

By Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

A Nice Cup of Tea

by Clifford Bevan

The English are peculiarly aware of things that they have lost. Amongst these are Men's Singles at Wimbledon, The Soccer World Cup, sundry princesses, and an empire. In order to cope, they long ago devised a strategy simultaneously offering comfort, warmth, and oblivion. This is "a nice cup of tea," an infusion mainly unknown in its peculiarly anglicized form to other nationalities, who choose not to drink their tea with the addition of milk and often sugar. It is a guaranteed cure for all ills, including failing an audition, aerial bombing, missing the last train home, and hair loss. No English person can understand how other nations manage to function without the knowledge that at times of disaster, disease, or death you can call upon instant relief through "a nice cup of tea."

Readers of a businesslike turn of mind will have realized that there is a good living to be made from providing the great British public with their nice cups of tea. One of the best of these good livings was that made by John Horniman who in 1826 founded Horniman's Tea, probably the first to be sold in packets as opposed to dusty piles of loose tealeaves. He was succeeded in the family firm by Frederick Horniman, a manic collector and committed philanthropist who opened his south London home to the public and later built a museum, which he presented to the locality on the condition that admission should always be free.

The Horniman Museum and Gardens stand in the south London district of Forest Hill, sixteen acres of grounds on high land from which the visitor can look far over to the city of London when not



The author activates the 35 foot of tubing in the Besson Monster Bass.

listening to groups like the London Serpent Trio in the Victorian conservatory. Within the collections include a natural history section, another dedicated to world cultures, and a third consisting of over 8,000 musical instruments, one of which became particularly valuable when it recently absorbed what had previously been the Boosey & Hawkes collection of instruments and associated archives. That event was commemorated in 2006 with an exhibition (running through December 2008) entitled *Sound Designs:*

The Story of Boosey & Hawkes.

Thomas Boosé, a refugee from the French Revolution born about 1714, opened a bookshop in London and anglicized his name to Boosey. His son, Thomas, junior, inherited the shop and, ten years before John Horniman began his tea business, diversified into sheet music publishing. He also acquired *Boosey's Military Band Journal*, run by an ex-director of music of the Scots Guards, the German Carl Bosse who had paradoxically changed his surname to Boosé to ensure pronunciation of the final syllable. Later the firm diversified further into making and selling musical instruments. Over the years increasing numbers of Booseys joined the business. Charles T. and Arthur began as clerks to their father Charles, son of Thomas, Jr., and later John also entered the family firm. He established the London Ballad Concerts (at which ballads published by Booseys were performed) while his brother was listed in the 1881 Census as having thirteen employees in his publishing business. John's adopted son William worked first for Boosey and then for the rival firm of Chappell, which also happened to own the hall in which Boosey's

Ballad Concerts were presented. Leslie became director of the Saturday and Monday Popular Chamber Concerts while his brother George was a close friend of composer Edward Elgar.

Booseys, now a company, began to acquire other manufacturers—Henry Distin in 1868 and Lafleur in 1917—and then merged with Hawkes & Son in 1930 to become Boosey & Hawkes. In 1946 they took over Besson & Co., founded in Paris around 1838 and opening a London

branch in 1851. When Bessons left their London shop on Euston Road, the gilded monster bass, which had stood above the frontage, was re-erected above the entrance to Sonorous Works, Boosey & Hawkes's new factory in Edgware, north of London. The number of employees reached a peak of 700, with 1,000 instruments produced each week.

Takeovers continued apace, with Buffet Crampton in 1981, Karl Hofner in 1994, and Rico International 1997, causing shares to rise in value to over ten pounds sterling each. In 1998 the publisher Carl Fisher was absorbed, and the company found itself riding high as the results of an attempt by the British government to curry favor with the masses by allocating huge grants to brass bands through the new National Lottery. Demand for instruments soared while quality dropped alarmingly. One retailer estimated that sixty-per cent of instruments were being returned by dissatisfied customers. The chief executive was quoted in *The Daily Telegraph* as saying "There were some silver-plated instruments which came out a bit dull." Alas, more than a bit: valves

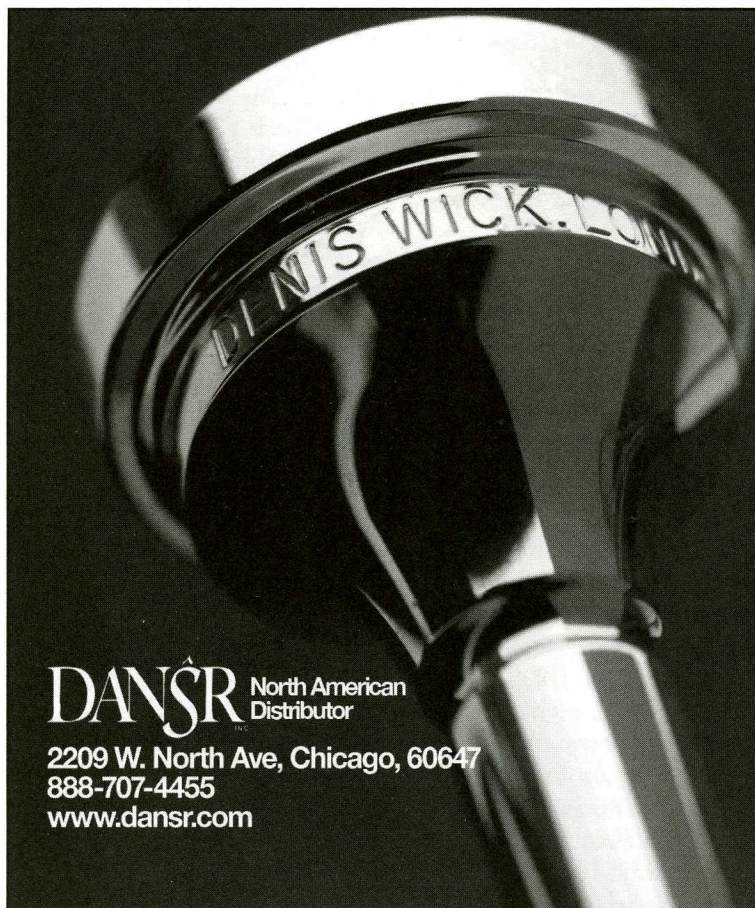
were rough, stays inadequately brazed, and the bits and pieces had a disconcerting habit of dropping off in performance. The company plunged £45,100,000 into the red and, in 1999, only two years after shares had peaked, their value dropped to 352½ pence each. Sonorous Works closed in 2001 and a private equity investor acquired the share capital. In 2006 Buffet Crampton purchased the company's instrument-making activities, though the publishing side remained with Boosey & Hawkes and groups of ex-employees began to manufacture instruments under various names.

Meanwhile, a particularly zealous ex-employee rescued the 6 foot 6 inch high monster bass from the rubbish skip to which it had been consigned, took it home, and built a shed since it was too big to fit in her house. At the opening of the Horniman Museum's new musical instrument galleries it was on display in all its magnificence, and an attempt was made to discover its pitch. The instrument actually responds very well, but sadly the original giant mouthpiece (shown in some early photographs) had disappeared

and a small and peculiar replacement had been mocked up at some point, which inhibited attempts to play the fundamental. However, it became clear after relating the intervals between available harmonics to each other that the instrument was built in BBB-flat, an octave lower than a BB-flat tuba. What was equally clear is that the valves were not, as they say in the theatre, "practical." They look convincing, but there their usefulness ends.

For the time being the instrument lives at the Horniman Museum, along with the musical instrument gallery, the new interactive media, and archive films. Find out more at www.horniman.ac.uk or, better still, see it in the flesh on your next London visit. Train from London Bridge Station to Forest Hill, a ten-minute walk up the hill, and then take a couple of hours for your preliminary look round the collection. And then pop outside to the refreshment room for...a nice cup of tea. You can celebrate good experiences this way, as well as disasters.


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