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Collins, Count Fosco, and the Concertina

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When Margaret Oliphant reviewed *The Woman in White* in 1862, she described Count Fosco partly in terms of what she perceived to be his Italianate character:

No villain of the century, so far as we are aware, comes within a hundred miles of him: he is more real, more genuine, more *Italian* even, in his fatness and size, in his love of pets and pastry, than the whole array of conventional Italian villains, elegant and subtle, whom we are accustomed to meet in literature. (Oliphant, 113)

And nudged along by the likes of both his name and his "organ-boy" dexterity (Collins *Woman*, 243), mid-Victorian readers would no doubt have recognized the Count as Italian to the core.¹

Yet there is one respect in which Fosco could hardly be more *un-Italian*: he plays the concertina.

As we passed an open space among the trees in front of the house, there was Count Fosco. . . He was singing Figaro's famous song in the Barber of Seville, with that crisply fluent vocalisation which is never heard from any other than an Italian throat, accompanying himself on the concertina, which he played with ecstatic throwings-up of his arms, and graceful twistings and turnings of his head, like a fat St Cecilia masquerading in male attire. 'Figaro quà! Figaro là! Figaro sù! Figaro giù!' sang the Count, jauntily tossing up the concertina at arms' length, and bowing to us, on one side of the instrument, with an airy grace and elegance of Figaro himself at twenty years of age. (Collins *Woman*, 250)

And given that Fosco is singing and playing Rossini (the famous "Largo al factotum" from Act 1 of the opera), he must surely be playing that type of concertina known as the "English" concertina (hereafter, "English"), a designation that, by 1860 (and still today), refers not only to the instrument's place of origin—it was developed by the physicist Sir Charles Wheatstone (1802-75) during the late 1820s—but also to the musical system according to which it works.² For among the members of the concertina family, it was only

¹ On the ethnic implications of "organ-boy," see Grant, and Kurata. I am grateful to Phyllis Weliver for having called these articles to my attention.

² In addition to the "English," there were (and still are) two other generic types of concertina: the "Duett," also developed by Wheatstone and thus native to England; and the variously named "Anglo," "Anglo-German," or "Anglo-Continental," a British adaptation of the German *Konzertina*. Each of the three types operates according to different musical

the "English" that made inroads into the art-music tradition and found a home in both London's leading concert halls and the drawing rooms (or in Fosco's case, on the grassy lawns) of the upper- (titled nobility included) and middle-classes.³ There it gained the attention of such respected mid-Victorian composers as John Barnett, Julius Benedict, George Alexander Macfarren, and Bernhard Molique, as well as a number of lesser lights—usually concertinists themselves—who composed original works and turned out transcriptions by the handful for the instrument.⁴

What, then, was un-Italian about Fosco's playing the instrument? Simply put, it was that the "English" was British to the core, virtually ignored (and to a large extent even unknown) on the Continent, particularly in Italy; and it would, therefore, have been a rather unlikely instrument for Fosco to have taken up, much less mastered, even though he had already spent some time in England prior to the opening of the novel (*Collins Woman*, 245).

Collins, I believe, must have known all this, for he seems to have been familiar with the instrument: 1) his description of Fosco playing with "ecstatic throwings-up of the arms" describes accurately a mannerism of many a concertinist;⁵ 2) he faithfully portrays another facet of the concertina in *Armada*, where, on his "roaring" concertina, the junior Augustus Pedgift

principles and each—until around the end of the nineteenth century—was associated with different repertoires and social milieux. On the various types of concertina and their repertoires and reception, see Atlas *The Wheatstone, passim*; for brief accounts, see Pilling, and Atlas "Concertina."

³ Collins was perfectly realistic in having Fosco play outdoors (as he would be again with Augustus Pedgift, Jr., in *Armada*, see note 6), since the concertina's portability was part of the sales pitch of its manufacturers and devotees; see Cawdell, 13: ". . . the concertina may be played in any position, standing, sitting, walking, kneeling, or even lying down. If confined to the house by a sprained ankle, you may play whilst reclining on a sofa. . . and when you are convalescent, you may take your instrument into the fields where the Piano can never be."

⁴ Collins was realistic once again in having Fosco perform Rossini, since his operas—along with those of Donizetti, Bellini, and Meyerbeer—were a favorite source for those who ground out transcriptions for everything from unaccompanied "English" to the "remarkable" arrangement (as *The Musical Times* called it in 1851) by the virtuoso George Case of the Overture to *William Tell* for an ensemble of twelve concertinas. (Never published, the arrangement is, unfortunately, now lost.) Oddly, however, there is no known transcription of the "Largo al factotum," and Collins probably used it simply because it was so well known. On the repertory for the "English," which, by 1860, numbered hundreds of pieces, including concertos with orchestra, see Atlas *The Wheatstone*, 58-72.

⁵ That Collins took note of what was a widespread habit is evident from the various published tutors that tried to squelch it; thus George Case, 62, admonishes the player as follows: ". . . a continual swaying of the body, (however much it has a tendency to preserve the time) causes an unpleasant sensation in the spectator, and is consequently a habit which should never be indulged in."

entertains Miss Milroy and friends with popular tunes of the day as they enjoy an outing aboard a picnic boat;⁶ and 3) Collins, as I have speculated elsewhere, may have owned and played an "English" himself (Atlas, *The Wheatstone*, 4 & 14n).

This last assertion calls for documentation, and I should, therefore, spell out the evidence, flimsy and circumstantial though it is. On 18 May 1860—thus while *The Woman in White* was being serialized in Dickens's *All the Year Round*—a "Mr. Collins" purchased an "English" from Wheatstone & Co. (the leading manufacturer of concertinas). Nine months later, on 18 February 1861, the same firm sold a similar instrument to a "Mr. Dickens."⁷ Now, while neither name (particularly Collins) is rare, and while neither would arouse much speculation by itself, their appearance together within nine months of one another is enticing, and we must at least consider the possibility that Messrs. Collins and Dickens were the famous writers, especially since they often partook of things together (both literary and otherwise), and Dickens, as we know, was an avid accordionist and might, therefore, following Collins's lead, have been drawn to the accordion's smaller "cousin."⁸

To return to the main question: given his seeming familiarity with the "English," why did Collins place so thoroughly British an instrument in Fosco's Italian—and thus unlikely—hands? I believe that Collins had a specific model in mind for Fosco as concertina-player and that he fashioned the count's talents in this respect after the foremost "English" virtuoso of the time: Giulio Regondi

⁶ See Collins *Armada*, ed. Sutherland, 251; the Dover edition, 231, contains an illustration of Pedgift playing the concertina, its caption reading "Music on the Water." The description of Pedgift's concertina as "roaring" may be a slap at the inexpensive, mass-produced "Anglo" concertina, which, having arrived in Britain from Germany around the middle of the century, quickly became a favorite instrument among street musicians. It was the "Anglo" that later incited the wrath of George Bernard Shaw, who otherwise had nothing but praise for the "English"; see Laurence, ed., 1:86, 118-19, 222, 439, 575-76, 605.

⁷ The sales are recorded, with no further indication of the buyers' identity, in one of the dozen extant ledgers of the Wheatstone firm. When I examined these in 1993, they were housed at the Concertina Museum, Belper, Derbyshire, with the ledger that records the transactions in question bearing the signature CM C 1053. Since then, the entire collection of the Concertina Museum—instruments, ledgers, and other archival material—has been acquired by The Horniman Museum, London, where the ledgers await cataloguing.

⁸ On Dickens and the accordion, see Ruff, and Lightwood, 1-2. Admittedly, there is one piece of evidence that may speak against the identifications. In 1885, another Charles Dickens—unrelated to the writer's family, so far as I know—married the pianist and teacher (at the Guildhall School of Music) Linda Scates, whose father, Joseph Scates, was a publisher and concertina manufacturer. Perhaps this is the "Mr. Dickens" to whom the 1861 sales record refers, and perhaps—to hazard a sentimental speculation—it was this Mr. Dickens and the Scates family's mutual fondness for concertinas that kindled the romance.

(1822/23?-72), who, ironically—but significantly for Collins and his readers (see below)—was also a native Italian.⁹ But there the Italian connection shared with Fosco ends. For by 1860, Regondi, unlike Fosco, was neither a recent immigrant nor just an occasional visitor to England. Rather, he had arrived there in 1831 as an eight-year-old child prodigy on the guitar, and except for a number of sojourns in nearby Ireland and two short tours through Central Europe (Leipzig, Vienna, and Prague) in 1840 and 1846-47, he never left his adopted home. Thus it was a thoroughly "anglicized" Regondi who became a fixture (as performer and teacher) in London's musical life, his career reaching an apex of sorts in the 1850s, from which time on he could hardly have escaped the notice of anyone with even the slightest interest in the concertina, the culturally aware Collins included (see Atlas "Wilkie Collins"). One review of his playing may stand for many:

Signor Regondi has now brought his execution on the concertina to such perfection that it is probably impossible to go beyond him. He has attained such wonderful dexterity, his command over his instrument is so great, that it seems a mere plaything in his hands. But therein does not lie his greatest merit . . . That which raises Signor Regondi above other performers, is the sentiment and expression by which he assimilates his instrument to the human voice, and sings in a manner to rival the effects of the greatest singers. The cantabile passages remind us, by their breadth of tone and feeling, of Rubini, or Paganini or Ernst in similar passages on the violin.¹⁰

Thus while those of Collins's mid-Victorian readers who were acquainted with the "English" would have known that it was an entirely home-grown instrument, it was with the Italian Regondi that the instrument had, to a certain extent,

⁹ Although the literature on Regondi contains occasional references to him as having been born in Switzerland, these probably arose from an error in the nineteenth-century in which Genova was altered to Geneva (perhaps through nothing more than a typographical error). And even should the error eventually be shown to have gone in the other direction, there can be no doubt that "Signor" Regondi, as he was usually called, was thought of as being Italian. The most thorough account of Regondi's career is that of Rogers; see also the recent biographical discoveries reported by Tom Lawrence in "The Guitar", 121-69 and App. III, and "Giulio Regondi"; for a brief summary (that antedates Lawrence's findings), see Atlas *The Wheatstone*, 48-54. Regondi also composed and arranged extensively for the "English"; and some of his music for the instrument can be heard on *The Great Regondi: Original Compositions by the 19th Century's Unparalleled Guitarist & Concertinist*, The Giulio Regondi Guild, with Douglas Rogers playing the "English." Bridge Records, BCD 9039 (1993) and 9055 (1994).

¹⁰ Unsigned review in *The Musical World*. For further reviews, see Rogers, and Lawrence "Giulio Regondi". Giovanni Battista Rubini (1794-1854) was one of the great tenors of the period, and was extremely popular in London from 1831 to 1843 (he retired in 1845). The violinist Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1814-1865) was sometimes considered Paganini's successor; he too was popular in London, and settled there in 1855. On Rubini and Ernst, see *The New Grove*, 16:295-96 and 6:238, respectively.

become synonymous, and it was with him that they would have immediately associated it.

In all, I would suggest that Collins placed the "English" in Fosco's foreign hands in order to cash in on the name-recognition of its single, but famous Italian connection: Giulio Regondi, who may therefore stand as the model for "Count Fosco, concertinist." And to some extent there is a parallel between the two, for just as Fosco outwitted his British hosts at almost every turn, it was Regondi who showed the English what the "English" could do.

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