

Letter by John Distin  
c. September 1844

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Cork Examiner  
Monday 16 September 1844

A letter by MR DISTIN written at Baden Baden to a friend.

We have been favoured with an extract from a letter dated August 23, addressed by Mr DISTIN to a friend in this City, from BADEN BADEN, where the family are now playing, after a career of unprecedented success in Paris. The newly-invented Musical Instruments called Sax-Horns, after being declared by the most eminent Parisian Performers to be too complicated to produce effect, were tried by the Distin Family, who triumphantly succeeded in conquering every difficulty, and are now playing on a magnificent set of Silver Instruments, presented to them by LOUIS PHILIPPE, drawing forth the most dulcet and exquisite tones, and eliciting rapturous and unbounded applause from audiences composed of the *elite* of all the nations of Europe:-

“I fear you will accuse me of neglect and ingratitude in so long a silence, but be assured such is not the case, as often, *very* often you and your disinterested friendship are the subject of my thoughts. Continual travelling, fatigue, and a multiplicity of business have prevented me from writing.

We have been enormous travellers since we last had the pleasure of seeing you. We left England on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1843, on board the ‘Earl of Liverpool’ steamer from London to Ostend, where after a good voyage we arrived on the next night; and after the usual disagreeable task of having our luggage overhauled at the Custom-house, and being questioned as to “who we were, *what* we were, whence from, and where going to”. Slept at the hotel. Finding we were in the wrong season for Ostend, we left next day for Belgium – played one night at the *Grand Opera* with great success; but finding it was usual to reside there three or four months before we could give a Concert, we left for Paris where we remained six *months* (a time unprecedented since our travels) and

obtained during our stay greater fame and honors than ever before were shown to any *English* artistes. We played at all the Nobility's Concerts, all the principal *public* Concerts, always receiving most enthusiastic applause – we played at the Grand Annual Concert, given by Monsieur Berlioz, which was attended by 3,000 people; there were above 200 fine musicians in the band, all the first singers in Paris, Liszt, the great Paganini, and "Signor Sivori" the greatest Violinist; yet amidst all this excellence we had the only encore through-out the Concert (the French way of encoring is to cry bis, bis, bis"), and on our re-entrance we were received with roars of "bravi, bravi, Anglaises" &c. We were on the point of returning to England a long time previous to this, when we were requested to stop and try some newly invented Instruments, which *had* been tried by several *French* artists who found them too difficult and complicated to make any effect with them; but I knew immediately we tried them, they would prove everything we wished, and after a little practice we played them with the most *unparalleled success*. The instruments are of a most peculiarly curious construction, called 'The Sax Horns', and the tone is surpassingly beautiful beyond the power of description, - we threw by our own Instruments, and have never touched them since – we played at the Grand Annual Concert of the 'Societe Des beaux Arts' to an audience of above 2,000 persons, where our reception was most brilliant, and the Gentlemen of the Committee called a meeting, and after a highly complimentary speech (à la Française) they presented us with the silver prize medal, with on one side a beautifully chased head of FAME surrounded with laurels, and on the other side the words 'Societè libes des Beaux Arts, presente á Monsieur Distin et Sa Famille, Mai 12, 1844'. I afterwards played my own *Trumpet*, which you so often heard, at the *Conservatoire*, where as usual my reception was immense, and after a few days I received a most flattering letter from the Directors, who presented me with a handsome silver medal, on one side a beautifully chased "Lyre"- and the words 'Ecole Royale de Musique' – and on the other 'Societes des Concerts, Fonèe, en 1828, Mr John Distin' over which is the blazing sun engraved;- this was an honor never before conferred on an *English* Artiste. After this we were sent for to play to the Royal Family at the Tuilleries – and there were present King Louis Philippe, the Queen, Princess Adelaide, Prince de Jonville, Due d'Aumale, Due de Nemours, Ministre de l'interieure, General de Ruigny, &c., all of whom paid us the highest encomiums, particularly the King, who conversed with us a long time in good English most affably, and said "Allow me to express my best thanks for the great treat you have afforded me, I could not possibly imagine such exquisite sounds could be produced from such Instruments!!" He then ordered that we should have 500 francs – and in a short time presented us with the most magnificent set of silver instruments (Sax-

horns) which we now play on; - all the first composers in Parish came and offered to compose for us – we then were offered an engagement *here* for three months to play once a week, and whenever any Grand Concert takes place. It is a most picturesque and lovely country, Baden is thronged with visitors from England, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Rome, Italy, Hanover, Russia, Prussia, to whom we play every *Sunday*, which I am sorry to say is here as well as in Paris the principal day for every kind of amusements, Balls, Concerts, Theatres, Shows &c. We were a long time before we could bring ourselves to this Sunday work, but eventually found ‘in Rome you must do as Rome does’. In *Paris* you never can tell any difference in the days, for Sunday there is the *principal* day for business as well as pleasure – every shop is open and decked out more gay than any other day, and at the time of the Carnival it was curious to see all classes, men, women and children in the streets with masks dressed in the most fantastical dresses. Men in women’s clothes, women in men’s clothes, and many of both sexes scarcely dressed at all. – Shows, conjurors, balls, concerts, 22 theatres open, promenades, and in short every gaiety you can imagine - but after all give me the true warm hearted, Paddy.

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“Living here is cheap – but meat is 10 kreutzers (6 ¼ d.) a pound, butter 20 kreutzers (6 ¼ d.) a pound, bread 6 kreutzers (2d.) a pound, potatoes 6 kreutzers (2d.) a peck, fruit very cheap, beautiful grapes (acres and acres growing like currant trees) 3 kr, (1d.) a pound – now the contrast, a small cauliflower is 18 kr. (6d.) – Beer, most horrible, is 5 kr. a bottle – Splendid Rhine-wine 12 kr. (4d.) a bottle, so that we can every day afford ourselves half-a-dozen of wine which only coast us 2s. Having nothing to do but on a Sunday (when we play in the Grand Salle to thousands of nobility) we go fishing, and always manage to catch 300 or 400 fish every week, some of which we boil, some we fry, some we salt and dry, and some we give away to a friend or so. The Grand Salle is a splendid building with massive pillars in front, which support a roofing over a terrace where hundreds of ladies and gentlemen sit, conversing, sipping coffee, wine, or ices, and within is a gorgeously magnificent room 150 feet long, 70 high, with an orchestre at each end, the walls are white and gold, sofas and chairs all round of white with crimson velvet cushions and backs – splendid mirrors and huge looking-glasses all round the room, beautiful bouquets in every direction – this is the grand Salle de Conversation where we play, and there is every evening another band who play in the Kiosk (a temple erected outside on the grass) – the grounds are very extensive with

magnificent walks, waterfalls, fountains, gravel walks, choice trees, flowers,  
&c., - You would be delighted with it.

“JOHN DISTIN”