



Keys to success

We road test three high quality Morse keys from Italian manufacturer Begali

INTRODUCTION. Despite amateur licences no longer requiring a Morse test, it is quite refreshing to discover a new range of Morse keys being produced. I have had my trusty Vibroplex paddle since 1957 so it has seen a lot of action over the years. It does begin to show its age however, although it still works very well. The test of time is a good test for a Morse key.

These new keys from Italy look very modern by comparison with the Vibroplex, and they look as though they will be around for a similar period. They are precision engineered and exude luxury and style. I have three to try, one normal paddle, one iambic paddle and a straight key. Each key comes well packed and is supplied with a dust cover and certificate of authenticity, signed by the manufacturer.

They are manufactured by Piero Begali, I2RTF (shown in **Photo 1** with his daughter) in Cellatica, Italy. Officina Meccanica Begali has been manufacturing electro-mechanical precision components since 1960, and his line of fine keys and paddles for radio amateurs is a more recent addition. They are a result of Piero's desire to create the finest keys and paddles for his own use.

THE SCULPTURE. **Photo 2** illustrates the Sculpture, an iambic paddle which is the top



PHOTO 1: Piero, I2RTF (who was first licensed in 1964) with his daughter.

of the range of Begali keys. All fixed parts are made from AISI-304 stainless steel, polished to a mirror finish that is claimed to stay perfect for a lifetime. Unlike plated surfaces, you can always remove any blemishes with fine abrasive compounds like jeweller's rouge or car polish.

The lightweight alloy arms of this paddle have a 1:1 leverage ratio and are extremely short. The finger pieces are carved out of a very light, stiff and robust carbon fibre material that provides excellent tactile feedback. The resulting minimal moving mass, in combination with high grade racing bearings, results in a responsiveness

and precision that you appreciate when keying.

The Sculpture has very fine adjustments, and gold contacts are standard. A protective dust cover is included. A miniature stereo jack socket on the back connects to the transceiver.

This key weighs just under 3lb (1.3kg) and this ensures it does not move when keying.

THE SIMPLEX MONO. This is a single lever key (**Photo 3**) with a heavy base, roughly the same as the Sculpture. The Simplex Mono has a palladium or gold plated base and gold plated components. Micro-threaded screws are used for all adjustments. The pivot uses ball bearings that are imbedded in the base, and the moving components are made of a light-weight alloy.

This key uses a novel approach with a segmented lever that provides decoupling of the two sides and an exceptionally well defined neutral position. In fact it looks at first glance like an iambic paddle. The contacts are corrosion resistant and have apparently been tested in salty fog according to DIN 50025. The key comes with a protective dust cover and a spare set of paddles which are easily fitted should it



PHOTO 2: The Sculpture iambic paddle.

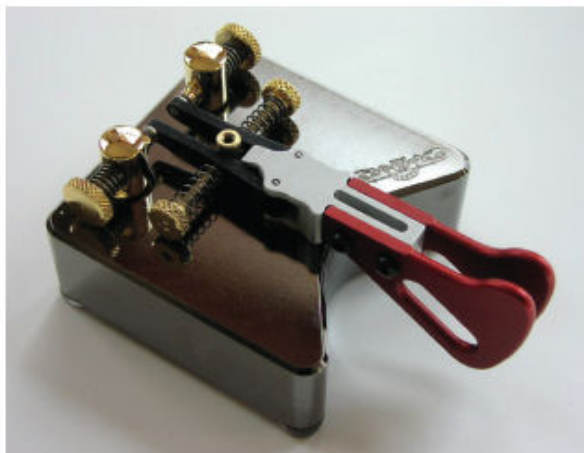


PHOTO 3: The Simplex Mono with the palladium base option.

be necessary. There are solder contacts underneath for the connections. Weight is roughly the same as the Sculpture.

THE CAMELBACK. This straight key is shown in **Photo 4**. The camelback shape for a straight key dates back more than 150 years; Charles Chubbock (in 1848), Thomas Hall, and Chester Brothers in New York produced some of the earliest keys with the characteristic "hump". This key was inspired by the beauty of that shape, although it does not try to replicate any of the classical designs. Most old camelback designs have the hump located before the pivot to shift the mass towards the knob.

The Begali Camelback has a very heavy, black cast iron base, weighing over 4lb, which makes it sit rock steady on your table. All other parts are gold plated for corrosion resistance. Precision bearings are used. A unique aspect of the design is the placement of the spring behind and very close to the pivot. This places most of the moving mass in front of the spring and provides for effortless keying even at high speeds. Although this key looks the part, it is anything but old fashioned, and is based on ergonomic and dynamic principles that are thoroughly modern.

PERFORMANCE. I wired all three keys into my MM3 keyer for my Morse Class to try. Malcolm, G3PDH, also came over to give some practice to the class and he tried all three keys. We found that straight from the box they all worked but were not set up very well. Time needs to be spent on any key when first installing it.

I have used a single lever paddle for so long that I could not use the Sculpture very well, being an iambic paddle. However, Malcolm used it efficiently enough, as did one of the class. We did notice that the gaps were fairly wide, however, causing a clacking noise, but I later manage to lower this with suitable adjustment of the paddle contacts.

The Simplex Mono performed well, just like my Vibroplex and I preferred that key.

The paddles of both these keys are at just the right height above the desk and the keys do not move, an essential requirement.

The Camelback, weighing in at over 4lb also stays put. As with the paddles, this key needed some adjusting and we found that cleaning the contacts with a piece of paper

incentive to play at all, let alone play well. However, I do play some gigs at our local concert hall where I get to use the Steinway concert grand. This does inspire me to play well. Morse keys are the same. Cheap keys will not inspire you to produce good Morse, whereas using a quality key will.



PHOTO 4: The graceful camelback straight key

slid between them helped, as they had some dust on them. This would be an ideal key for a Straight Key Night, or for general practice on a decent key.

FINAL COMMENTS. Morse keys and CW operators can be compared to musical instruments and musicians. I have heard children learning to play the piano on an instrument obtained at the local sale hall, out of tune, notes missing and so on. Those children will never play well or even want to play well. I have played on such instruments (unfortunately!) and there is no

I spent some time adjusting all three keys and they behaved very well after that.

The Begali keys are quality products. They are not cheap, but like a good piano, they should last a lifetime if looked after well. Sending good Morse is something to be proud of and using a quality Morse key will certainly help you achieve that. Take a look at www.i2trf.com for further details.

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