



Benjamin Franklin and the Story of the Armonica
By Lady Reid

It is well known that whilst Franklin was in London, he created a new musical instrument called the “Armonica”. He must have heard the efforts of several musical hopefuls playing the “musical glasses”, and realised their shortcomings. Who did Franklin hear?

There is a lovely story in *The Scots Magazine* of early 1760 about the fate of a gentleman called variously Richard Puckridge, or Pockrich. He was an Irishman, described as a house builder, and bog-drainer, who ran through his inheritance, and came to England to make his fortune with his “Angelic Organ”, a set of wine glasses tuned with water and fixed to a table. He tried Bath, and then made his way to London. He persuaded a young man called Pilkington to sing along with him, and booked a hall and promoted a concert. Unfortunately a pig of some sort entered the hall shortly before the concert, and upset and broke most of the glasses. Thus Pockrich and Pilkington failed to make any fortune.

Franklin must have heard him at some point. He had arrived in London in 1757, in plenty of time to hear the “musical Glasses” at some venue.

But, the story has a violent ending. Apparently Pockrich was known to have unsavoury habits, and was reduced to penury in some city lodging. On 10th November 1759 he managed to set fire to his lodgings, which then burnt down thirteen other houses and shops, and consumed the bog-draining musician in the flames.

Franklin, by 1762 had perfected his Armonica, by grinding a series of glass bowls of graded sizes. These were strung on a metal spindle, turned by a handle or treadle, and rested in a metal lined cabinet with a nearby water bowl to enable the player to use both hands and ten fingers. Gluck and Mozart composed several pieces for the Armonica, and it became a very popular drawing room instrument, mainly on the continent, until its demise in the early nineteenth century. This was because of stories that players were contracting illnesses, and the females in the audience were tending to swoon or faint during performances.

It was also recorded that Anton Mesmer used the instrument as the background to his hypnotising séances in Paris before the Revolution. Franklin, Le Voisier, and none other than Dr Guillotin were the committee that pronounced Mr. Mesmer a quack and a fraud.

The Armonica is alive and well again, in the twenty first century, with players in the USA, France and the UK giving concerts with new composers and innovative parts to play, and no one so far has managed to faint.

