

Strike Up the Band

Begg's Musical Army

By Clare Gleeson

During the 1940s and 1950s many well-known New Zealand musicians began their musical training within the ranks of Begg's Musical Army. The Musical Army had been started by the well-known music firm of Charles Begg & Co Ltd (Begg's) in Dunedin in 1939 'to cultivate a love of music in all classes of the community, to provide a general foundation for a musical education and to foster New Zealand talent'.

Through the Musical Army, Begg's provided cheap class tuition on selected musical instruments 'to enable youngsters and others to learn music on the instruments of their choice at little cost to themselves'. Tuition on guitars, ukuleles, banjos, mandolins, piano accordions and percussion was offered. Students could either provide their own instruments, which many of them did, or purchase them using special weekly terms.

Begg's employed the music teacher Bill Coulter to organise and run the Musical Army for them in Dunedin. Although others, including many of Begg's staff, taught various instruments over the years, Bill Coulter remained the driving force in the Dunedin Army for the thirty-five years of its existence and it was due to him that the Dunedin Musical Army lasted as long as it did. Soon after the establishment of the Dunedin Musical Army others were set up by Begg's in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. Details of leaders and teachers are not easy to find but the leader of the Army in Wellington appears to have been Gordon (Joe) Paris and, in Auckland, Begg's J. K (Robbie) Robertson was the organiser.

From the beginning the Musical Army was extremely popular. By the end of 1940 there were 560 Dunedin members, 800 in Auckland, 200 in Wellington and there was also a Musical Army in Christchurch. The Musical Armies differed slightly from city to city depending on the person employed to run it and the Begg's personnel involved.

Begg's Musical Army, Wellington. The man at centre front is probably Joe Paris, leader of the Wellington branch.





Begg's Musical Army Dunedin, 21st Anniversary Concert.

The programme cover shows the original army photographed at the time of the concert in 1939 held in the Dunedin Town Hall. Bill Coulter is in the centre of the photograph. Also in the front row left to right are Jimmie (JD) Dixon, Begg's Dunedin branch manager, Walter Sinton who worked for Begg's as an instrument salesman at the time and later managed the Dunedin branch and who was also a world class percussionist and Jimmie Himburg, a long serving Dunedin Begg's employee.

The annual concert was a regular event for all branches of the Army and a chance for its musicians to display their ability and progress. Proceeds from the concerts went to worthy community causes. In Dunedin in 1939 this was the Spitfire Fund, the concert in Wellington in 1940 was in aid of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary for use in the leper colony of Kaogai and the 1940 concert in Auckland was in aid of the National Permanent Health Camp and the war effort. The concerts were big events and well supported. A Begg's staff member, Margaret Gardiner, remembers the Dunedin Army marching along the street to the Town Hall on the day of the annual concert and then marching off afterwards each licking an icecream donated by Begg's.

Participants of all ages were welcome in the Musical Army. The Smith family of Dunedin 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.

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. With the huge number of people who learnt, participated and enjoyed its activities, Begg's Musical Army definitely achieved its aim of encouraging musical education and enjoyment in New Zealand and made a significant contribution to the musical life of New Zealand over many years. ■

For details of Clare Gleeson's new book *Meet me at Beggs* refer to page 48.