

# Queen Victoria's Orchestrion

by Alison Biden

From time to time a mechanical instrument captures the imagination of the general public, or the owner exploits some aspects of its construction or past to promote it. Thus we have the Welte Philharmonic Organ in the Deutsches Musikautomatenmuseum at Bruchsal in Germany, claiming that it was intended for the Titanic, but was delivered too late for installation. Another story with more convincing supportive evidence surrounds the similar Welte Philharmonic organ in the Museum of Music Automats in Seewen, Switzerland, which it is thought, was built to be installed in the Titanic's 'sister' ship, the Britannic.

Yet another instrument with a colourful mythological history is an Imhof & Mukle Orchestrion ensconced in an Edwardian hunting lodge on the Scottish island of Rum. Unfortunately, unlike the other examples cited here, it is in poor condition, and its fate is a lot less certain.

Much has been written in recent years about Kinloch Castle and how it came to be built in 1897 for Sir George Bullough, a third generation Accringtonian industrialist whose family had made its fortune manufacturing machinery for the cotton industry. Former MBSGB President Arthur Cunliffe lived a number of years in this town, and recalls the Howard and Bullough premises which dominated it. It would seem that although some of the more racy aspects of the family's history were exaggerated in the past, it would nevertheless trounce the fictitious

Forsythe Saga or Downtown Abbey in terms of eccentricity, unbridled wealth, and clandestine and unconventional goings-on. Truth is stranger than fiction, as they say. You couldn't make it up. However, one of the myths which does appear to have been dispelled is that Sir George bought an orchestrion which had allegedly been ordered by Queen Victoria, from the New Oxford Street, London showroom of Imhof and Mukle, of Vorenbach, Germany. As she died before it could be delivered it became unexpectedly available on the market, and was snapped up by Sir George in 1906. There is little evidence to support this story, other than boastful claim, although it was indeed custom installed under the main staircase in his baronial-style hunting lodge, no doubt to impress his society guests (socialites, celebrities and politicians – nothing changes in a hundred years) as it played them in to dinner in the adjacent dining room. More modest music was created occasionally by the servants using a Simplex piano player, now located in the ballroom, but which, unlike the orchestrions beautifully displayed pipes, was discreetly hidden in Sir George's time.

Another of the orchestrion's outstanding claims to fame is that no other similar instrument has as many as its 40 rolls of music. The titles include several favourites familiar to disc musical box owners, such as selections from *Faust* and *The Belle of New York*, the overtures from *The Bohemian Girl* and *William Tell*, music from *San Toy*, *Lancers*, *Lohengrin*, the ballet *Coppelia*, and a roll of polkas. There is even a roll of music from

Puccini's *La Bohème*, which first appeared the year before the castle was built.

Some reports suggest Sir George did not much care for the instrument once it had been installed, and the lodge itself, with all its very luxurious furnishings, was under-utilised. Like many similar properties in Scotland at the time, the island had been bought as a holiday retreat, in this case by George's father, John, and continued to be used as such until after the Second World War. Rum like much of wild Scotland suffers from unbearable plagues of midges during the summer months, and has precarious access at other times of the year. One wonders why the Bulloughs chose it for their summer retreat – another story all together. Not just the castle but the island itself was privately owned by the Bulloughs, and in 1957, it was sold to the nation by his widow, Monica Lady Bullough, who wanted it to be a nature reserve. Some reports say it was sold to the equivalent of the Nature Conservancy Council. Until 1996 the castle was run as a hotel and hostel, and simply as a hostel until 2013, when Scottish Natural Heritage wanted to sell it with vacant possession. It is still possible to take a guided tour of the building, and passable recordings of the orchestrion playing can be found on YouTube by Googling it.

The castle and its contents, still very much as they were when it was first built, are like a time capsule of the Bulloughs and their way of life, much like the National Trust's Tyntesfield House near Bristol which once belonged to the Gibbs family. In both 2006 and

subsequently 2012 the orchestrion was appraised by former MBSGB member Michael MacDonald, who submitted detailed reports on its deteriorating condition, along with estimates for the cost of restoration, which inevitably escalated during the interim.

One cryptic comment on the internet is that it is one of only three existing, and the only one which at time it was posted could be played. There is nothing cited to substantiate this claim, or any indication as to the whereabouts of the other two. Described as being of the highest quality materials and workmanship, it is not, as also stated elsewhere on the internet, of the Badenia II style, as unlike the Badenia, the Kinloch Orchestrion does not have a piano.

The last assessment of it noted that incorrect lubrication had been carried out on the system, with the wrong oil, allowing an accumulation of dust and rust, which impaired the movement, and that the majority of notes were not working correctly. This is partly due to woodworm dust partially blocking the internal borings. Woodworm had affected not just the primary action rails, but had now also infested the storage cupboards.

Rum is an important destination for studying wildlife, and its primary economy is based on tourism, with sparse, very basic, although fairly new, facilities. It has captivated the hearts of many visitors over the years, who describe its unique attraction. However, the restoration of Kinloch Castle and its orchestrion is only part of a bigger challenge facing the island: how to sustain its small community.

In these uncertain times of austerity measures and political upheaval, salvation is unlikely to come from the state. At time of writing the Friends were in the process of looking at taking on ownership of the castle from Scottish Natural Heritage.

Michael MacDonald described the orchestrion in one of his appraisals as 'one of the last surviving instruments of this type' – but for how long? Its fate is not so unusual for a publicly owned artefact, inexcusable though this is. Will this become yet another tragic story of an important instrument lost through ignorance, indifference and neglect? One hopes not, although the Friends of Kinloch Castle have a challenge ahead of them to convince donors to support its restoration, which will only continue to rise as costs increase, and its condition gets worse. KCFA intends to keep the orchestrion appeal separate from that for the main building and is anxious to complete its restoration as soon as possible after the planned asset transfer.

The orchestrion may yet prove to be an important asset in its more general fundraising. According to Catherine Duckworth, Secretary of KCFA, last year, during a stay on the island, a visitor was adamant that the castle was a waste of

money – that was, until she went on a castle tour and heard the orchestrion play. Such is the power of a special instrument that it completely changed her views. We know the feeling.

Footnote: it would appear that Queen Victoria did once own an orchestrion, which is now in the Deutsches Musikautomatenmuseum at Bruchsal in Germany.

Further information can be found on the internet. Our thanks go to Catherine Duckworth, Secretary of the Friends of Kinloch Castle, (KCFA) for her help in compiling this article. See: [www.kinlochcastlefriends.org](http://www.kinlochcastlefriends.org)

Other sources:  
[www.isleofrum.com/isleofrumheritag.php](http://www.isleofrum.com/isleofrumheritag.php)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPYsROXyPCM>

<http://kinlochcastle.blogspot.co.uk/2016/12/>

Eccentric Wealth:  
*The Bulloughs of Rum*, by Alastair Scott, published by Birlinn.



*Kinloch Castle on the Isle of Rum*