

Brass Band History

The brass banding tradition dates back to the early 19th century and England's industrial revolution. With increasing urbanization and shorter working hours, employees had more time to themselves. Employers began to finance factory bands in an attempt to occupy some of the time and consequently decrease the political activity with which the working classes seemed preoccupied during their leisure time. Thus, the brass band tradition was born. Brass bands in Great Britain currently number in the thousands, many founded prior to 1900. When the topic arises, fervent discussion has always ensued among brass band fans as to which band was founded first. Certainly the two bands with the longest known traditions are the Bessies O' The Barn Brass Band and the Black Dyke Brass Band.

Taking advantage of improved mechanical skills in the production of brass instruments and the rise of conservatories and music departments at universities, the 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 instrumentation has evolved over the years to the current composition of cornets, flugelhorn, tenor horns, baritones, euphoniums, trombones, B-flat and E-flat basses plus percussion.

Contests are the lifeblood of the brass band world and rivalry has always been strong, with cash prizes providing additional incentive to achieve top honors. Nineteenth-century politicians hired bands to enliven campaigns and challenges between bands often followed. By the 1840s, a thriving local contest circuit had grown.

In England two major championship events are held each year: the National Championship and the British Open Championship. Leading up to these events are a series of local and regional contests. Both major championships are held in the fall each year and are fiercely competitive. It is a great honor to win either of these competitions. The time commitment is very extensive for members of the competing bands. The top bands rehearse 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. In the United States there is only one national Championship (North American Brass Band Championship) which is held each year in April.

In Great Britain brass bands presently number in the thousands with many of the bands having origins prior to 1900. Originally bands were funded by coal mines, mills and factories. The bands were comprised of non-professional musicians who were employed at the sponsoring company and some of these historic bands retain their business sponsorship to this day. Today brass bands in Great Britain and across the world follow the tradition of being all-volunteer. There are no corporate sponsorships in the United States. Some bands have corporate, business or private sponsors but most rely on donations, fees, grants and fund raising events. 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.

Traditional British brass bands are popular in Japan, Australia and New Zealand; and in recent years a large number of brass bands have started in several European countries.

What makes the brass band unique? All the brass music (with the exception of the bass trombone) is scored in treble clef making the transition for players from one instrument to another somewhat easier, a characteristic that over the years has allowed for remarkable freedom among band members. The

number of members (instrumentation) is rigid, usually limited to between twenty-eight and thirty players, but the repertoire is unusually flexible, with concert 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 mellow sound, a rich 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.

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 in the United States today. During the course of the last century the Salvation Army was predominantly responsible for maintaining the brass band tradition in America through their music ministry. Only in the last twenty-five years has a brass band resurgence begun in North America. The formation of the North American Brass Band Association (NABBA), which held its first annual brass band competition in 1983, has been crucial and influential in the renaissance.

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

- COL Thomas H Palmatier, Leader The US Army Band, 2011 -

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

There are presently several hundred brass bands in North America and the number continues to grow. It is exciting to see the tradition making a return to popularity. Brass banding is a valuable and unique contribution to the rich musical heritage of this country.

Although there is some reference to a brass band stationed on Pea Patch Island in Delaware during the American Civil War, the Chesapeake Silver Cornet Brass Band is believed to be the first and only permanent Delaware brass band.

For additional information see:

www.NABBA.org

www.Chesapeakebrassband.org

The Music Men, An Illustrated History of Brass Bands in America, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.