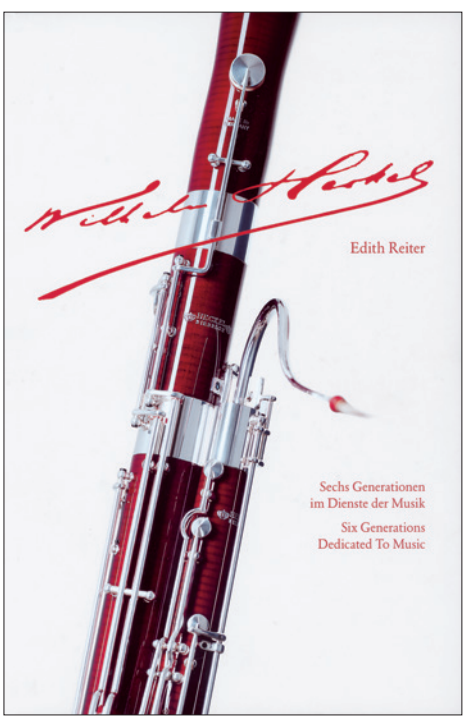
# How Heckel Became *Heckel*

*Edith Reiter's narrative of how creative brilliance combined with farsighted business decisions and being in the right place at the right time all coalesced to create one of the great musical instrument manufacturers in history.*

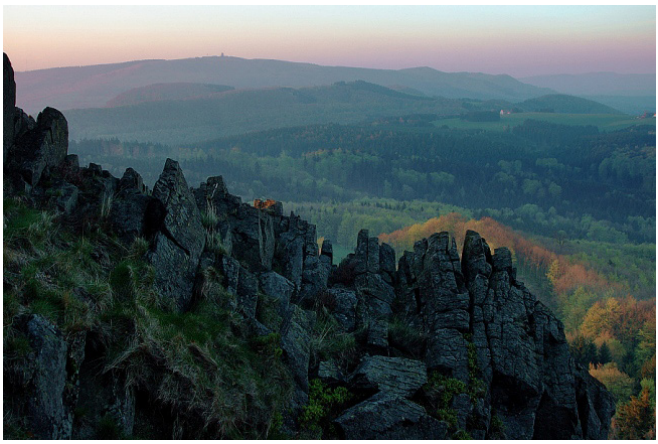
Nora Post
Kingston, New York

***Wilhelm Heckel: Sechs Generationen im Dienst der Musik/Six Generations Dedicated to Music.*** By Edith Reiter.
Wiesbaden: Marixverlag, 2014.
384 pages




Every so often a book comes along that is such a pleasure to read that you dread getting to the last page because you never want it to end. Edith Reiter's book *Wilhelm Heckel* is just such a book—at least it was for me. There are many intriguing reasons for this—there was a lot of history to think about—but first, a bit of background:

Edith Reiter is the granddaughter of Wilhelm Hermann Heckel (1879-1952). She is one of two daughters born to Franz Groffy (1896-1972). With no brothers (i.e. no male heirs to carry on the family business), she began an apprenticeship in 1953 at the Heckel firm in Wiesbaden, Germany.[1] She became head of production in 1966, a position she held until her retirement in 1997. Once she retired—at which point the firm was taken over by her children, Angelika Lucchetta and Ralf Reiter—she spent about ten years researching the history of the Heckel firm. Published in German with a simultaneous English translation, her book is filled with photos of the Heckel family ancestors, the craftsmen, Heckel instruments, and the instrument factory, plus reproductions of drawings, letters, awards, maps, patents, concert programs, paintings, etc. This volume is also a valuable reference work, as Reiter includes a *Register of Instruments* at the end. Each Heckel instrument is listed



The Taunus Mountain Range in Hesse, Germany, where Wilhelm Heckel did the logging for much of his wood.

with its serial number, the country to which it was delivered, and the shipment date. These records began in 1852, so it is an extensive archive.

The Heckel firm was founded in 1831 in Biebrich, Germany, as a joint venture between the then nineteen-year-old Johann Adam Heckel (1812-1877) and the famed bassoonist **Carl Almenräder** (1786-1846). Their instruments were known as Heckel-Almenräder until Almenräder resigned from the firm in 1838, at which time the instruments were simply called Heckel. The Heckel firm is now almost 190 years old. That is a remarkable accomplishment for any company, and I kept looking for clues as I read this book. How did they do it? Part of the answer, as simple as it seems, is that they were practical. The Heckel founder Johann Adam Heckel used neighboring carpenters and wagon makers for his woodworkers, so that he didn't have to purchase expensive machinery. A century later, when World War II broke out, the firm stored their drawings, tools, business records, archives, and the instruments from their museum in large boxes that they took to a small village in a remote area of the Taunus Mountains in the German state of Hesse. Quite close to Wiesbaden, this was also the forested area where Wilhelm Heckel did the logging of the wood for his instruments. He sometimes made the logging trips into family outings and picnics, so the family knew the area well. Fortunately, most of what was stored in that area during the war survived intact.

So, what did it take for Heckel to thrive so successfully? Heckel clearly has a superb product. They have intentionally kept the business small, the demand for their instruments is high and, most important, their craftsmanship sets an enviable standard. Although Heckel is known these days primarily as a bassoon maker, Reiter's book is an eye-opener concerning all the other instruments they have made, including all the members of both the woodwind and brass families. No musical instrument maker can thrive for nearly two centuries without taking risks, and the Heckel firm took plenty of them. Some of their innovations were commercially successful and some were not. There were musette oboes, basset horns, Heckelphoneclarinets, contrabass clarinets, piccolo clarinas, and so many others. The *Register of Instruments* at the end of the book documents the production of all these instruments. One of Wilhelm

Heckel's inventions called the Monophone was particularly intriguing because it was so far ahead of its time. It was the late 19th century ancestor of the Korg tuner. Heckel sold a total of seventeen Monophones between the years 1895 and 1904. The size of a footrest, it was placed next to the conductor, who tuned the orchestra by pressing his foot onto a plate that was part of the Monophone, thus producing the tuning 'A'. It was a brilliant idea, just ahead of its time by a half century. While most of us today think of the Heckel firm primarily as a bassoon maker, their other activities show without any doubt that they were constantly innovating across a very wide variety of musical instruments.

The Heckel firm also protected their innovations with patents (several are reproduced in the book). Ahead of his time yet again, Wilhelm Heckel designed the first bore liner for the wing joint of the bassoon in 1889, and held the patent for many years, thus protecting his creativity to commercial advantage. His numerous design innovations would surely argue that Wilhelm Heckel was the most gifted bassoon maker to have lived in modern times.

Another important aspect to the prominence of the Heckel firm is that they clearly made wise business decisions. The Heckel founder, for example, was travelling the globe even in the 19th century, exploring new markets, meeting with players and

Little Elsa with her Piccolo Heckelphone in 1907. Elsa Heckel Groffy (1906-1970) was the mother of Edith Reiter.

marketing his instruments. Johann Adam Heckel made a trip to St. Petersburg, Russia in the mid-19th century. He made the trip in a horse-drawn carriage with all the instruments packed in baskets. That opened up the Russian market for him, and St. Petersburg was its center at the time. There were trips to Paris in 1852 and London in 1851. Working with the newly founded firm of Boosey & Son in England, Heckel used the London visit to launch the sale of 127 bassoons and two contra-bassoons within a ten year time period. When Wilhelm Heckel (who took over the company in 1877 at the age of twenty-one) finished designing the Heckelphone in 1904, nothing could have been savvier than having Richard Strauss write for the instrument's orchestral debut in his then stunningly scandalous opera *Salome* (1907), followed, of course, by his dazzling blockbuster of operatic orchestral scoring, *Elektra* (1909). What a stellar debut for any new instrument. As Reiter explains, the concept of the Heckelphone was Richard Wagner's, who suggested it to Wilhelm Heckel when he visited the Heckel firm in 1879. Richard Strauss, however, also had a hand in this: his visit to the factory in 1900 was the impetus behind the development of the Piccolo-Heckelphone and the Terz-Heckelphone.

In understanding the success of the Heckel firm, it is so important to understand how Heckel and the other Germanic bassoon manufacturers survived the tumultuously disruptive effects of World War II and its aftermath on their businesses. This topic has a great deal to do with the success of the Heckel firm—and the unfortunate failure of some others. Interestingly enough, all the German bassoon makers had their origins in the same small geographical area—one that experienced so many difficulties during and after the war. Dr. Janet Lein (Professor of German at Central Michigan State University) has researched this subject and written a number of fascinating articles for *The Double Reed*.[2] She has visited and interviewed most of the Bohemian bassoon manufacturers. As she explains:

> Skilled musical instrument makers and high quality musical instruments, particularly wind instruments, have long come from an area in southeastern Saxony (today a part of Germany) and northwestern Bohemia (today a section of the Czech Republic), including the Vogtland. Towns like Markneukirchen, Adorf, Klingenthal, Schöneck and Graslitz housed many instrument workshops. Graslitz in particular was the site of a music academy. The students not only learned the craft of wind instrument making, but also playing instruments and music theory. After completing a lengthy apprenticeship in an existing workshop, many established their own, furthering the reputation of this area as a center of instrument making. Many names we recognize came from this heartland of musical instrument production—to name a few: Riedl, Püchner, Adler, Mönnig, Hüller, Schreiber and, of course, Heckel.[3]

This area has, in fact, been renowned for its woodwind musical instrument makers since the Middle Ages. The founder of the Heckel firm, Johann Adam Heckel, hailed from the village of Adorf; Reiter found town registries and tax records that document the Heckel family going back to a Lorenz Heckel born in 1485.

In what can only be described as a glorious accident of fate, the Heckel firm was located in Biebrich, not Adorf. Heckel and Mollenhauer were the only bassoon makers whose firms were located in what was later to become West Germany. The other woodwind/bassoon makers went through horrific times, and a brief description of what some of these other companies faced is indispensible in terms of understanding how very fortunate Heckel was to be located in Biebrich, and how that location worked so beautifully for them.

The German firms that were located in what became Czechoslovakia after World War I (the area had actually been part of Austria before 1918) were all liquidated and nationalized after World War II and became part of the Amati state-owned conglomerate.[4] Manufacturers were told what instruments (if any) they were permitted to manufacture. When a commission from Prague arrived to liquidate the Püchner firm, Vincenz Püchner removed his cap and said: "The Lord giveth, and these gentlemen taketh away."[5] The situation was similar in the German Democratic Republic, where woodwind musical instrument manufacturers were fully nationalized in 1972. A bassoon maker, for example, might have been told only to make flutes—or car horns. It was also decreed in 1972 that manufacturers were required to destroy all the tooling, reamers and machinery for the instruments they had been prohibited from making. The Hüller bassoon firm in Schöneck (which had been producing about 11,000 woodwind instruments a year at its peak) survived World War II making armaments and was, of course, nationalized by the German Democratic Republic after the war. The owner, Wilhelm Hüller, was given a new job—as a street sweeper. Production completely collapsed without him. Herr Hüller was then reclassified as "indispensible," at which point he was hired as an instrument tuner on an hourly basis in what had once been his own factory.[6]

After World War II, most ethnic Germans in what was then part of Czechoslovakia were evacuated to West Germany. It was a massive exodus of about four million people. Citizens were generally given only twenty-fours hours notice before leaving; they were permitted to bring very few belongings and nothing of any value. This is how the Püchner firm, for example, was able to relocate to Nauheim, Germany.[7]

> The morning we were leaving a notice was posted against us alleging "industrial looting," and we were thoroughly searched. The next blow was just before the transport by lorry: my father was refused exile. Despite this the authorities did not succeed in their aim to hold us: my mother decided to leave without my father—with my grandparents, my sister Gerti and myself."[8]

Josef Püchner's wife had parts of oboes hidden inside jars of oatmeal. Josef Püchner and his teenage son Walter had guessed what was coming, and had put together a small notebook that Walter smuggled out. In it they had very carefully recorded the measurements for all their instruments. Fortunately, Josef Püchner was permitted to join the rest of his family in Nauheim shortly after the family emigrated.

Woodwind manufacturers who were fortunate enough to be able to leave had to start again with nothing. Just like everyone else, Püchner had no money, and musical


German President Horst Köhler (on first step with bassoon) and Roland Koch, the Minister President of Hesse (behind Köhler with Heckelphone) at the Heckel factory.

instrument production only started again when someone gave him the seasoned wood he needed, and told him it would be fine to pay for everything when he could. That one compassionate act must have made all the difference. Walter Püchner's sister Gerta got a job in the office of a marmalade factory in order to raise some cash to help them begin again. The family sold a stamp collection along with the two oboes that had been inside the oatmeal jars. When Walter Püchner went to pay his German taxes in 1949, his taxes were *so* low that the tax collector sympathetically suggested he get a job in the local Opel car factory (a subsidiary of General Motors Corporation). Püchner owed eight Deutsche Marks (about $2).[9] And so it went.

Despite the difficulties of World War II for all the manufacturers, Heckel and Mollenhauer had the advantage that they did not have to relocate their firms to another country and begin again. But everything is relative; all the European musical instrument makers faced enormous challenges getting their production going again after the war. Unfortunately, the Mollenhauer factory in Kassel was not as lucky as Heckel; their factory was completely destroyed during the war, along with a very valuable collection of musical instruments that had been packed in crates that did not survive. But the then seventy-year-old Johannes Mollenhauer was determined to rebuild, and he did.[10] Rather impressively, the Heckel factory remained open throughout World War II. However, like the other musical instrument makers throughout Europe during World War II, most of their workers were in the military (factory workers in those days were almost always men), and both materials and customers were in very short supply.[11] But Heckel was able to continue production to some degree (the listing of instruments that were finished during World War II in the *Register of Instruments* at the end of the book certainly tells the story). What a contrast to Püchner, for example, who spent much of the war years making airplane parts,[12] only to have the firm liquidated at the end of the war. Janet Lein comments insightfully on all of this history:

> Heckel had a lot of things going for them. They were already well established by the time World War II came along, and they were on the western side of the East/West border from the end of the war to 1990. The manufacturers in East Germany, no matter how good they were before, were practically squashed during the forty years of the German Democratic Republic, which of course was anything but. When I visited Mönnig, Adler, and Hüller in 1998, their workshops still looked dreadfully Stone Age, even though reunification was already eight years old. Those that did "get out," Püchner, Schreiber, and Kohlert, couldn't begin to catch up with the already well-established Heckel workshop, as they all escaped with virtually nothing.
>
> I think there is one other important thing about the Heckel success; they have always made intelligent financial decisions. I do suspect that luck always plays a part, but there are plenty of other factors and Heckel had them all.[13]

What I admire the most about Edith Reiter's book is simply that it was written. That being said, the English translation leaves a great deal to be desired. English-speaking

readers will just have to forgive and be grateful that there is an English translation at all. There are many errors, and some of them are glaring. In future editions of this book, a careful editing of the English translation by someone who is experienced with the terminology of machinery, tools and woodwind musical instruments would be a most welcome addition. An index would also be very helpful, since this book will surely become a classic woodwind reference book. Availability as an eBook would also be a big plus.

The Reiter Family today. Left to right: Angelika Lucchetta, Edith Reiter (seated) and Ralf Reiter.

But the positives of this book far outweigh the single negative of the English translation. Edith Reiter had the vision and the foresight to document the legacy of an iconic musical instrument manufacturer. One of history's great losses is that the legendary musical instrument makers across the centuries have not documented their thoughts, their ideas, and their designs. Consider Stradivarius, Selmer, Steinway, Buffet, Guarneri, Powell, Lorée, Haines, and Bössendorfer, as well as the great brass instrument makers. Where were their Edith Reiters? Someone directly involved in the manufacturing process has finally written the history of a legendary musical instrument maker. At first glance, it's the charming story of a family business making iconic bassoons that are treasured in every corner of the world. But it's so much more than that, too. Bravo to Edith Reiter.



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Because *Wilhelm Heckel* can be a difficult book to find, I am including several companies that currently carry the book:

1) Howarth of London (www.howarth.uk.com)
2) Midwest Musical Imports in Minneapolis (www.mmimports.com)
3) Japan Double Reeds in Tokyo (www.jdri.jp).
4) The Heckel firm can also be contacted directly:
   Angelika Lucchetta
   Wilhelm Heckel GmbH
   Stettiner Straße 7
   D - 65203 Wiesbaden
   Telephone: +49 0611 66182
   Email: mail@heckel.de

It is my pleasure to thank Dr. **Janet Lein** for all the information she so generously shared with me, as well as Nigel Clark of Howarths in London for his wonderfully encyclopedic knowledge of 20th century woodwind history and, of course, both Edith Reiter and Anglelika Lucchetta of William Heckel GmbH for their very gracious assistance answering my many questions.

## Endnotes

1 The Heckel firm was started in the town of Biebrich, Germany, which was incorporated into the city of Wiesbaden in 1926.

2 Janet Lien's articles about the history of German bassoon manufacture during and after World War II are available online through the IDRS (www.idrs.org)

3 Paul and Janet Lein, "Whatever Happened to the Kohlerts?" *The Double Reed* 13, no. 1 (1990).

4 "The Czech companies were not nationalized in Czechoslovakia after Germany lost World War II, but the German firms were. When Hitler annexed this area known as the Sudetenland, it became part of Germany, and after World War II it became Czechoslovakia again. After Germany lost the war, all German companies and property were taken from the German-speaking inhabitants (the former Austrians) living in Czechoslovakia. That's the reason that German companies in Czechoslovakia were liquidated and nationalized. Skilled specialists like Josef Püchner were forced to work for Amati.

Why were there German companies in Czechoslovakia? The background was that until 1918 and the end of World War I Bohemia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (created in 1867), so they were all Austrians who spoke German. Czechoslovakia was originally founded after World War I, when Bohemia became Czechoslovakia. At that time, there was still a minority of four million German-speaking former Austrians." Email from Walter Püchner and Gabriele Püchner to the author, June 15, 2016.

Janet Lein adds: "My maps from 1871 show that the Vogtland is just on the German side, in Saxony." Email from Janet Lein to the author, July 7, 2016.

5 From the *Chronicle* section of the Püchner website www.puchner.com/us

6 Janet Lein, "Bassoon Makers of the Vogtland: Adler, Hüller, Mönnig," *The Double Reed* 22, no. 2, (1999): 20.

Very much to the point of what Dr. Lein writes about, Nigel Clark of Howarths in London described a visit he made to the Adler bassoon factory in the East German town of Markneukirchen in 1985 (five years before reunification). He had gotten through Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, arrived at the Adler bassoon factory and knocked on the door. It was winter, and there was no heat. No one was making any instruments, but there were a lot of employees, and they were all in the factory office in slippers, huddled around a wood-burning stove that was the only source of heat for the factory. Only one of the people at the factory spoke English, and Nigel asked him how he had mastered English so well. The

man looked around thoughtfully, and replied that he had been a POW in Scotland for five years after the war, commenting nostalgically that they had been the *best* years of his life.

7 Janet and Paul Lein, "The Püchner Family: 100 Years of Craftsmanship," *The Double Reed* 13, no. 1 (1990): 24.

8 Email from Walter Püchner to the author on June 14, 2016.

9 Lein, Ibid., 25.

10 Janet Lein, "The Mollenhauer Bassoon: An Achievement by Two Families," *The Double Reed* 26, no. 3 (2003): 80.

11 The French oboe makers were in much the same position during the war as the German bassoon makers. Anne deGourdon of F. Lorée described the situation at Lorée: "The production never stopped but was strongly down because the majority of our employees were requisitioned obligatorily to work in Germany (we call this the STO—*Service du Travail Obligatoire*—in France). At the end of the war in 1945-1946 the production was still limited because of the important shortage of raw materials and especially metal. Production started to come back to normal in 1947." Email to the author on May 25, 2016.

Rigoutat Oboes in Paris stopped manufacturing instruments completely during the war. Charles Rigoutat and his young son Roland were repairing saxophones and clarinets during World War II simply to survive. According to Philippe Rigoutat, about 700,000 French were working in Germany during the war due to the STO. Emails to the author on June 16 and 21, 2016.

12 The Püchner firm was certainly not alone in making armaments during World War II. Nigel Clark relayed a bit of similar British history during World War II. Boosey & Hawkes was the largest musical instrument manufacturer in England at the time. During World War II, their workers were making wooden bodies for the de Havilland Mosquito plane. They also worked on the Lancaster Bombers for the Bristol Aircraft Company; they made the bomb doors and the rear gun turrets. Telephone conversation with the author on May 23, 2016.

13 Email from Janet Lein to the author on May 16, 2016. The importance of making good business decisions cannot be overemphasized. Among other German/Bohemian bassoon makers, Schreiber and Kohlert both suffered from some unwise business decisions. Kohlert made one catastrophic business blunder that resulted in their 1965 bankruptcy. At one point prior to World War II they had employed over 600 workers. Schreiber collapsed financially in 2011 before the Buffet Group rescued them.