and my fellow concertina players from around the globe at www.concertina.net. The discussion forums are one of the friendliest places on the Internet. Arrr!

¹⁸ These tunes can be downloaded and printed out for free in either ABC format or standard musical notation at www.thesession.org.

¹⁹ www.mysticseaport.org. Look under the Special Events link.