

The Piccolo Soloists **by Stuart Scott**

The piccolo first made its presence felt in the eighteenth century but it wasn't until the following century that its use became more widespread in orchestras. The instrument evolved from fife to Boehm system much as the concert flute and more and more composers included a piccolo part in their orchestral scores throughout the nineteenth century. However, it soon became apparent that piccolos demanded special requirements from the players.

Macaulay Fitzgibbon maintained that the great piccolo players such as **Robert Frisch, Harrington Young, Charles le Thièrè** and **George Roe** etc. did not shine very pre-eminently as flute players. There may well be some truth in his thought on the matter. The tighter embouchure required for piccolo playing may well adversely affect flute tone for some players. Switching between metal flute and wooden piccolo can cause a player difficulties. Wooden piccolos rarely have a lip plate and the tighter embouchure needed for the small hole is much more tiring for the player to maintain over a long period of time. The smaller instrument requires more air speed and breath pressure than the flute. Lip position, air pressure and the small size of the instrument are all critical factors affecting intonation.

Nevertheless, the piccolo really came into its own with the advent of recording equipment such as Edison's phonograph and **Frank Goede** may well have been the first to record a piccolo piece for Edison at a session on May 24th 1899 as his name appears on the first page of the first Edison recording ledger. (see *Tim Brooks, A Directory to Columbia Recording Artists of the 1890's*)

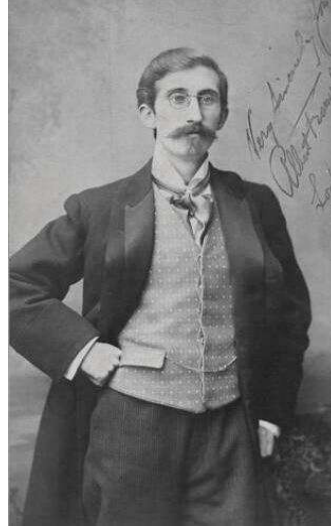
Many virtuoso performers were recorded from the 1890's and on into the twentieth century simply because the piccolo was one of the most suitable instruments to record. Its loud, clear and high pitched voice was admirably suited to the technical process. The early recording companies required short pieces from composers because of the limitations imposed by the current technology and the performers were happy to thrill their growing audience through their own prowess and the opportunity of technical display offered by these short pieces. As recordings were made and sold throughout Europe and America the players earned for themselves an international reputation.

In England the early recording artists included **Albert Fransella (1865-1935), Eli Hudson (1877-1919) and James Wilcocke (1853-1927)**. Hudson had been a pupil of W. L. Barrett and A. P. Vivian at the Royal College of Music and spent his early career in music halls playing piccolo solos, duets and trios along with his sister, Winifred (Elgar) and wife, Eleanor (Olga). Later he was appointed first flute in the London Symphony Orchestra and held teaching posts at the Royal College of Music and at the Military School of Music, Kneller Hall, London. He was an outstanding player whose technique was second to none and the piccolo solos he recorded for Edison, Gramophone Company and Zonophone in the first decade of the twentieth century clearly display his clean articulation, perfect intonation and brilliant, even scale passages. Nowhere are these qualities more clearly demonstrated than in his 1908 recording of Prendville's *Electric Polka*.

A couple of years after Hudson's recording was made, Albert Fransella appeared as piccolo soloist giving the premiere of his own *Variations on a Russian Air* to an appreciative audience at the Promenade Concert on 15th October 1910. He often appeared as soloist, gave recitals and took part in chamber concerts with his own flute quartet. He was principal of the Queens Hall Orchestra and as flute professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Trinity College of Music, an influential teacher of many future players. He appeared as flute soloist at the very first Henry Wood Promenade Concert on 10th August 1895 and first recorded for the Gramophone Company in 1898. He seemed to be as much at home on the piccolo as he was on the flute and his recording of Damaré's *The Wren*, made in 1914, gives some idea of his mastery of the small instrument.



Eli Hudson



Albert Fransella

Like Fransella, James Wilcocke was a well respected member of the Queens Hall Orchestra and teacher of flute at the Guildhall School of Music. He studied with George L. Roe, a London flautist, composer and teacher, who is reported to have been a fine piccolo player. Wilcocke's recording of *Nightingale Waltz* made in 1904 may well bear testimony to Roe's abilities as teacher and player.



James Wilcocke



Jean Gennin

After about 1910 virtuoso piccolo recordings began to give way to a repertoire of music for small ensembles playing classical works although the Gennin brothers and **Gordon Walker (1885-1965)** continued to record piccolo pieces well into the late 1920's.

Belgian born **Jean Gennin (b.1886)** and his brother, Pierre, played with Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra from about 1913. Under the direction of Dan Godfrey they recorded piccolo and flute duets composed by Jean. His *Fluttering Birds* for two piccolos and orchestra was recorded on 29th April 1928 at the Old Winter Gardens, Bournemouth where the two brothers must have dazzled the audiences with a fine display of brilliant technique on numerous occasions.



Gordon Walker

In London **Gordon Walker** had already made a number of piccolo solo recordings for Zonophone UK in the early 1920's including Sontini's *Stump Piccolo Rag* which seems to reflect a changing repertoire led by the commercial recording companies. However, his 1921 recording of Frank Brockett's *Mocking Bird* harks back to the "birdie solos" of the previous decade and Walker dispatches it with musicianship and much aplomb.

It has been estimated that between 1889 and 1930 well over a thousand piccolo solos were composed and performed in outdoor bandstands across the USA and in Europe. Bands such as those directed by Sousa, Gilmore and Pryor were very popular in America and their star players were encouraged to appear as soloists. The piccolo soloists were always popular with audiences and it didn't take long for the recording companies to realize their commercial potential. John S. Cox, Henry Heidelberg, Marshall Lufsky, Darius Lyons and Eugene C. Rose all played with Sousa's band and all made numerous recordings in the early years of the twentieth century.



John S. Cox

The Irishman **John S. Cox (1834-1902)** was known to be a good piccolo player who also composed a number of solos for the instrument. He first played in Gilmore's band before being appointed by Sousa in 1892. From 1900 **Marshall Lufsky (1878-1948)** and **Darius Lyons (1870-1926)** played together and toured with Sousa. Between 1902 and 1909, Lufsky made nearly 100 recordings as piccolo soloist, and from 1906 became flautist in the studio orchestra of the Columbia Phonograph Company, a position he held for fourteen years.

During the 1920's he occasionally played at the Metropolitan Opera House and with the New York Philharmonic. His recording of *Nightingale Polka* made with Prince's band for Columbia in 1906 shows his technical prowess and assured style.



Marshall Lufsky



Darius Lyons

Lufsky's partner, Darius Lyons, played with the Victor Herbert Orchestra and the Savage Opera Company in New York before joining Sousa's band in 1900 where he remained for the next four years. He then played with the Arthur Pryor Band for a short time before joining Victor's permanent studio orchestra in 1905.

Henry Heidelberg (b.1872) filled the vacancy in Sousa's band left by Lyons in 1904 and continued to be a member of the band until 1915. He made a number of recordings for Edison including some duets with his band colleague, **Eugene C. Rose**. In the years that followed he played with the New York Symphony and Philharmonic orchestras.

Recording companies in America and elsewhere grew very quickly and soon found it advantageous to employ their own musicians. Perhaps an outstanding example of the early professional studio players was **George C. Schweinfest (1862-1949)** who began recording for Edison in 1889. In the last decade of the nineteenth century he also recorded for New Jersey Phonograph Company, Columbia, Berliner and Victor. He is said to have made well over 200 piccolo recordings altogether. *Bob White Polka* recorded for Columbia in 1897-98 is probably a good example of his repertoire and performance.

Piccolo players and composers of popular pieces for the instrument were numerous in the early years of the twentieth century but, in more recent times, players have had to prove themselves in the orchestral world, for it is here that the instrument has found its niche. In a sense, today's orchestral players are soloists every time they raise the instrument to their lips, as the sound of the piccolo is one of the most easily detected by ear of all the sounds an orchestra can offer.