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Introduction to Organology

Final Paper

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Firth, Hall, Pond & (their many) Co(mpanies)

The list of business ventures of John Firth, Sylvanus Pond, William Hall, and their sons reads like a mathematical exercise in counting combinations. As Nancy Groce begins her article on John Firth (the founding member of the Firth, Hall, and Pond), “Firth had a long and successful career as a musical instrument maker, dealer, importer, and music publisher. His various activities and partnerships, which occasionally overlapped one another, make a history of his career confusing”¹. Between 1821 and 1875 existed “Firth and Hall,” “Firth, Hall, and Pond,” “Firth, Pond, & Company,” “Firth, Son, and Company,” “Pond and Company,” and “Hall and Son.” These various organizations’ ever changing names and memberships, however, are not the only complication studying these businesses presents.² Throughout the period, they shifted not only in name, but also in terms of the products they sold and from where they acquired them, at various times publishing original music or importing it and selling instruments they made themselves or ones they simply stamped with the business of the day’s name. This corporate turbulence creates difficulty in identifying the provenance of their instruments, since they seemed to keep few records and hold little regard for up-to-date brand-naming. We are left then, with the question of what exactly ties an instrument to the Firth, Hall, & Pond network of companies, particularly in the absence of a

¹ Nancy Groce, *Musical instrument makers of New York : a directory of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century urban craftsmen*, (New York: Pendragon Press, 1991), 51.

² Groce 51-52, 70, 126-127.

maker's stamp or other definitive branding. If the tag says an instrument was produced by Firth, Hall & Pond in 1835, but the instrument itself does more to dispute this label than to support it, what can be learned by nonetheless examining the instrument through that lens?

The clarinet I am looking at is one such instrument, tagged "Firth, Hall, & Pond, 1835," but almost certainly incorrectly so. It is made of ebony and ivory and has thirteen sterling silver "salt spoon" keys and a metal thumb rest, along with a mahogany mouthpiece. Although John Firth had some experience building fifes, there is no evidence to indicate that he could have built this instrument, since Firth clarinets were almost uniformly made of boxwood



Example 1

Left, an illustration from *A Complete Instruction Book for the Clarinet, Developing its Power and Compass and Laying Down the Most Approved and Efficient Rules to Obtain a Perfect Knowledge of that Beautiful & Effective Instrument. Written and Dedicated to Robert Wiss, Esq. By Thomas L. Willman*. Published by William Hall & Son, 1848.

Right, a photograph of the clarinet discussed throughout this paper

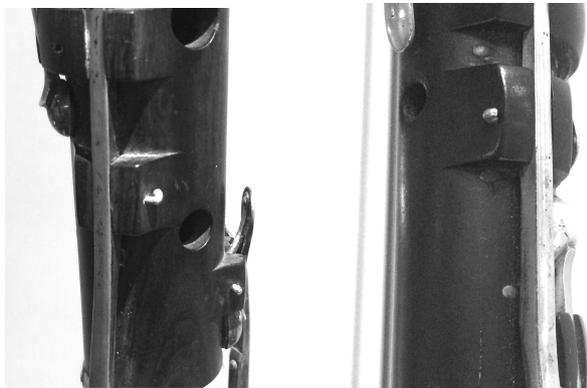
or maple, with brass keys and relatively primitive technology.³ Additionally, neither Hall nor Pond had any notable skill with woodwinds.⁴ Because of this lack of skill, the firm tended to purchase woodwind instruments and stamp their name on it afterward. They almost

³ Groce, 51.

⁴ Groce, 70, 126.

exclusively relied on Asa Hopkins and Jabez Camp's company, "Fluteville," for the production of woodwinds under their name and in 1834 acquired the firm.⁵

Fluteville, however, probably did not produce the clarinet mentioned above, either. As far as anyone can tell, neither Hopkins nor Camp, although known for their highly skilled and refined work in flutes, ever produced clarinets having more than five keys.⁶ Further, this clarinet is fashioned out of ebony and ivory, and the known output of Fluteville clarinets consists entirely of instruments made out of boxwood with only occasional pieces with minimal ivory embellishment, not full barrels made out of the material.⁷ The only aspects of this instrument that hints that it could have come out of Fluteville are the steel lining of the barrel and some of the top section of the body (a technique common in flute manufacturing) and the resemblance of some of the key fixtures to those on a Hopkins flute in the collection (see ex. 2). This clarinet, however, was most likely built after Camp's (the younger of



Example 2

Left, a key fixture from a Transverse flute in C by Asa Hopkins, Litchfield, Conn., 1829-1837.

Right, a key fixture from the analogous key on the clarinet in question.

Hopkins and Camp) departure from the musical instrument industry in 1837. The instrument's level of technological sophistication closely resembles that of one depicted in a 1848 tutor, published by "Hall & Son" with the caption "Firth & Pond Clarinet" (see ex. 1). Another tutor from fifteen years earlier presents another

⁵ Groce, 52.

⁶ Deborah Check Reeves, "Historically Speaking," *The Clarinet*, vol. 35, No. 2 (Idaho: International Clarinet Association, March 2008), p. 24.

⁷ Reeves, 24.

illustration of a “Firth, Hall, & Pond” Clarinet that much more closely fits Reeves’s description of Fluteville’s output.⁸ Since Firth, Hall, and Pond were relatively prolific publishers, it stands to reason that their work would include contemporary images of the clarinets they were hoping to sell alongside their tutors. Also, although there were thirteen key clarinets similar to this one as early as 1812, their production was not commonplace until the early 1840s.⁹ Further, this clarinet’s round salt spoon keys, whose increased use is related to the increase in number of keys and follows a similar timeline (these keys allowed clarinet makers to use leather pads rather than felt ones and better sealed the holes they covered) places this clarinet further forward in time as does the fact that its keys are round, rather than square, and less deep than early salt spoon keys.^{10 11}

The “curiosities” of this particular instrument, however, call into question whether it could possibly be from an earlier date because this clarinet has various vestiges of earlier models. First, the register key is reinforced with a steel tube that extends from the top of the barrel to just past the opening for the hole it uncovers. This technique of attaching the register key came from the flute-manufacturing industry (as did most technological innovations in clarinet making) and was most popular in the 1810s and ‘20s, but continued well through the century.¹² More surprisingly, the instrument is covered in small pins throughout the body, the use of which was common in instruments with added wooden rings or metal saddles in the 1810s and ‘20s but is surprising in this context, as this clarinet uses a mix of swellings and

⁸ Reeves, 22.

⁹ Jack Brymer, *The Clarinet*, (London : Macdonald and Jane's, 1976), 43.

¹⁰ Eric Hoeprich, *The Clarinet*, (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2008), 133.

¹¹ Brymer, 45.

¹² Albert Rice, *The Clarinet in the Classical Period*, (Oxford: Oxford UP 2003), 12.

pillars (bumps and blocks extending from the same piece of wood that the body is made out of) and as a result does not need pins to affix them to the body.¹³ It seems likely that the pins have something to do with reinforcing the wood around the finger holes. According to Reese Williams, this technique of using pins is a common way to repair a crack or prevent it from spreading. He also said, however, that it is incredibly labor-intensive, so their prevalence on this instrument likely indicates that either it was a very highly valued piece or that it was repaired by someone whose primary occupation was not the restoration of musical instruments.¹⁴ Despite the appearance of earlier technologies in this instrument, it seems very likely that it would have been produced after the mid 1840s because of the presence of techniques that were not in widespread use until that period and the fact that “Firth, Hall & Pond” was a relatively minor maker who likely would not have been at the forefront of clarinet innovation.

If neither Firth, Hall, nor Pond had recorded skill in making clarinets, and both Hopkins and Camp were out of the business before this piece was manufactured, then who made this clarinet? It is possible that it was William Hall, who does have some recorded success in making high quality amateur flutes, could have made it.¹⁵ Further, the clarinet’s keys are laid out according to the Müller rather than the Boehm system, whose “most obvious difference [is] the keys for the little finger: Where the Boehm System has four levers, the German system has two rather flat, half-round key ends that both have a small wooden roll

¹³ Rice, 12.

¹⁴ Reese Williams, “Restoration,” (lecture, Oberlin College & Conservatory, Oberlin, OH, March 31, 2014).

¹⁵ Terry McGee, “William Hall - New York Flute Maker,” <http://www.mcgee-flutes.com/Hall.htm>, (accessed May 14, 2014).

for sliding”¹⁶ (see ex. 3). This difference indicates that it comes from the German tradition, and Hall’s flutes were “distinctly english.”¹⁷ ¹⁸ Like Hall, most instrument makers in the United States created English-style products, but in Baltimore, Müller system clarinets imported from Dresden were available.¹⁹ It is possible that this is one of those clarinets or that Firth, Hall, and Pond imported it themselves. The use of ebony, ivory, and silver on the item mark it as a status piece, one that it seems likely to have been worth the effort of importing, and the great effort taken in repairing it further reinforces this idea. It is also possible that they hired a German craftsman to work in the Fluteville workshop in Connecticut, an idea supported by this instrument’s strong resemblance to other clarinets in the collection that came from it.



Example 3
Two keys for the little finger
with rollers from the clarinet
discussed

Of course, we do not and probably will never know for certain whether this clarinet truly is a “Firth, Hall, & Pond.” According to Barbara Lambert, it may have been entered into the catalogue as such because “Either [Lambert] found a stamp on the clarinet or it might have come from Bill Maynard's collection that Dr. Selch purchased, and if so probably Mr. Maynard had identified it as Firth, Hall and Pond.” Since I have looked thoroughly and found no stamp, for the time being, I will take Mr. Maynard’s word for the time being. Whether the instrument is Firth, Hall, & Pond or not, the question of its origin provides an interesting frame for looking at mid nineteenth century American clarinet production.

¹⁶ Eberhard Frost, “Differences Boehm System versus German System,” <http://www.the-clarinets.net/english/boehm-german.html>, (accessed May 14, 2014)

¹⁷ McGee

¹⁸ Oscar Lee Gibson, *Clarinet acoustics*, (Bloomington : Indiana UP, 1994), 3.

¹⁹ Hoeprich 131