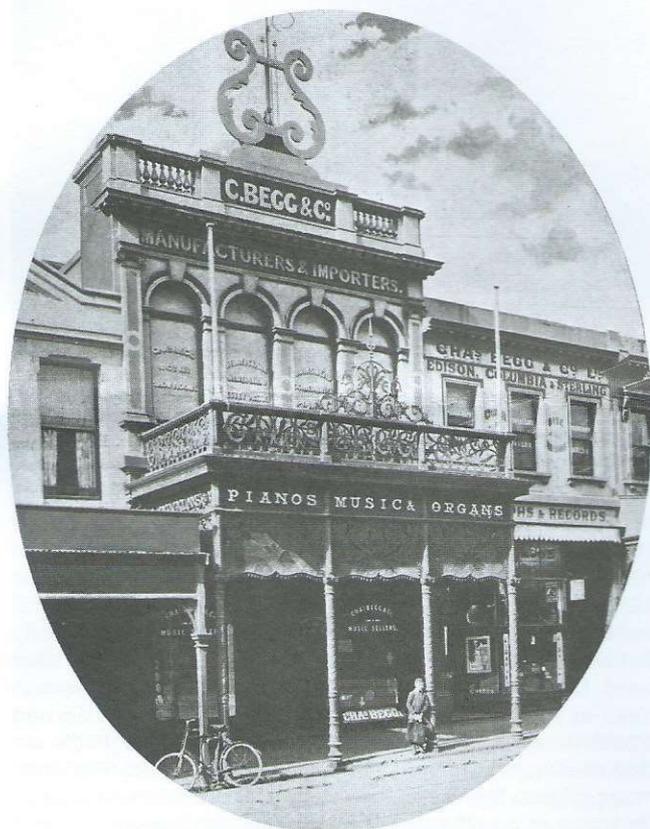


Selling and Making Music at Begg's



Beginning in Dunedin in 1861, only thirteen years after the settlement of Otago began, Begg's was an early business in what was to become the wealthiest city in New Zealand. The firm subsequently spread throughout the country and continued to operate until 1970, a period of nearly 110 years — an impressive record for any company. For many generations of New Zealanders, Begg's meant music and music meant Begg's. Yet it was not just a music retailer, it was also a manufacturer and wholesaler. From very early on, Begg's was astute enough to see the potential of, and embraced, the new musical technologies of gramophone and radio.

Begg's later expanded its importing to cover a wide range of electrical goods, including refrigerators, washing machines, shavers, irons, cake mixers and more. When strict import licensing measures were introduced in the 1930s, Begg's established its own 'Dreco' (Dominion Electrical Company) factory in Otahuhu and began assembling Philco radios and, in the 1960s, television sets.

Charles Begg arrived in Otago on 8 October 1861 and began work the next day. His business developed rapidly. On 12 January 1865 the New Zealand Exhibition opened in Dunedin. It was a creditable achievement for the newly settled province. A magnificent building was erected in Great King Street to house a wide range of displays and the exhibition attracted 800 exhibitors from around the world. Charles was a judge in two classes (Furniture and Upholstery), as well as an entrant in the Musical Instruments class at the Exhibition. He entered

two pianos, a Collard & Collard cottage pianoforte from London which won him an honorary certificate, and a piano of his own construction (apart from the action which was made by Broadwood of London) manufactured from New Zealand woods. The case was of Otago rimu and the string board and sounding board of Swiss pine. Charles' piano won a bronze medal 'For Piano Manufactured by him in New Zealand, and of New Zealand woods.'

After Charles' death the company was managed by his wife, Jessie, until 1896 when their sons Alex and Charles assumed management of the business. In 1908, after a protracted legal battle within the Begg family, the business became a limited liability company. During this time Begg's expanded to Timaru (1885), Wellington (1897) and Invercargill (1900), before opening an office in London in 1904 and finally a branch in Waimate (1907), as well as having numerous agencies throughout the country.

In early 1885 Begg's Timaru branch or 'saloon,' as it was named, was opened in the Theatre Buildings, Stafford Street with William Huggins as manager. He was a violinist and keen bandsman, and was to serve as manager there for nearly forty years, eventually dying at his desk on a Saturday afternoon after the shop had closed. His son, Frank Sargant Huggins, also worked for the company, originally training as a coffin maker and then as a piano tuner in Dunedin and subsequently being in charge of the piano tuning department at the Wellington branch. The Timaru branch offered all that was available in Dunedin, albeit in a more limited range and promised that 'country clients can rely on their orders being dispatched with Promptness and Despatch.' By 1887 the Timaru branch had a resident tuner, Mr Hathaway, who would undertake a single tuning for twelve shillings and sixpence, a reduction in the amount charged when the tuner had to come from Dunedin.

As is still the case today, musicians were attracted to working in an environment dealing with music and many of Begg's staff were very involved in the musical life of the community they worked in. In 1901 the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall visited the Dominion and a signal was sent to Dunedin to announce their landing at Auckland. As the signal was received flags were flown, bunting hauled up and a 21-gun salute fired, with a crowd gathered in Princes Street. Alas no band had been organised to play 'God Save the King' but on 'Messrs Charles Begg and Co's balcony ... eight or ten of the employees formed themselves into a band, and taking up a position on the balcony, played the National Anthem. Rousing cheers were given as the flags all around were hoisted.'

Begg's growth continued to be steady, with five new branches opened and staff numbers increased to 200 by 1926. The opening of a branch in Christchurch in 1920 meant Begg's now had a presence in three of the four major cities in the country and was another important step in their expansion policy. The manufacturing operation was substantially expanded during this period, moving from a workshop in the basement of the Princes Street premises to a specially built factory. Although Dunedin was still the major branch and head office, the city's position within New Zealand had begun to wane and it was vital for the company to develop in other areas to maintain its



position in the market. No doubt in part as a response to this Begg's were very involved in the 1925-26 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition which was held in Dunedin and stressed the importance of New Zealand's place in the empire and the promotion of local industry.

For the Exhibition Begg's constructed a special piano with an oak case and iron frame. Each piano had a round brass plaque on it with the words 'Specially manufactured for the 1925-26 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition, Dunedin' impressed into it. The frame had been specifically made for the company and had 'Begg' within a lyre motif (a symbol the firm used frequently) moulded into it. The design of the case was relatively simple and its straight lines and lack of excessive ornamentation had an Art Deco look to it.

In 1924, in a reversal of previous New Zealand exhibitions Begg's had exhibited at, where the largest part of their displays was imported goods, Begg's sent a piano and gramophone of their own manufacture to London for the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley. This illustrated the increasingly global nature of their business. By May 1926 there were between 40 and 50 men employed in the Filleul Street factory and Alex Begg had plans to expand further.

In 1926 Begg's became a public company although the Begg family were still involved. As well as expanding the range of musical goods and other types of products Begg's sold, the business also expanded its physical presence in New Zealand, most importantly with the opening of a branch in Customs Street East, Auckland in 1928. With this opening Begg's had achieved nationwide coverage and now had a presence, and were to become a keen competitor, in New Zealand's largest city. As before, Begg's continued to maintain agencies in the smaller cities and towns throughout the country and in 1943 new branches in Hamilton and Palmerston North were opened. Staff numbers continued to increase to the extent that during the Second World War eighty staff members served overseas, four making the 'ultimate sacrifice.' Most of those who served returned to Begg's employ after demobbing.

Many thousands of people worked for Begg's during its long history. Some employees came and went fairly quickly, some became integral parts of branches they worked in, and a few spent their whole working lives there. There were staff who never moved from the branch they began at, and retired from it years later, while others were transferred all over the country

as their career paths developed. There were many marriages among staff, and families would often have more than one member working for the company.

James Dixon (always known to Begg's staff as 'JD') managed the Dunedin branch. He had joined the firm at some time in the 1920s and conducted the successful choir in the nationwide 1927 Firm's Contest. In 1933, when Eric Begg was made general manager, JD succeeded him as branch manager. JD was heavily involved in the brass band world and in particular the St Kilda band. One of his sons, Jim, served his apprenticeship as a piano tuner at Begg's. JD's other son Arthur fought in the Second World War and on his return to New Zealand, JD bought the old Dunedin business of 'Terry's,' which included a substantial sheet music section, for his son to run. Needless to say, this caused a sensation among the staff of Begg's Dunedin branch, to whom the purchase smacked of treachery. In 1953 JD retired from Begg's and became general manager at Terry's with his son Arthur as manager.

Lots of well-known musical names worked at the various branches over the years — Jock Begg, bagpipe specialist and father of the famous mezzo-soprano opera singer Heather Begg (Auckland); Kiri te Kanawa (Auckland); Clare Golomos the violinist (Wellington); as well as countless band musicians who often worked at Begg's during the day and performed in the evenings. Michael Hill's father was an appliance salesman in the Whangarei branch.

Piano repairs and piano tuning were still a big part of the business in the 1950s. When Eric Officer began his apprenticeship in Dunedin in 1956, the branch had several tuners. As well as tuning pianos, there were many repairs to be undertaken in the piano workshop or 'the sunshine factory,' as it was known. Some tuners worked just in Dunedin itself, while others went out tuning in the country. When someone rang in for an out-of-town tuning they might have to wait until there were other tuning jobs nearby to make it worthwhile. When the country tuners came in on Monday morning they were given a list of where to go and went off in one of the branch's two small Ford Anglia vans that had 'Begg's Piano Tuning Service' on them. Margaret Gardiner says the tuners got to know their clientele well and would often stay privately in piano teachers' houses.

In 1961 the company celebrated its 100th birthday. In Invercargill the branch donated a square piano to the Invercargill museum to commemorate its 100 years, but the new grand piano

Left-right: Ground floor of the Princes Street premises displaying small instruments and music; piano repair and polishing in 1911.



ordered from Begg's by the Dunedin City Council for their Town Hall had to be paid for by them. Some felt that it should have been donated, as had happened some twenty years before. By now the family atmosphere was on the wane and many staff felt disappointed in the lack of importance attached to the centenary. The manager of the Dunedin shop, Walter Sinton, wrote to Begg's London representative, Bert Rayment, 'Confidentially, we have had a peculiar sort of Centenary, in that it has not been celebrated at all ... not a thing was done here even in the birthplace of the Begg organization! The whole timbre of the company was changing.

In more than any other aspect of Begg's operation it is the publishing of music that best illustrates the commitment the company had to New Zealand music and the contribution it made to many aspects of New Zealand cultural life, not all of it for purely pecuniary gain.

One well-known song was 'Blue Smoke,' written by Ruru Karaitiana, a Maori soldier who later wrote regarding it 'We were on the troopship Aquitania in 1940 off the coast of Africa when a friend drew my attention to some passing smoke. He put the song in my lap. It was a natural!' Ruru Karaitiana could not read or write music and although he composed the tune and wrote the words for the chorus, it was Begg's personnel who supplied the verse (Walter Sinton) and piano arrangement (George Winchester, manager of Begg's wholesale music division in Wellington). The author Patricia Grace remembers being taken by her mother to Begg's Wellington branch and hearing Ruru playing and singing the piece on the piano, presumably in order to publicise it. Ruru got a little carried away with the success of 'Blue Smoke' and went up and down New Zealand charging all sorts of things to his royalty account — greatly exceeding any royalties he was ever likely to receive, which caused enormous problems for Begg's. Begg's also published other compositions by Ruru: 'Let's Talk it Over' and 'Ain't It a Shame.'

Clare Gleeson (née Begg)



This is an extract, with the kind permission of the author, from *Meet Me at Begg's: The Story of Charles Begg & Co, Music and Appliance Manufacturers and Retailers, 1861-1970* (Wellington: Ngaio Press, 2012).

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Top left-right: New technologies – Begg's phonograph and radio departments, 1911 and 1930s
 Bottom: A Begg's record sleeve c1908