

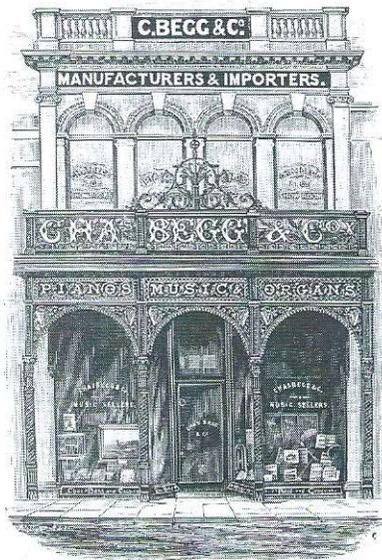
Begg's and Music Education in New Zealand

By Clare Gleeson

In 1937 Eric Begg, general manager of Charles Begg & Co Ltd (usually referred to as Begg's), returned from a three-month trip to the USA, Canada, Britain, and Europe. In an interview with the *Otago Daily Times*, he spoke of his admiration for the standard of music education he had seen overseas, in particular in the USA and Canada, and determined to do what he could to encourage similar developments in New Zealand.

Eric was the grandson of Charles Begg, the founder of a firm whose name has been synonymous with music for many generations of New Zealanders. In 1861 Charles Begg had left Aberdeen with his family and four pianos, bound for Otago. He was a piano manufacturer and tuner and some of his pianos had already been brought to New Zealand by earlier settlers. A Begg piano made in Aberdeen in the 1850s can still be seen in the Otago Settlers' Museum. On the day after his arrival, Charles began tuning pianos and a short time later opened a shop in Princes Street, Dunedin.

Charles continued manufacturing in Dunedin and in 1865 a rimu-cased piano he had made won a medal at the New Zealand Exhibition (see page 23). This was the first piano to be manufactured in New Zealand and is also in the Otago Settlers' Museum. The firm Charles founded went on to operate a large piano and later gramophone factory in Dunedin. In addition, Begg's were huge importers of pianos, many of which are still being played today.

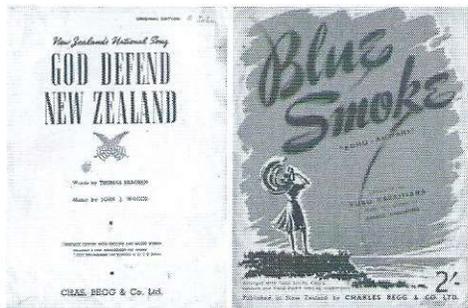


Chas. Begg shop front drawing (Ouida album cover)

Over the next 110 years, the business Charles founded, developed and expanded until there were branches from Whangarei to Invercargill and an office in London. Their operations included manufacturing, wholesaling, retailing, publishing, and a myriad of associated activities. Begg's were retailers of all things musical – instruments, music, accessories – as well as phonographs, gramophones, record players and radios. With its many branches,



Oamaru Branch staff moving pianos



Begg's sheet music

and in earlier days a widespread network of agencies, Begg's provided New Zealanders with access to everything musical.

In addition, Begg's was the largest ever publisher of New Zealand sheet music, beginning in 1868 with the *Henrietta Waltz*, which was composed, published, and printed in Dunedin. Over the next 100 years, Begg's published around 200 original New Zealand

compositions, many of them still familiar today, including *God Defend New Zealand*, *Blue Smoke*, *Now is the Hour*, *The Nikau Waltz* and *On the Ball*. They also published many hundreds of overseas compositions in New Zealand under license to overseas publishers, particularly during WWII.

One aspect of Begg's operations that is not so well known is the fostering of music education. From the early 1860s when Charles Begg provided rooms for the Dunedin Volunteers Band and Orchestral Music Society to practise, Begg's supported all sorts of musical endeavours. In some cities, Begg's provided rooms and pianos for music exams, and there were competitions, awards, prizes and sponsorship.

However, under Eric Begg's management (1933-1948) the desire to emulate the standard

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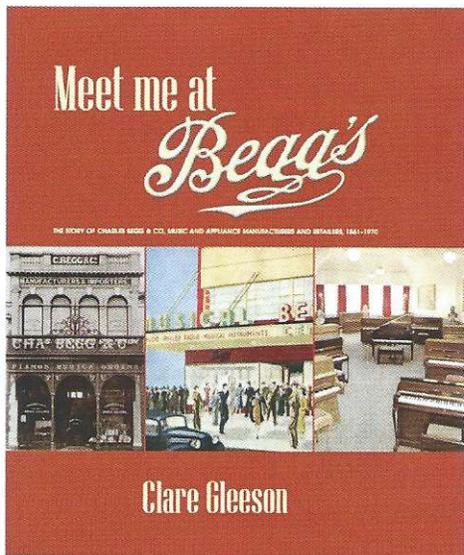
of music education he had seen abroad led him to introduce a more concentrated programme of support. During the 1930s and 1940s, Begg's expansion meant that several branches were enlarged, or completely redeveloped. New premises were opened in Auckland in 1939 and in Christchurch in 1940. Both these multi-storied branches had their own teaching studios and concert chambers. In addition, the Auckland branch had an Educational Music Department under the guidance of a director, Madame Anne Smith, whose tutor, *The School Percussion Band Progressive Course Specially Compiled for NZ Schools*, Begg's later published.

Begg's Musical Army was the starting point for many a successful musician's career. In Dunedin in 1939, Begg's employed music teacher Bill Coulter to organise and run a 'musical army' for them. The army would provide cheap, quality, class tuition on selected musical instruments (guitars, ukuleles, banjos, mandolins, piano accordions and percussion) "to enable youngsters and others to learn music on the instruments of their choice at little cost to themselves". Begg's Musical Army was extremely popular and by December 1940 there were over 500 students in Dunedin. The Smith family was typical of Army members. Mr Smith played the electric steel guitar, Mrs Smith the acoustic guitar, Joan the guitar and ukulele, and Noeline the ukulele. The sisters also sang. At the end of each year the entire Musical Army, complete with instruments, would march along to the Dunedin Town Hall for a concert, after which Begg's would give all members an ice-cream. Proceeds from the concerts went to worthy community causes such as the Spitfire Fund in 1939.

Bill Coulter remained the driving force in Begg's Musical Army for the 35 years of its existence although other people, including various members of Begg's staff, also taught there. In 1959 an anniversary concert was held in the Dunedin Town Hall. At that time there were almost 300 members in the Dunedin Army and between 2000 and 3000 pupils had passed through its ranks. Auckland and Christchurch also had sizeable Musical Armies but they did not enjoy the longevity of the Dunedin one.

In 1943 Eric Begg offered to fund a scholarship at the University of Otago in memory of his grandfather, Charles Begg, which the company hoped would "assist outstanding students who are studying Music in the University with a view to teaching this subject in the Secondary Schools of the Dominion". The University accepted the offer and Begg's gave £1,000 to found the Scholarship in Music. It was open to all students who had passed Music I in the BA degree and were intending to take Music II. The recipient had to have "personal qualities ...which would indicate that they would become stimulating teachers of the subject". The scholarship was replaced by the Charles Begg prizes in 1966 and these are still awarded today.

The Charles Begg Music Composers' Contest was introduced in 1943 "to encourage Musical Composition in New Zealand and the teaching and performing of New Zealand music". The compositions had to be original works for the piano, of at least moderate difficulty (about Grade 5), and have two or three movements. There was a cash prize of 10 guineas for the winning composition which Begg's undertook to publish. The winning entries were published as part of a series titled *The Lyric Collection*



Book Cover

of Piano Compositions by New Zealand Composers. The emphasis was very much on giving composers an opportunity to practise their craft and, if successful, have their work published. The well-known composers Ernest Jenner, Henry Shirley, L D Austin and Ronald Tremain were all winners of the competition.

The major impetus for these activities came from Eric Begg and when he died in 1948 the focus lessened somewhat. However, Begg's continued to be involved in music education until the company collapsed in the early 1970s. Even today some legacies of their influence in this area remain.

Clare Gleeson, Wellington, is a librarian and the great-great-grand-daughter of Charles Begg, founder of one of New Zealand's best known music firms. She is the author of Meet Me at Begg's, the story of Charles Begg & Co, music and appliance manufacturers and retailer, 1861-1970. Published 2012

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