

REVIEWS

BOOKS

***Conquering the Concertina: A Comprehensive Guide to the English Concertina*, by Les Branchett.
Gloucester: Sherborne House Publications, 2002. 49 pp.**

***The Concise English Concertina: A Tutor*, by Dick Miles.
Cork: Milestone Publications, 2002. 32 pp. € 17.**

Reviewed by RACHEL HALL

Players of the English concertina fall into a number of categories in terms of their style of playing. There is the 'classical' school, which traces its lineage to a mixture of the Victorians—one thinks of Regondi, Blagrove, Case, *et al.*—and the somewhat later Eastern European school as exemplified, most notably, by the Matusewitch family. The great majority of players, of course, cultivate folk music of one sort or another: some play Irish music and/or a cross-cultural blend of American, Celtic, and Quebecois tunes that are common in the contradance repertory; some focus on English country dance music, while others use the instrument to accompany the voice. A few players have recently begun to revive a number of early twentieth-century traditions, namely those associated with the music hall and vaudeville, on the one hand, and the *klezmerin*, on the other. And finally, there are those who explore new directions, such as the jazz-inspired playing of Simon Thoumire.

Given this wide range of preferences and styles, how should the newcomer to the English concertina choose a tutor? Clearly, the answer depends on a combination of the player's level of musical training and the style that he or she prefers. Most recent tutors for the instrument focus on single-line playing of Celtic or English folk tunes. Some also contain suggestions for accompanying songs. In general, these tutors assume an adult player with some prior musical training, an assumption that certainly fits the majority of players I know, most of whom take up the concertina as a second (or even third) instrument.

Two new tutors are now available: Les Branchett's *Conquering the Concertina* and Dick Miles's *The Concise Guide to the English Concertina*. Of the two, Branchett's tutor aims at the more elementary level, though it covers a wider range of repertory, as it

includes both well-known classical themes and popular songs. Miles, on the other hand, deals exclusively with the folk music of England and Ireland, and though nominally aimed at the beginner, it is really more appropriate for the intermediate player.

Starting with the assumption that 'readers with at least a basic musical knowledge will wish to skip the preliminaries' (in other words, the basics of musical notation), Branchett begins with a brief introduction to the keyboard, and follows immediately with the C-major scale, arpeggios, and several well-known melodies in that key (for example, 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes', and 'Morning has Broken'). He then proceeds through the keys of G, D, F, and B flat (all major), offering, once again, scales, arpeggios, and tunes for each key. Obviously, this key-by-key method helps the beginner: it is easier to concentrate on learning to play in one key at a time, and Branchett's use of familiar melodies eliminates some of the difficulties associated with learning unfamiliar material. Following all of this is a selection of pieces, including tunes with chords. Only after these does he address 'the preliminaries': general issues such as the basics of musical notation and how to hold the concertina. Finally, he has a section on harmonized scales and chords. In all, I recommend *Conquering the Concertina* for the beginner, though Branchett's fairly gentle introduction to the elements of music will not be sufficient for someone with little or no musical training.

Miles's introduction to the instrument is bound to frustrate the beginner, or at least one with little general experience in making music. For instance, while page 3 deals with so basic an item as holding the instrument, pages 7-8 throw the novice into the 'Atholl Highlanders'—surely a tune for those with some facility—in A and B flat! On the other hand, Miles offers useful advice for the intermediate player: tips on ornamentation, fingering, and playing chords. Perhaps the most valuable feature of the tutor is the series of seven songs that Miles has arranged for voice and concertina, including two very satisfying treatments of 'A Fair Maid Walking'.

My main complaint about many tutors for the English concertina is their neglect of how to use and control the bellows (one exception is Allan Atlas's recent *Contemplating the Concertina*).¹ To my mind, the bellows are the soul of the instrument. Without musically intelligent use of the bellows, the English concertina becomes a musical typewriter of sorts. And though full control of the bellows is difficult to achieve (more so than getting the right finger on the right button), players should be encouraged to explore this aspect of the instrument

from the start. Here Branchett does a better job than most. He encourages the player to strive for a 'bounce' on some tunes, though he is vague about how this is done. One exercise that I often suggest is to repeat the same note (with or without changing fingers) while using pressure on the bellows to accent first every fourth note, then every third note, and finally every other note. For reels, practice accenting beat two and four of a 4/4 measure. Branchett also suggests that the player experiment with staccato and legato playing, phrasing, and a range of dynamics.

In the end, both Branchett and Miles satisfy a need among concertina players. I would recommend Branchett for the beginner, no matter what style he or she wishes to play. Miles, on the other hand, is probably most appropriate for the intermediate folk player, especially one interested in developing the art of song accompaniment. Both Branchett and Miles, then, have given us welcome additions to the growing number of tutors for the English concertina.²

NOTES

1. The full title: *Contemplating the Concertina: An Historically-Informed Tutor for the English Concertina* (Amherst: The Button Box, 2003).

2. Since we're not likely to see these tutors advertised in neon lights, certainly not in the States: Branchett's tutor can be had from Sherborne House Publications, 25 Spa Road, Gloucester, GL1 1UY, UK; Miles's from Dick Miles, Cooragurteen, Ballydehob, County Cork, Ireland (or rjmiles@eircom.net).

EDITOR'S NOTE: Some readers will no doubt notice that two other recent tutors are not reviewed here: my own *Contemplating the Concertina* (see note 1) and Pauline De Snoo's *Concertina Course*, vol. 1 (Schijndel [NL]: De Snoo, 2002). To have included a review of my own tutor would have constituted a rather blatant conflict of interests. As for Ms De Snoo's tutor: though we invited Ms De Snoo to send a review copy, she declined the invitation.