

# George Gissing's Concertina\*

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Among late-Victorian novelists, none, perhaps, had a sharper eye or keener ear for the sights and sounds of London's mean streets than George Gissing (1857–1903).<sup>1</sup> And if, in Gissing's urban-music "soundscape," it was the humble street organ that held sentimental pride of place (see below), the concertina, too, played a role.<sup>2</sup>

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304

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<sup>1</sup> On Gissing, see the biographies by Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Brighton, 1980; originally published 1963), and John Halperin, *George Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford, 1982); two other indispensable items for any work on Gissing are: *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Lewisberg, PA, 1978—hereafter *Diary*); and *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, 9 vols., eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (Athens, OH, 1990–1996—hereafter *Collected Letters*).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I use the term "concertina" generically to refer to the family of three such instruments that were—and still are—played in England and other parts of the English-speaking world: (1) the "English," developed circa 1830 by the well-known physicist Sir Charles Wheatstone (1802–1875) and the only concertina to enjoy a career in nineteenth-century art-music circles (there are compositions by such composers as John Barnett, Julius Benedict, George Alexander Macfarren, and Bernhard Molique, as well as by a number of concertina virtuosos; see note 31, below); each button produces the same pitch regardless of the direction of the bellows, and the instrument is fully chromatic, with a range (for the standard 48-button treble) of *g* to *c*<sup>'''</sup>; (2) the "Anglo" (or "Anglo-German"), adapted from the German *Konzertina*, on which each button produces two pitches depending upon the direction of the bellows; in its simplest form—a twenty-button model—it is basically diatonic, with an instrument tuned in C having only one accidental, F sharp; in the nineteenth century, the "Anglo" was generally the least expensive member of the concertina family and was particularly at home among the working poor, whether urban, rural, or at sea (see below and notes 5, 9, and 32); and (3) the "Duett," developed by Wheatstone in the 1840s; with its separate registers for treble and bass on right and left sides, respectively, it is the only concertina that can play a melody with a full, piano-like accompaniment; toward the end of the nineteenth century, it gained favor both in the music hall and with the Salvation Army (see below and note 24). Further on the technical characteristics, repertory, and reception of the three instruments, see Allan

During the 1880s, Gissing explored the life of London's working class in a series of five novels. The concertina appears in two of them: *Thyrza* (1887) and *The Nether World* (1889).<sup>3</sup> In *Thyrza*, it is Mr. Jarmey, landlord of the Lambeth house in which Thyrza and her sister Lydia live, who plays the instrument:

Then began the unutterable dreariness of a Sunday afternoon. From the lower part of the house sounded the notes of a concertina; it was Mr. Jarmey who played. He had the habit of doing so whilst half asleep, between dinner and tea. With impartiality he passed from the strains of popular hymnody to the familiar ditties of the music hall, lavishing on each an excess of sentiment. He shook pathetically on top notes and languished on final chords. A dolorous music! . . . The milkman came along the street. He was followed by a woman who wailed 'wa-ater-creases!' Then the concertina once more possessed the stillness.<sup>4</sup>

Three comments seem in order. First, though Gissing does not identify the type of concertina that Mr. Jarmey plays—and perhaps he (Gissing) could not distinguish one type from another (see note 2), or, just as likely, simply did not wish to—that Mr. Jarmey's repertory consists of popular hymn tunes and songs from the music hall may rule out the largely-diatonic "Anglo," which was not typically the concertina of choice for either of those repertories. Yet if this is so, there is at least some irony here, since it was the "Anglo" that was usually the least expensive of the concertinas, and might, therefore, have been the type most frequently found among the working class of Lambeth. In fact, at the time Gissing wrote *Thyrza*, one could buy a British-made "Anglo"

305

W. Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1996); "Who Bought Concertinas in the Winter of 1851? A Glimpse at the Sales Accounts of Wheatstone & Co.," in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies* 1, ed. Bennett Zon. Music in 19th-Century Britain (Aldershot, 1999), 55–87; "The 'Respectable' Concertina," *Music & Letters* LXXX (1999), 241–53. For short surveys, see Atlas, "Concertina," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, rev. ed., eds. John Tyrrell and Stanley Sadie (forthcoming), and Julian Pilling, "Concertina," *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, I, ed. Denis Arnold (Oxford, 1980), 459–62; see also Maria Dunkel, "Harmonikainstrumente" in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, rev. ed., ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel, 1996), *Sachteil*, IV, cols. 167–210, which has recently been published independently as *Akkordeon-Bandoneon—Concertina im Kontext der Harmonikainstrumente*. Text zur Geschichte und Gegenwart des Akkordeons VI (Bochum, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The others are *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Unclassed* (1884), and *Demos* (1886).

<sup>4</sup> Cited after the edition by Jacob Korg (Brighton, 1974), 53–54 (subsequent references give page numbers in the text). The reference to Mr. Jarmey's instrument as an accordion in P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (New York, 1971), 62, is incorrect.

for just over one guinea (about the cost of slightly less than four pounds of prime beef), while the German-style import from which it was derived could be had for as little as three and sixpence.<sup>5</sup>

Second, that Gissing associates the concertina with "ditties of the music hall" does not speak well for his view of its social status; as we shall see, Gissing held the music hall in contempt, and did so from points of view intellectual, moral, and aesthetic. And finally, we can hardly miss the sense of gloom that pervades the description of both the concertina and Mr. Jarmey's playing: "unutterable dreariness," "half asleep," "excess of sentiment," "shook pathetically," "languished on the final chords," and "dolorous music."

How differently Gissing describes another player and another instrument, Mr. Boddy and his violin:

He raised his violin, and struck out with spirit "The March of the Men of Harlech."<sup>6</sup> . . . "That's the toon as always goes with me on my way to work," he said with a laugh. "It keeps up my courage." . . . He swept

<sup>5</sup> In a catalogue issued by the concertina manufacturer George Smith Jones circa 1890 (thus contemporary with the novel), a bottom-of-the-line, twenty-button "Anglo" with mahogany ends and reeds of metal-alloy (as opposed to the more expensive tempered steel) is priced at £1.2.6, while Jones's least expensive "English" goes for £2.2.0, or nearly twice as much. Moreover, the discrepancy in price between the two types widens dramatically for better-quality instruments; thus Jones's top-of-the-line "Anglo" (with thirty-two buttons and thus with greater chromatic capabilities—see note 2) sold for £3.7.6, while his best "English" models went for £14.14.0 and £15.0.0 (treble and baritone, respectively); the Jones catalogue is reproduced in Frank E. Butler (and Joel Cowan), "Concertinas in the Commercial Road: The Story of George Jones," *Concertina & Squeezebow XX* (1989), 8, 11. On the cost of prime beef circa 1890, see William Ashworth, *An Economic History of England: 1870-1939* (London, 1960), 57. To put the price of the one-guinea "Anglo" into further perspective: in 1882, the average four-and-a-half-member working-class family in London had a weekly income of thirty shillings (one guinea = twenty-one shillings); see J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (London, 1954), 107.

To press the concertina "shop talk" just a bit further: Jones's high-end prices were by no means extravagant for the time. Already in 1848, Wheatstone & Co.—the most prestigious manufacturer of concertinas—priced their own top-of-the-line "English" treble at sixteen guineas, while an 1862 price list issued by Lachenal & Co.—Wheatstone's main competitor—quotes a price of eighteen guineas for its best "English" treble and twenty-two guineas for its best baritones and basses. Finally, at the low end: in 1866, the instrument dealers Imhof & Mukle advertised an "English" at four guineas, while an "Anglo" of their "own manufacture" (possibly false advertising) sold for 30 shillings. For the Wheatstone catalogue, see Stephen Chambers, "Louis Lachenal: Engineer and Concertina Manufacturer" (Pt. I), *The Free- Reed Journal* I (1999), 16-18; the Lachenal price list appears in *The International Exhibition of 1862: The Illustrated Catalogue of the Industrial Department*, II (London, 1862), 112, while that for Imhof & Mukle, who did manufacture "self-acting" (mechanical) instruments, is reproduced in Arthur W. J. G. Ord-Hume, *Barrel Organ: The Story of the Mechanical Organ and its Repair* (South Brunswick, NJ, and New York, 1978), 262.

<sup>6</sup> For the Welsh tune and its words, see *The Oxford Song Book*, I, ed. Percy C. Buck (London, 1916), No. 81.

the bow through a few ringing chords . . . "Old Jo Racket played this instrument more than sixty years ago . . . When he went into the 'Ouse he give the fiddle to Mat Trent, Lyddy and Thyrsa's father . . . Ah, talk of a player! You should a' heard what Mat could do with this 'ere instrument . . . Lambeth 'll never know another like him. He was made o' music! When did you hear any man with a tenor voice like his? He made songs, too . . . words, music an' all" . . . (28-29).

Thus while the concertina echoes the despair of those living in Lambeth, the violin offers at least a joyful moment of respite from it; and that it was only a moment becomes clear later in the novel: Mr. Boddy will die in the street of cold and starvation after pawning his violin for a mere ten shillings (375-78).

The concertina appears more prominently in *The Nether World*, generally regarded as the finest of Gissing's novels about the urban poor. Here we first meet the concertina in connection with Bob Hewett of Clerkenwell.<sup>7</sup> Aged nineteen and quick of mind, with some talent for draftsmanship and drawing caricatures, Hewett is employed as a die-sinker, at which craft he earns £1 for his fifty-four-hour work week; but he is also a drunkard and brawler, a wife-beater and ne'er-do-well who eventually comes to a bad end. Gissing describes him and his concertina-playing as follows:

307

He had an ear for music, played (nothing else was in his reach) the concertina, sang a lively song with uncommon melodiousness—a gift much appreciated at the meetings of a certain Mutual Benefit Club, to which his father had paid a weekly subscription, without fail, through all adversities.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, then, he played the concertina because it was the only instrument that he could afford.

Gissing next places the concertina in the hands of a member of the wedding party that accompanies Hewett and his bride of a few hours, Pennyloaf (Penelope Candy), on the train to the Crystal Palace, where they go to celebrate their wedding day:

<sup>7</sup> Clerkenwell was among the worst of London's slums, over-populated, filled with tenements and workshops, and a hotbed of political radicalism (it was from Clerkenwell Green, on 13 November 1887, that a group of socialist protesters marched to Trafalgar Square and set off the events known as Bloody Sunday); its main industry was the manufacture of light metals; see *The London Encyclopaedia*, eds. Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert (Bethesda, MD, 1986), 181-83. On concertina manufacturers in Clerkenwell, which was also a center for the production of "street pianos" (or mechanical dulcimers), see below, and note 12.

<sup>8</sup> Cited after the World's Classics Edition, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1992), 70 (subsequent references give page numbers in the text).

Among their companions was a youth with a concertina; as soon as the train moved he burst into melody. It was the natural invitation to song, and all joined in the latest ditties learnt at the music-hall . . . Towards the end of the journey the young man with the concertina passed round his hat (106).

As he did in *Thyrza*, then, Gissing once again associates the concertina with the music hall, while the passing around of the player's hat recalls London's street musicians, more than a few of whom played the concertina.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, there is a concertina among the instruments that entertain the crowd at the Crystal Palace itself that same evening:

On the terraces dancing has commenced; the players of violins, concertinas, and penny-whistles do a brisk trade among the groups eager for a rough-and-tumble valse; so do the pickpockets (110-11).

Thus Gissing situates the instrument—even as he does the more “respectable” violin—in the midst of an unattractive mob: young, fisticuff-prone rowdies, among whom the liquor flows freely (110-11), and, still worse, bands of outright criminals. Indeed, the concertina is here part of a throng that leads Gissing to ask: “Since man came into being did the world ever exhibit a sadder spectacle?” (110).

What we see in these portraits of the concertina in *The Nether World*, then, is an instrument that Gissing consistently associates with everything that he considered dismal, vulgar, and even uncivilized about life among the working class. And if this contrasts starkly with the portrayal of the violin as an almost spiritually uplifting force in *Thyrza*, it does even more so with Gissing's apparent affection for the street organ. This is clear from a passage in *Thyrza* in which Gilbert Grail—the sympathetic hero of the novel, who, as a man of some self-education, can envision, but never attain a life beyond the slums—strolls through Lambeth:

He turned towards Lambeth Walk. The market of Christmas Eve was flaring and clamorous; the odours of burning naphtha and fried fish were pungent on the wind. He walked a short distance among the

<sup>9</sup> There is a profile of such a concertinist, albeit one who plied his trade mainly on the London-Richmond steamboats and—a few evenings each week—in a dance band (with violin, harp, and fife), in Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, III (London, 1861-1862; cited after the Dover reprint, 1968), 182-85. These were the concertinists—always players of the “Anglo” and the cheap German imports—against whom George Bernard Shaw constantly railed; see Dan H. Laurence, *Shaw's Music*, I (New York, 1981), 439, 605. I am currently working on a study about music in the writings of Mayhew.

crowd, then found the noise oppressive and turned into a by-way. As he did so, a street organ began to play in front of a public-house close by. Grail drew near; there were children forming a dance, and he stood to watch them . . . Do you know that music of the obscure ways, to which children dance? Not if you have only heard it ground to your ears' affliction beneath your windows in the square. To hear it aright you must stand in the darkness of such a by-street as this, and for the moment be at one with those who dwell around the bleary-eyed houses, in the dim burrows of poverty, in the unmapped haunts of the semi-human. Then you will know the significance of that vulgar clanging of melody; a pathos of which you did not dream will touch you, and therein the secret of hidden London will be half revealed (110-11).

In effect, then, Gissing constructs well-defined roles for the three instruments: the concertina embodies all that is hopeless, depraved, and ultimately entrapping about both the slums and its inhabitants; the violin affords at least a fleeting moment of relief from all of that; and finally, the street organ, despite its "vulgar clanging" and though it offers no promise of escape, reveals, at least in part, the "secret"—we might even say the "voice"—of London's working poor.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> About this passage, Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (Totowa, NJ, 1971), 83, writes: "The music that we hear is therefore emblematic of the energy and possibility in the general mass of working people . . ."; see also Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, 62. Gissing treats the street organ sympathetically in other works as well; for example, in *Workers in the Dawn*, Pt. III/Ch. 2/p. 37, Arthur Golding recalls the "heaven sent organ-grinder's strains," while "miserably clad children [avail] themselves of the Italian's [the organ grinder's] good offices to enjoy a dance on the pavement" (cited after the Garland reprint [1976] of the first edition [London, 1880], to which the subsequent citation, too, refers). Finally, Gissing was particularly enchanted by the street organs that he heard during his three extended sojourns in Italy; see my forthcoming article, "George Gissing: Impressions of Musical Italy."

Indeed, with respect to his tolerance and even sympathy for street-organs and the "grinders" who played them, Gissing stood in a distinct minority among intellectuals of the time. He may have been influenced by the Reverend Hugh Reginald Haweis's *Music and Morals* (London, 1871), in which Haweis expresses similar sentiments about the instrument and its grinders (457-61):

I bless that organ-man—a very Orpheus in hell! I bless his music. I stand in that foul street where the blessed sun shines, and where the music is playing; I give the man a penny to prolong the happiness of those poor people, of those hungry, pale, and ragged children, and, as I retire, I am saluted as a public benefactor; and was ever pleasure bought so cheap and so pure?

Gissing had probably read *Music and Morals*, and certainly knew Haweis at least by reputation. We know from an entry in his diary on 9 March 1892 (*Diary*, 272), that Gissing had just read another of Haweis's books, *My Musical Life* (London, 1884). In fact, there are interesting parallels between the careers and tastes of Gissing and Haweis: both sojourned in Italy, were concerned with the poor, disliked the popular music of the music hall, and considered music to be primarily an "emotional"—as opposed to an intellectual—art; they differed, however, in their views of the concertina, which Haweis praises on a number of occasions (see notes 30 and 34). On Haweis, see Stephen Banfield, "Aesthetics and

Why was it the concertina that Gissing singled out as the musical symbol of misery and despair? Though I can only speculate, I should like to offer three possible reasons, all of which may well have worked in conjunction with one another. First, Gissing himself would have said that he was simply telling the "truth," that he was situating the concertina just as he saw and heard it as he himself trod the streets of Lambeth and Clerkenwell taking notes for *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*, respectively.<sup>11</sup> In fact, his walks through Clerkenwell might even have brought him into direct contact with one of the two most prominent concertina manufacturers of the period, since the neighborhood was home to the firm of Louis Lachenal & Co.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Gissing might have singled out the concertina because of its association with two institutions for which he had little sympathy: the music hall and the Salvation Army. The music hall—where the concertina had been at home since the early 1850s<sup>13</sup>—was a place of entertainment that Gissing clearly held in low regard, not only with respect to the aesthetic value of its entertainment, but as a place of dubious moral standing.<sup>14</sup> As he puts it in *Workers in the Dawn*:

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Criticism," in *Music in Britain: The Romantic Age, 1800-1914*. The Athlone History of Music in Britain V, ed. Nicholas Temperley (London, 1981), 460. There is a fine essay on street-organs, organ-grinders, and the general antipathy—both aesthetic and ethnic (virtually all the organ-grinders were recent Italian immigrants)—toward them, as well as attempts throughout Europe to regulate them in Ord-Hume, *Barrel Organ*, 233-53.

<sup>11</sup> On Gissing's research in these neighborhoods, see Halperin, *Gissing*, 88, 109. Though it stands outside the observations made in Clerkenwell itself, the description of the Crystal Palace mob in *The Nether World* (cited above) surely grew out of Gissing's first-hand observations, as witness an entry in his diary on 2 April 1888: "Spent day at Crystal Palace and brought back a lot of good notes" (*Diary*, 25); see also (on the same page) the entries on 26 and 29 March, which refer specifically to tours of Clerkenwell, and note 28, below.

<sup>12</sup> See Chambers, "Louis Lachenal," 16-17. Other concertina manufacturer-dealers located in Clerkenwell either when Gissing was touring the area or not long before then were Nickolds & Crabb, Thomas Dawkins, James Card, and J. Russell; see Neil Wayne, *The Wheatstone Story: The Life and Works of Charles Wheatstone* (unpublished manuscript, 1986), 69-70; Butler (and Cowan), "Concertinas in the Commercial Road," 7.

<sup>13</sup> One of the first concertinists to play the halls was Alfred B. Sedgwick, who appeared there by the Spring of 1851 at the latest; this is the same Sedgwick who had been a founding member of the highly-praised Concertina Quartett (established in 1844), and who would emigrate to New York by November 1851, where he continued to perform on the concertina and build a successful career as a composer of theater music; on Sedgwick's activities, see Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England*, 52, 57; and Michael Meckna, *The Collected Works of Alfred B. Sedgwick* (New York, 1994). Another concertinist already in the halls in the 1850s was the manufacturer George Jones; see Butler (and Cowan), "Concertinas in the Commercial Road," 7.

<sup>14</sup> On the association between the music hall and prostitution, see Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*, trans. Roy Kift (Cambridge, 1996), *passim*. Given that Gissing himself frequented the Oxford Music Hall (see below), it is at least somewhat ironic that the Oxford in particular gained a reputation as a hangout for prostitutes (Kift, 137).

She [Carrie Mitchell] had gone out on Saturday night, and, above all places, to a music-hall, the resort of the most abandoned of both sexes, a place in which no woman who valued her reputation would care to be seen (Pt. II/Ch. 14/p. 348).

And later, as Arthur Golding walks past the Alhambra Theatre:

he turned his attention to the female faces which he saw passing and re-passing. How hideous were most of them! The eyes circled with rings of dark red, the drawn lips, the cheeks whereon the paint lay in daubs of revolting coarseness, the bodies for the most part puffed into unsightly obesity . . . (Pt. III/Ch. 2/p. 36).

And even while sojourning in Rome, where, according to his Irish-American companion, Brian Ború Dunne, Gissing seems to have turned into a "most cheerful, luxury-loving, witty" person, he considered an evening spent at the Teatro Orpheo a "waste of time," an afternoon at a variety show, "stupid."<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the music hall seems to have fascinated Gissing, perhaps in a love-hate relationship of sorts. Already in 1877, while residing in Chicago for a short while, he left a rather cryptic—and, unfortunately, isolated—entry in his so-called "American Notebook": "Sentimental Songs in Music Halls."<sup>16</sup> On 18 August 1889, about a month after completing *The Nether World*, he wrote to his brother Algernon: "I am beginning to sketch a new book, & shall work on it mentally. On returning to London, I am going to make an exhaustive study of music-halls,—not for the next book, but for one of a rather tremendous kind that has long been shaping itself."<sup>17</sup> And less than two months later, on 11 October, he attended a meeting at St. James's Hall that had been called "to protest against the immorality of Music Halls."<sup>18</sup> There are also four

<sup>15</sup> See *With Gissing in Italy: The Memoires of Brian Ború Dunne*, eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (Athens, OH, 1999), 84, n. 44. Gissing mentioned both entertainments in his *Diary*, 480: 12 January 1898—"In evening to Orpheo, with O'Dunne. Very poor"; 16 January—"In afternoon, with O'Dunne, to variety concert in Via Due Macelli. Stupid."

<sup>16</sup> See *George Gissing's American Notebook: Notes—G.R.G.—1877*, ed. Bouwe Postmus (Lewiston, NY, 1993), 26. Postmus tentatively dates the entry from the period 20–30 May 1877. Gissing had gone to America in the wake of his expulsion from Owens College, Manchester, in June 1876, after he had been caught stealing money from another student's coat pocket, this in order to rescue his future (first) wife, Marianne Helen ("Nell") Harrison (they wed in October 1879), from her life of prostitution and alcoholism. Gissing would marry "below" his own self-perceived intellectual-social status again (see below), and the feeling that he could not meet and marry a woman who was his intellectual and social equal because of his own precarious financial situation plagued him through much of his life and turns up as a recurring theme in his novels.

<sup>17</sup> *Collected Letters*, IV, 98–99.

<sup>18</sup> *Diary*, 168–69.



entries about the music hall in the so-called "Scrapbook": two of these concern the Oxford Music Hall, where Gissing would eventually meet his future (second) wife, Edith Underwood (they wed in February 1891); a third reference mentions the "get up"—eyebrows and hair—of a music hall singer; while the last cites Percy Fitzgerald's *Music-Hall Land* (1890), which he apparently purchased in 1891 for a shilling.<sup>19</sup> And still another music-hall-related item that he read was John Davidson's six-part (plus prologue and epilogue) poem "In a Music Hall" (1891), in which each of the six main poems celebrates another music-hall performer and about which Gissing entered a note in his diary on 26 September 1893.<sup>20</sup>

Yet perhaps Gissing's views about the music hall changed somewhat over the years. Indeed, there are signs of just that in the short story "The Muse of the Hall" (was this the fallout of his "exhaustive study"?), which appeared in the Christmas 1893 number of the *English Illustrated Magazine*.<sup>21</sup> Here the music hall stands at the very center of things, as Gissing uses it to expound on the aesthetic differences between "popular" art for the masses (the music hall) and, through the character Dennis Bryant, a serious-minded composer at work on a "cantata," that of a more cultivated nature. The conclusion might surprise: while Bryant persuades his girl friend, Hilda Paget, to give up her new career in the halls, he himself succumbs to the ease with which he can earn a fast £5 by knocking off a catchy tune for those very same halls. In the end, there is a sense of ambivalence. And if, as seems likely, it is Gissing's voice that we hear in the following words of Lionel Tarrant in *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894)—and Lionel certainly displays certain Gissing-like attitudes—his opinion may well have softened even more:

"By-the-by, Nancy [Lionel's wife], will you go with me to a music-hall tomorrow night?"

"A music-hall?"

"Yes. It would do us both good, I think. I feel fagged, and you want a change.—Here's the end of March; please Heaven, another month shall see us rambling in the lanes somewhere; meantime, we'll go to a

<sup>19</sup> The "Scrapbook" is preserved (without signature) at the Lilly Library, Indiana University; I am grateful to Ms. Catherine Johnson of the Lilly Library for consulting the original manuscript for me and sending me copies of the appropriate folios (which are unnumbered). The entries for the Oxford Music Hall and the Fitzgerald book are cited in the *Collected Letters*, IV, 99, n. 3. A critical edition of the "Scrapbook" by Dr. Bouwe Postmus is scheduled for publication.

<sup>20</sup> *Diary*, 317; Davidson, *In a Music Hall and Other Poems* (London, 1891; reprinted by Woodstock Books, 1993), 1-13; on Davidson, see Carroll V. Peterson, *John Davidson*. Twayne's English Authors Series 143 (New York, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> *English Illustrated Magazine* (December 1893), 313-22. This story was never reprinted in any of the retrospective anthologies, and I am grateful to Bouwe Postmus for bringing it to my attention.

music-hall. Each season has its glory; if we can't hear the lark, let us listen to the bellow of a lion-comique."<sup>22</sup>

But by 1894, Gissing had gone off in new literary directions. Having put aside the plight of the working poor (on whose improvement he had given up), he was now concerned with middle-class life in the suburbs; and if he found that way of life no less vulgar, crass, and corrupt, he had come to crave the financial security and respectability—middle-class "virtues" both—that would let him lead his cherished life of the mind. Perhaps the music hall had some redeeming virtues after all.<sup>23</sup>

As for the Salvation Army: it had adopted the concertina—especially the "Duet"—for its street-corner bands,<sup>24</sup> and we should recall that, in *Thyrza*, Mr. Jarmey's repertory includes "strains of popular hymnody," among other things. If in *The Nether World*, Gissing lets the Salvation Army march by in relative peace:

Sensitive to every prompting of humanity, instinct with moral earnestness, she [Jane Snowden] betrayed no slightest tendency to the religion of church, chapel, or street-corner. A promenade of the Salvation Army half-puzzled, half-amused her . . . (152),

<sup>22</sup> Cited after the Everyman edition by Paul Delany, with notes by Jon Paul Henry (London, 1994), 356 (the subsequent reference cites the pages in the text). What is ironic here in view of Gissing's faint (facetious?) praise—"Each season has its glory"—is that, for one critic, writing in the *St. James Gazette*, 21 April 1892 (thus just two years prior to *In the Year of Jubilee*), the "lions-comiques" were "the most vulgar and objectionable creatures that ever faced the public . . . and turned the music-halls into veritable sinks." Briefly, the "lions-comiques" were known for their "swell" songs, the "swell" being a hard-drinking, womanizing "dandy"; see Peter Bailey, "Champagne Charlie: Performance and Ideology in the Music Hall Swell Song," in *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, ed. J. S. Bratton. Popular Music in Britain (Milton Keynes, 1986), 46–69 (the *St. James Gazette* review is cited on p. 49); Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall*, 48–51.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it had even acquired some virtues some years earlier. An entry in Gissing's diary on 4 July 1888 records that an evening at the Royal Music Hall provided "needed relief" after a "painful" two-and-a-half-hour piano recital to which he had gone in the afternoon (*Diary*, 35). See also his light-hearted reference to the "lions-comiques" in the poem "The Humble Aspirations of G. G., Novelist," in *The Poems of George Gissing*, ed. Bouwe Postmus (Lewiston, NY, 1995). On the other hand, perhaps he still had second thoughts as late as 1898; in the short story "Lord Dunfield," which appeared in the collection *Human Odds and Ends* (London, 1898; cited after the Garland reprint, 1977), 257–62, Lord Dunfield is, despite his title, a man of "brutish harshness" and "cheap, rough fibre" (258) who "sought companionship where he would naturally have found it but for the accidents of his name and wealth; in a world where he was quite unknown, among clerks and counter-jumpers, shop-girls and music-hall women . . ." (259). On Gissing's turnabout with respect to materialism, see especially Korg, *George Gissing*, 94–95.

<sup>24</sup> On the Salvation Army's use of the concertina, see Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina*, 9; W. Bramwell Thornett, "Rediscovering the Salvation Army's Second Official Organ," *The Musician* (20 July 1974), 368; A. R. Wiggins, "Makers of Army Music and Song: Brigadier Archie Burgess," *The Musician* (28 December 1968), 872. The Salvation Army also published two tutors for the instrument: *The Salvation Army Tutor for the English Concertina* (London, 1935) and *The Salvation Army Tutor for the Triumph Concertina* (London, 1938), the latter for the Army's own version of the "Duet" concertina.

his contempt for William Booth's organization is more apparent in a passage describing Jessica Morgan near the end of *In the Year of Jubilee*:

Miss Morgan wore the garb of the Salvation Army. Harmonious therewith were the features shadowed by the hideous bonnet: a face hardly to be recognised, bloodless, all but fleshless, the eyes set in a stare of weak-minded fanaticism (363).

Finally, he pulls no punches in a "Scrapbook" entry, where he describes the Army's Christmas Day parade of 1886:

Booth standing up in the carriage. Many bands, marching & playing at intervals; girls with tambourines. The only healthy faces were those of a few girls evidently making sport of the outing. No pretty faces. The men poor cripples, epileptic & cretinous. Grotesque religious inscripts round their hats. Sudden outbursts of hymns, & gesticulation. The pathos of it all.<sup>25</sup>

314

In all, Gissing may well have found the concertina guilty by association.

The third possible reason for Gissing's negative attitude toward the concertina may have had deep psychological roots. Perhaps he associated the instrument with illness—his own (a major preoccupation)—and even death. Writing to Henry Hick, his long-time friend and physician, on 13 April 1897, Gissing expresses his concern about his health: "it is clear to me that I suffer from two (if not more) distinct maladies. For a long time my *whooshing* has been worse than ever; indeed it has occasionally wakened me in the night—a noise like that of a noteless concertina."<sup>26</sup> Strange as the association might seem, even here Gissing's observation was accurate, since by the end of the century many concertinas were being produced with an "air button," which, when depressed, permitted the player to open and close the bellows with a noteless, slightly coarse "whoosh" that resembles the sound of someone gasping for breath.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cited after Stephen Gill's edition of *The Nether World*, 401 (see note 8); on the unpublished "Scrapbook," see note 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Collected Letters*, VI, 268–69. On Gissing's pulmonary and respiratory disorders and their psychological effect on him, see Gillian Tindall, *George Gissing: The Born Exile* (New York, 1974), 245–50; Korg, *George Gissing*, 247.

<sup>27</sup> Gissing was not alone among late Victorian writers to draw a parallel between failing lungs and a bellows-driven free-reed instrument. In his short story "Without Visible Means," Arthur Morrison sets a group of idled workers off and walking on dusty roads in search of work. Among them is Joey Clayton, who tramps along for a while in the company of an accordion player; Joey's "cough was aggravated by the dust, was especially tortured, after every fit, to hear the thing [the accordion] drawling and *whooping* the tune it

After *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*, Gissing seems to have returned to the concertina on two other occasions, both times in short stories. In "Lou and Liz" (1893)<sup>28</sup> a story about two Cockney-accented women—one (Lou) the deserted wife of a bigamist, the other (Liz) a single mother—who live together in order to make ends meet. The concertina appears at the Rosherville Gardens amusement park in Gravesend, where Lou and Liz have decided to spend the Easter Monday Bank Holiday. As it did in *The Nether World*, the concertina provides dance music for a boisterous crowd, one that "sang and bellowed . . . swayed violently . . . [and] stamped on the wooden flooring in wild fandangoes . . ." (9). Indeed, the scene is reminiscent of the unruly Crystal Palace crowd in *The Nether World*, which, in fact, it was specifically intended to evoke.<sup>29</sup> Here, though, the concertina is the only instrument mentioned, so that it alone bears the stigma of working-class rowdiness.

The scene changes in "The House of Cobwebs" (1900).<sup>30</sup> Here the setting is a still-rural suburb south of London, the concertina player the rather eccentric Mr. Isaac Spicer. He is come upon by Goldthorpe, an aspiring young novelist:

... there sounded from somewhere near a thin, shaky strain of music, the notes of a concertina played with uncertain hand . . . The musician was playing "Home, Sweet Home" . . . [Goldthorpe's] interest was engrossed by a human figure . . . holding a concertina, whence, at this

315

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had drawled and *whooped* a dozen times before . . ." (my italics); see Morrison, *Tales of Mean Streets* (London, 1894), 72. The bellows-failing lungs equation was also known in Germany, where Frank Wedekind utilized it in his drama *Erdegeist* (1894), one of the two Wedekind plays on which Alban Berg based *Lulu*. Act 2/Scene 2 has the following exchange between Lulu and the asthmatic old Schigolch, who is breathing heavily: Lulu: "Und deine Harmonika?" Schigolch: Hat falsche Luft, wie ich mit meinem Asthma." ("And your accordion?" "Out of breath, as I am with my asthma.") See *Erdegeist: Tragödie in vier Aufzügen*, 10th ed. (Munich and Leipzig, n.d.), 75. In Berg's opera, the exchange takes place in Act 1/Scene 2; and when, at measures 491–95, Schigolch utters his reply, the woodwinds "gasp" as if they are as breathless as the accordion's bellows (see the Universal-Edition piano-vocal score, Plate No. 10.745). I am grateful to Leo Treidler for calling this passage to my attention.

<sup>28</sup> Originally published in the *English Illustrated Magazine* (August 1893), 793–801, the story was reprinted in the posthumous collection titled *A Victim of Circumstances* (London, 1927); I cite it here after a recent Gissing anthology titled *The Day of Silence and Other Stories*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (London, 1993), 1–13. Although the original publication featured five illustrations by Dudley Heath, none of them depicts a concertina.

<sup>29</sup> See Coustillas's introduction to *The Day of Silence and Other Stories*, xvii. We might note that, as he had done for *The Nether World* and *Thyrza*, Gissing did his homework for "Lou and Liz," visiting Rosherville Gardens on Easter Monday, 1893; see *Diary*, 300–1.

<sup>30</sup> Written in March 1900, the story was published for the first time in a similarly titled, posthumous collection, *The House of Cobwebs* (London, 1906), assembled by Gissing's brother Algernon and consisting of previously unpublished short stories written during the period 1893–1903. The excerpts are cited after the Constable edition of 1931.

moment, in slow, melancholy strain, "Home, Sweet Home" began to wheeze forth . . . he [Mr. Spicer] seemed to listen in a mild ecstasy to the notes of his instrument . . . "Home, Sweet Home" came to an end, and, but for the cry of a milkman, the early-morning silence was undisturbed (4-5).

The story continues:

Smiling and happy, Mr. Spicer fetched from the cupboard his concertina, and after the usual apology for what he called his "imperfect mastery of the instrument," sat down to play "Home, Sweet Home." He had played it for years, and evidently would never improve in his execution. After "Home, Sweet Home" came "The Bluebells of Scotland," after that "Annie Laurie"; and Mr. Spicer's repertory was at an end. He talked of learning new pieces, but there was not the slightest hope of this achievement (16-17).

Innocent though it seems, the reference to the concertina is wrought with ambiguity. On the one hand, Gissing has removed the instrument from the grime of Lambeth and Clerkenwell and placed it in a relatively idyllic countryside setting. In addition, the bawdy "ditties" of the music hall have given way to such favorite—and morally unobjectionable—"national songs" as *Annie Laurie* and *The Blue Bells of Scotland*, as well as the famous Henry Bishop-John Howard Payne *Home, Sweet Home* (1829), all of which were at home in both pasture and drawing room alike.<sup>31</sup>

Now, in associating the concertina with both the countryside and a more folk-like repertory, Gissing was once again portraying the reception of the instrument—albeit another facet of it—realistically, as the concertina had, by 1900, established itself in English folk dance and

<sup>31</sup> *Annie Laurie* and *The Blue Bells of Scotland* appear conveniently in Buck, *The Oxford Song Book*, 1, Nos. 3 and 4; for a discussion of *Home, Sweet Home*, see Nicholas Temperley, "Ballroom and Drawing Room Music," in *Music in Britain: The Romantic Age*, 125-26. All three tunes in Mr. Spicer's repertory were drawn upon as the basis of virtuoso arrangements by such concertinists as Giulio Regondi, Richard Blagrove, the sisters Catherina and Anné Pelzer (the former better known as a guitar virtuoso under the name Madame R. Sydney Pratten), George Roe, and others. We can only wonder if Gissing had ever heard the songs in that guise. In fact, there is no evidence that Gissing was familiar with the "English" concertina's virtuoso tradition, which, to be sure, was fast becoming—perhaps had already become—a thing of the past; see Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina, passim*. On the other hand, he had certainly come across the name of Giulio Regondi in Haweis's *My Musical Life* (see note 10), where Regondi is called "incomparable" on both concertina and guitar, and mentioned as one of the musicians that Haweis had invited to give concerts for the educational-cultural betterment of the workers and children of London's East End (116-17). And if, as seems likely, Gissing had also read Haweis's *Music and Morals* (see note 10), he would have come across the names of both Regondi and Blagrove, both of whom Haweis considers "perfect players" of the concertina (440).

song circles. Indeed, in 1899—on Boxing Day, to be precise (thus just a little more than two months before Gissing completed “The House of Cobwebs”)—the folklorist Cecil Sharp met the “Anglo” player William Kimber (1872–1961), a member of Oxfordshire’s Headington Quarry Morris Dancers, and “adopted” him as his mentor on the subject of English dance and its music; at the same time, the concertina—especially the “Anglo”—was gradually transformed into an icon of the turn-of-the-century folk revival.<sup>32</sup> This, then, is the “positive” side of Gissing’s depiction.

Yet some of the negative attitudes that we have seen in Gissing’s earlier references to the concertina remain. First, he places the instrument in the hands of Mr. Isaac Spicer, who, though a kindly old man who had earned his living as a chemist’s assistant, is something of a dolt, a man whose “mental development had ceased more than twenty years ago . . . [and who] though a true lover of books . . . knew nothing of any that had been published during his own lifetime” (17). Moreover, Mr. Spicer’s playing is clearly inept: he plays with an “uncertain hand” and “imperfect mastery,” as he himself admits, and “would never improve in his execution”; and though “he talked of learning new pièces . . . there was not the slightest hope of this achievement.” Not once, then, in the references to the concertina, does Gissing explicitly place the instrument into the hands of a truly competent musician (as he seems to do when he gives the violin to Old Jo Racket in *Thyrza*). Nor does he ever seem to describe a high-quality concertina. Here its tone is “thin” and “shaky,” once again comparable to the “wheeze” of Gissing’s own failing lungs.<sup>33</sup> And finally, as he did in *Thyrza*, Gissing again juxtaposes the sound of the concertina with the cry of a street vendor, leaving us to wonder if he heard any aesthetic difference between them at all.

In all, Gissing seems to have had—or at least offered—a rather fixed and unfavorable view of both the concertina and those who played it. At best, it was a source of distraction for the poor, whether urban or rural, but one that Gissing imbues with neither the fleeting

<sup>32</sup> See Stuart Eydmann, “The Concertina as an Emblem of the Folk Music Revival in the British Isles,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* IV (1995), 43. On Kimber, see T. M. Chaundy, “William Kimber: A Portrait,” *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* VIII (1959), 203–11, and Derek Schofield’s extensive notes to *Absolutely Classic: The Music of William Kimber*, English Folk Song and Dance Society, EPDSS CD 03 (London, 1999). Admittedly, it is hard to say just how aware Gissing was of the development, as he spent the last years of his life in France.

<sup>33</sup> One could, of course, argue that, given the socio-economic status of Gissing’s concertina players and their inability to afford either formal instruction or high-quality instruments, nothing else could be expected. Yet we should bear in mind that William Kimber (see above and note 32) was basically self-taught and earned his living as a bricklayer.

joy of the violin nor the "soul" of the street organ. At worst, it represented everything that Gissing came to despise about the working class and everything associated with it. And in the end, both the concertina and its music stand as exceptions to Cecily Doran's rule, expressed so concisely in *The Emancipated* (1890): "all music is sacred."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Gissing had yet to formulate that view when he wrote about the concertina in *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps he had already forgotten it when he portrayed the instrument in "Lou and Liz" and "The House of Cobwebs." Or perhaps I am being too kind (to the concertina, that is). Perhaps the concertina was simply Gissing's idea of musical blasphemy. In any case, Gissing, as much as anyone in late-Victorian literary circles, helped construct—or at least reinforce—the concertina's end-of-century social identity among the intellectually inclined readers to whom he mainly appealed: it was an instrument not to be taken seriously. And it was an identity that the instrument has, to some extent, failed to shed right down to the present day.<sup>36</sup>

*The Graduate Center/The City University of New York*

<sup>34</sup> Cited after the edition by Pierre Coustillas (Rutherford, NJ, 1977), 145.

<sup>35</sup> Gissing does, however, acknowledge music's moral power in *The Nether World*:

To humanize the multitude two things are necessary—two things of the simplest kind conceivable. In the first place, you must effect an entire change of economic conditions . . . then you must bring to bear on the new order of things the constant influence of music . . . Destroy, sweep away, prepare the ground; then shall music the holy, music the civiliser, breathe over the renewed earth, and with Orphean magic raise in perfected beauty the towers of the City of Man (109).

Given both Gissing's familiarity with the works of Hugh Reginald Haweis and their shared opinions concerning the social role of music, it is interesting to compare this passage from *The Nether World* with one in Haweis's *My Musical Life*:

Let the heaven-born art of music spread; let it bless the homes and hearths of the people; let the children sing, and sing together; let the concertina [my italics], the violin, or the flute be found in every cottage . . . thus let the factory girl forget her toil and the artisan his grievance, and Music, the Civiliser, the Recreator, the Soother and Purifier of the emotions, shall become the music of the future for England (161).

Except for Haweis's accolade for the concertina, his prescription for how music might make a better world would be perfectly at home in Gissing's *The Nether World*; indeed, one might even suspect a direct connection between the two passages.

<sup>36</sup> For some recent signs of change, see Atlas, "The 'Respectable' Concertina," (note 2).