

WHAT IS A BRASS BAND?

For many musicians in North America, the brass band is an unknown phenomenon. The following is a synopsis of the traditional instrumentation.

One E-flat Soprano Cornet serves as the piccolo voice. It requires a delicate touch and is used frequently as a soloist or to add brightness to the cornet tutti sound.

Four B-flat Solo Cornets are the lead voices in the ensemble. The use of four cornets permits players to pace themselves on parts that are frequently continuous throughout the entire piece. Divisi parts are also frequent. The four solo players should ideally match each other in sound.

Two B-flat Second Cornet and two B-flat Third Cornets fill out the cornet choir.

One B-flat Repiano Cornet is the "roving middle linebacker" of the section. Often used as a solo voice, or doubling the Soprano Cornet in unison or at the octave, the Repiano is also used to add weight to the other Cornet parts.

One B-flat Flugelhorn serves as the bridge to the horns. It is a frequent solo voice, and is often used as the top voice of the horn family.

Three E-flat Tenor Horns (solo, first, second) often perform as a choir with flugelhorn and baritone horns. The solo horn is a frequent solo voice. Also commonly referred to as the alto horn in the U.S., it is an upright three-valve instrument with a lighter sound than the french horn.

Two B-flat Baritone Horns are often doubled with euphoniums but work best as lower extensions of the horn section. As separate voices, their ability to blend and add a middle voice without heaviness is a unique feature of the brass band.

Two B-flat Euphoniums are the predominant solo tenor voices and also function as tutti enforcers with the basses.

Two B-flat Tenor Trombones provide punch and drive because of their cylindrical construction.

One Bass Trombone is both a support for the trombone section and adds additional weight to the tubas. As the only brass instrument to be reading in bass clef, I am not sure what the early designers of brass bands were trying to say!

Two E-flat Basses (Tubas) and two B-flat Basses (Tubas) give composers an extraordinary flexibility in dictating the sound of the bass part. The lighter quality of the E flats can have all the lyricism of the euphoniums while the fatter b-flat Bass sound adds weight. In octaves or in fifths, the section can give the brass band an incredible richness of tone.

Three Percussionists will cover the entire spectrum of percussion instruments. Timpani, battery and mallets are standard for almost all compositions.

It might be worth stressing here that although brass band literature works most effectively with the appropriate instrumentation, a small number of bands function quite successfully with the use of trumpets instead of cornets and french horns instead of tenor horns. The NABBA annual competition also has a section which permits more flexible instrumentation. And indeed several brass bands in North America perform popular repertoire that includes keyboards and electric bass.