



At the Sign of the BBb Bass

Linda Hawken, Marketing Manager of Peters Edition and Leslie Lake, Principal Trombone, English National Opera, take a look at the Phil Parker shop in central London.

There can be few, if any brass-players in the London scene – orchestral, West End theatre, light music, jazz, brass band or teachers – who will not have crossed the threshold of Parkers at some point in their careers, and many have stayed on to become regular visitors and customers. Indeed, their customer base reaches throughout the county and beyond – many players from abroad make a beeline to the shop when their orchestras are in town.

It is tempting to say that Parkers has been a fixed point in the life of the capital's brass fraternity for over half a century, but that's not quite geographically correct. Now on its third site, the firm first opened for business in 1945 in Dansey Place, a back alley in a dark corner of Soho that could best be described as

'interesting' – you were always afraid that if you knocked on the wrong door you might be offered services of a non-musical variety. Even approaching the front door involved avoiding various items of oriental cuisine that had not only not found their way to the restaurant table but had also missed the dustbins!

Once safely inside however, brass-players found a relaxed environment where they could always pop in just for a chat, try a few instruments and mouthpieces, look through music and maybe even spend some money once in a while. The shop's generosity seemed unbounded, sometimes bordering on what appeared to be commercial suicide, whereby 'on appro' arrangements were so flexible that an initial two-week trial period could stretch to as many years without any nasty 'reminder' of the kind that the Inland Revenue et al. might send.

Phil Parker senior, the firm's founder, had come from Dewsbury and after working as a freelance trumpeter in show and orchestras and as a teacher, had volunteered to serve in the Second World War. Here his other talent and interest was used to good effect – the internal

combustion engine. He was appointed Inspector of Transport (Scottish Command) with responsibility for the area from Carlisle to the Shetland Isles.

Although known as 'Old Phil' to some and 'Pop Parker' to others, his son ('Young Phil') would usually refer to him by his middle name of Ben! His advice was sought by countless players on the physical aspects of playing, particularly in regard to breathing. Even after his retirement in 1967, he would often travel up to Bradford to stay with Jim Shepherd and give advice to players up there. He spent a few years in Canada and died in 1972 in his mid-eighties.

'Young Phil' was by that time well in charge. He had previously spent some years in Canada as principal trumpet player with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, until his career took a knock – literally – which damaged his embouchure and put an end

to professional playing for him so he returned to work with his father.

By 1974 the firm had out-grown the cramped facilities of Dansey Place and more up-market premises in Chiltern Street were found. This move introduced a better view of the outside world – unlike Dansey Place, it had a proper shop-front – with windows! Situated near Baker Street, the shop was now on the door-steps of both the Royal Academy and Trinity College and attracted new custom from professors and students.

However, to start with it was a bit of a culture shock for musicians at ENO and Covent Garden as well as for those in theatre land. No longer was it possible for them to walk just a couple of minutes to get an emergency repair carried out or to replace a forgotten mouthpiece. In those days repairs were expertly supervised and carried out by Bill Thompson – a gentleman artisan of the old school.

A third generation entered the scene with Adrian Parker, who claims to be a dyslexic trumpet player with a penchant for 'rogue' Bb's. He had started helping out his father before, during and after his studies at Sussex University (where he gained a BSc



Phil Parker Senior - 'Pop Parker' (on left), Dewsbury Town Band Member c.1880s.



'Young Phil' – Dewsbury Town Band member, mid. 1920s.



'Young Phil' and wife Doreen at Chiltern Street premises - mid 1980s.

in engineering) and finally joined the business full-time in 1976. This was also the year that Adrian gained international fame at the Montreal Olympics (another Canadian connexion) – he was a recipient of the team Gold Medal for the Pentathlon for Britain, along with Jim Fox, Danny Nightingale and fourth man, Andy Archibald. Eventually Adrian succeeded 'Young Phil' at the helm in mid-80's.

The shop is currently located in Crawford Street – a move to the other side of Baker Street – and is just a few minutes from Marylebone Railway and Underground stations. A mere 86, 'Young Phil' customarily comes up for one day a week to do a bit of tuba practice and, as he says, 'to annoy the others', although one suspects he likes to keep his finger on the pulse and meet old friends.

Repairs are now in the more than capable hands of trumpeter David Woodhead, who trained with Bill Thompson for many years before his retirement and the shop is managed and staffed by Hugh Fairbairn, Alec Randall and the comparative new boy Will Hodgson and, of course, Adrian. Adding her graceful presence for a few days a week is 'Young Phil's' bride of 54 years, Doreen, a real English rose. She has exchanged her pianistic skills for those of company secretary. It's refreshing to find that in the midst of London's hectic bustle, Phil Parker's has retained its character as a friendly and successful family firm.



Adrian Parker receiving his Pentathlon team Gold Medal at the 1976 Montreal Olympics for Britain.