

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRASS BANDS

By Colin Holman

The brass band dates back to the early nineteenth century and England's Industrial Revolution as an outgrowth of the medieval waits. With increasing urbanization, employers began to finance work bands to decrease the political activity with which the working classes seemed preoccupied during their leisure time. This conveniently coincided with the development of brass instruments (most notably the saxhorn family) and the improvement of existing brass instruments. Thus, the brass band tradition was founded. Fervent discussion has always ensued as to which band was founded first. Certainly the two bands with the longest traditions are the Bessies O' Th Barn Brass Band and the Black Dyke Mills Brass Band. Standards of instrumental technology and performance quickly improved. By 1860 there were over 750 brass bands in England alone. Although these bands were not fully comprised of brass instruments until the second half of the nineteenth century, the tradition developed to the present day current instrumentation of cornets, flugelhorn, tenor horns, baritones, trombones, euphoniums, B flat and E flat basses and percussion.

Contests are the lifeblood of the brass band world and rivalry has always been strong, cash prizes providing additional incentive. Nineteenth-century politicians hired bands to enliven campaigns and challenges often followed. By the 1840s, a thriving local contest circuit had grown. Today two major championship events are held each year in England; the National Championship and the British Open Championship. The National Championship is only open to bands from England, Scotland and Wales. This competition ran sporadically in the nineteenth century from 1856, but was firmly established by Sir Arthur Sullivan in 1900. The Open Championship invites bands from all countries and has been in existence since 1853, the first winners being the Mossley Temperance Saxhorn Band. Both major championships are held in the fall each year, are fiercely competitive, and it is a great honor to win either of these competitions. In addition there are international events (The European Brass Band Championships as an example) and entertainment contests, the most notable being Brass in Concert. The time commitment is very extensive with the top bands rehearsing at least three nights a week prior to the championships, and often every night the week before the competition itself. Youth brass band competitions are similarly well established, providing quality players for the adult bands as the young members mature, thereby continuing the tradition.

Brass bands in Great Britain presently number in the thousands with many of the bands having origins prior to 1900. Originally the bands were funded by coal mines, mills, and many today retain corporate sponsorship. To this day, the bands use only non-professional musicians who in former years were usually employed at the sponsoring company. It is a testament to the quality of performance in the brass band tradition that many players are able to secure professional positions as a result of their brass band experience. Indeed, several professional brass musicians in this country began their education in the brass band world, New York trumpeter Phil Smith and Chicago trombonist Michael Mulcahy being two good examples.

English brass bands are also popular in Japan, Australia and New Zealand; and in recent years a large number of brass bands have started in several European countries, with Scandinavian countries being particularly successful and innovative in their approach. If you plan a trip to England, be sure to find a brass band concert to attend.

What makes the brass band unique? All the brass music (with the exception of the bass trombone) is scored in treble clef, a characteristic that over the years has allowed for remarkable freedom among certain bands, making the transition from one instrument to another somewhat easier. The number of members (instrumentation) is rigid, usually limited to between twenty-eight and thirty players, but the repertoire is unusually flexible, with concert

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programs consisting of anything from original works, orchestral transcriptions and featured soloists to novelty items, marches, medleys, and hymn tune arrangements. With the exception of the trombones, all instruments are conical in design, producing a mellower, richer sound, yet one that has wide dynamic and coloristic variety. The term "brass band" is not entirely accurate, since brass bands also normally include up to three percussion players who are called upon to play as many as twenty different instruments depending on the demands of the music. Standard acceptance of more than one percussionist in the brass band is really a phenomenon of the last forty years, but one that has added immense challenge, interest and variety to the sound.

Although brass bands were an important part of life in nineteenth-century America, they were superseded by larger concert and marching bands. However, many fine historic brass bands are still actively performing today. During the course of this century the Salvation Army were predominantly responsible for maintaining the brass band tradition in America through their music ministry. Only in the last thirty years has a brass band resurgence begun in North America. The formation of the North American Brass Band Association (NABBA) has been crucial and influential in the renaissance.

"Brass Bands are one of the world's most wide spread forms of amateur music performance"

Original works from Gustav Holst and Edward Elgar to modern-day composers such as Philip Sparke, Edward Gregson and Joseph Horovitz have resulted in a growing and dynamic repertoire. American composers such as James Curnow, William Himes, Stephen Bulla and Bruce Broughton all got their start writing for brass bands of the Salvation Army and are currently writing brass band music in addition to their other compositions for band, orchestra and film scores.

There are presently several hundred brass bands in North America, many affiliated with NABBA, and it is not only exciting to see the tradition making a return, but also such a valuable and unique contribution to the rich musical heritage of this country.

