

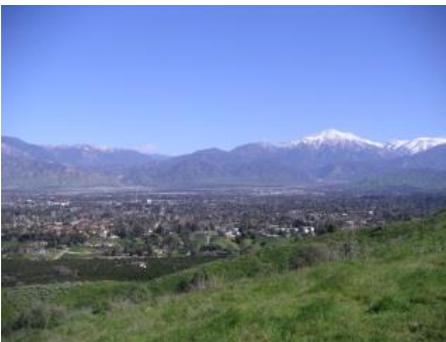
Highs and Lows of Concertina Playing

As many of you may know, as a hobby I play English concertina, a little hexagonal squeezebox. This article relates some elevation-related memories of concertina playing. The full article with videos is at http://www.pghardy.net/concertina/highs_and_lows/.

I used to follow a newsgroup on Usenet (an early form of social media) called rec.music.makers.squeezebox, which discussed matters concerning accordions, melodeons and concertinas. One day in July 2006, there was a thread (set of messages) about the effects of altitude on free reed instruments like concertinas. Someone was suggesting that the thinner air at altitude would adversely affect the volume and the pitch, and ease of starting of the notes.

2006 - Highs in America

In 2006 I was living in Redlands in Southern California, to the Southeast of Los Angeles towards Palm Springs. I lived a few miles from the San Andreas fault, by a section which hadn't slipped in 160 years and is long overdue! Just beyond the fault are the adjacent San Bernardino mountains which were created by the collision of the Pacific and American tectonic plates. The summits rise to 11,489 feet (3,502 m) at San Gorgonio Mountain. There is a famous drive called "The Rim of the World" that climbs to the mountain chain and runs along the top and back down to the valley.



San Bernardinos from Redlands



Paul on Rim of the World

At that time, I was in the habit on a Saturday of driving 10 miles north from where I lived, up into the San Bernardino Mountains to

Green Valley Lake village where I took part in a regular Celtic music jam session. The lake sits at 7,200 feet (2,195 m).



Green Valley Lake



Green Valley Lake musicians

The next time I was 'up the hill' at a Green Valley Lake music session, I tried to determine whether the altitude affected the way I played, or the volume or pitch of the sounds that resulted. As far as I could tell, it made no audible difference. I also tried at the top of the Onyx pass which is the highest road in the area at 8,443ft (2,573 m). So, I reported to the newsgroup that as far as I could tell, 8500 feet or 2500 m of altitude makes little difference to the way that I played the concertina, or the notes that came out. The only observed negative factor was that on one older instrument, a couple of reeds were a little slower to start speaking than at home below in the valley.



Onyx Pass – 8443 ft



Mt Evans – 13000 ft

It so happened that the next month I was travelling on business to Boulder Colorado. Nearby, the scenic byway up Mount Evans reaches near the summit at 14,271-foot (4350 m). This is the highest

metalled road in North America. So, I took my concertina and my GPS, and drove up the mountain on this road, and although the very top section was closed, at 13,000 feet I stopped and played the concertina. I have a photo (below) of the GPS showing the altitude of 12936 ft, together with the concertina. As far as I could tell it made no difference to the volume or pitch of the instrument. I suspect that one unconsciously applies a little more force to the bellows to compensate for the thinner air.

It's a pity that the conversation did not happen a year earlier, as then I had been to Peru. As well as visiting Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca we crossed the Patapampa Pass at 16109 feet (4910 m) to get to the Colca Canyon. That would have been a real altitude test. Unfortunately, I did not have a concertina with me at the time.

2006 - Lows in America

At the end of 2006 we were returning to live in England and while our furniture was crossing the Atlantic in a container, we went to spend Christmas in a hotel in Death Valley. We visited Badwater Flats which is the lowest place in North America at -282 ft (-86 m), and there I played some Christmas carols on my concertina, which my wife Margaret recorded as a video for me. Again, the altitude (or lack of) did not obviously affect the tuning of the instrument.



Patapampa Pass - 16000 ft



Badwater Flats -282 ft

2009 - Highs in England

Returning to the UK, we have no local extremes of altitude. The highest point in Great Britain is Ben Nevis in Scotland, at 4413 ft (1345 m), but that's a long way away (by British standards). I live in

the county of Cambridgeshire, for which the highest point is at 479 feet (146 m). One week in 2009 I was leading a walk for the local rambling group, which passed through this highpoint and the nearby highpoint of the neighbouring county of Essex at 482 feet (147 m).



Cambridgeshire highpoint 479 ft



Essex highpoint 482 ft

I described this walk on the Cambridge Rambling Club programme as the Twin Peaks route, and made jokes about needing oxygen for the final ascent. While doing the reconnaissance for the walk with Margaret, I took my concertina and played it at the high point of Essex, again recording a little video. There is also a photo of me on the nearest road to the high point of Cambridgeshire - the actual high point 20 metres to the East has a water tower and is therefore enclosed from public access.

2018 - Lows in England

Having been to highpoints on both sides of the Atlantic, and a lowpoint on one side, I felt the need to round off the set by visiting a lowpoint in England. Finally, after a few years of delay, in 2018 I and Margaret visited the lowest point in Cambridgeshire at Holme Fen near Peterborough. This is actually at the lowest point in the whole of the British Isles at -9 feet (-3 m). So again, I took my concertina and played it while Margaret took a video. We recorded the altitude nearby using the GPS in my iPhone.

The point at which I played was by the Holme Fen Posts - the original post was driven through the peat soil into the underlying clay in 1848 before the drainage of the nearby Whittlesey mere. The original wooden post was replaced in 1851 with a cast iron post to the same height, and then another post added later. Now, the tops

of the two posts are some 4 metres above the ground due to shrinkage of the peat. See <http://www.greatfen.org.uk/holme-fen-posts> for more information.



Cambridgeshire lowpoint -9 ft



Playing 'tina by Holme Fen Post

Conclusions

This series of rather frivolous experiments suggest that concertinas are not significantly affected by altitude, at least not for the range of elevations that most players will encounter. So, take your concertina wherever you go!

Paul Hardy, December 2018

See http://www.pghardy.net/concertina/highs_and_lows/ for full article with links to videos, and more photos.