

Broadcasting Brass Bands: the early years

Gavin Holman – September 2021

An outline of the broadcasting pioneers of live brass band music. Starting with the earliest known telephone transmission of band music, with a short diversion into the infant recording industry, concluding with a look at the birth of the true wireless brass band radio broadcasts.

In July 1882 the Tyler Family Silver Band was engaged to provide music at the Bradford Technical School's Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition. The band consisted of Joseph Tyler and his children, and it had been touring the country over the previous ten years, performing in music halls, concert venues, as a stage band, and even a resident 'town band'. The National Telephone Company had instruments at the Exhibition connected to their exchange, which enabled the subscribers in Bradford to listen to the concerts in their homes or offices via the telephone.

On Wednesday 26th July their evening concert was relayed to telephone subscribers and their friends in Dewsbury. This telephone broadcast was repeated on Thursday and Friday evenings, even though the Thursday evening suffered a 'strong earth current', with the playing of the soloists to the finest note, their most elaborate double-tonguing or fingering being easily heard, and so could the applause of the audience, down to the last clap of the hands. On lady, commenting on the Wednesday performance, said she could 'hear the interval' – a somewhat paradoxical and surprising statement – what she meant was that she could hear the buzz of conversation during the interval.



Tyler Family Silver Band, c. 1875

Although this was not strictly a broadcast, being point to point via the telephone network, it was the first known instance in the UK of a band's performance being transmitted remotely to an audience.

On Thursday 6th September 1888, the strains of the Band of the 2nd Volunteer Battalion, South Wales Borderers were telephoned from Newport to Ebbw Vale, where a bazaar was being held in aid of the funds of a church. To make matters easy for the listeners, Mr Ashton, the obliging local superintendent of the Western Counties Telephone Co., had arranged a dozen listening tubes at the Ebbw Vale Institute, where the bazaar was held, and getting music from Newport, a distance of 35 miles, proved the feature of the evening.



The encores demanded were not stated. The band, under Mr Hazell, was stationed in the Newport office of the Ebbw Vale Company's manager, and played a selection which comprised a clarionette solo, valse, piccolo solo, quadrille, waltz, grand march, march, fantasia, etc.

The recording industry was also beginning around this time, and some of the early demonstrations involved brass bands.

A month after the Newport broadcast, in October 1888, Colonel Gouraud, Thomas Edison's agent in England, gave a reception in honour of the new "phonograph" with the arrival of a fresh batch of the precious cylinders from the USA. As reported:

"Breathlessly the guests watched them inserted into the instrument and set in action, and to their intense delight the sound given forth was that of a fascinating polka played outside Mr Edison's laboratory, at Menlo, New Jersey, by an itinerant brass band. In a twinkling, all prejudices against the proverbial 'German band' disappeared, the room was cleared, and the company was whirling in the mazy waltz, to the ghosts of the strains first played thousands of miles away."

The following year, in July 1889, there was a demonstration of the Edison Phonograph at the Victoria Hall in Exeter by Professor William Lynd, featuring the reproduction of a performance of a brass band.

A lantern lecture in Hackney, in April 1890, by J.E. Greenhill, demonstrated the Harmonograph, Sympalmograph and Edison's latest Phonograph – which included the records "American Village Brass Bands", "English Street Band", "Horn Calls" and a "Cornet Solo"

In September 1890 William Lynd gave a demonstration of Edison's phonograph at the Fine Art Institution in York, which included "Brilliant Cornet Solos by Celebrated Musicians" and "Performances of Brass Bands played before the phonograph in America and England". The evening also included a "Great Vivisection Feat: Cutting a Living Man to

Pieces, and the Cremation of a Living Woman” – a truly great night out! Just one of a series of similar occasions as he toured the country with his show. At one of his later shows, in Leighton Buzzard, he featured the cornet solo “*The Ash Grove*“, “*Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep*” played on euphonium three months back.

“The most remarkable was the perfect and effective reproduction of the Silsden Brass Band, recorded in Yorkshire.”



A band recording on the phonograph

Another telephone performance took place in Australia in November 1906. The Kingscote Brass Band played selections through the telephone to Cape Willoughby and Cape Borda Lighthouses. The music was much appreciated by the watchers by the sea at either end of Kangaroo Island. Cape Borda is about 70 miles westerly from Kingscote and Cape Willoughby is about 50 miles easterly.

The first known radio program was broadcast by Reginald Fessenden on Christmas Eve, 1906 in Massachusetts. Nearby ship operators with wireless systems heard the broadcast, which featured two musical selections, a reading of a poem, and a short talk.

By the end of World War I, radio technologies had become more widely available to amateurs and hobbyists. A few “radio stations” went on air in the USA, often playing songs from records to anyone who happened to be listening. One hobbyist even created the first known radio advertisements, which were promoting a local record shop in exchange for free records for him to play.

In October 1920, a student at Union College in New York started the first college radio station. Wendell King operated the station under his personal call letters, 2ADD, and the station aired what is believed to be the first public entertainment broadcast in the United States: a series of Thursday night concerts able to be heard for nearly 1,000 miles.

True wireless broadcasts, using radio transmitters, were also starting up in the UK, though the “free spirit” approach of the USA was tempered by officialdom and a more measured approach to the new technology. Radio broadcasts and receivers had to be licensed through the General Post Office, which had control of the airwaves at that time.

The first experimental music broadcasts, from Marconi's factory in Chelmsford, began in 1920.

Two years later, in October 1922, a consortium of radio manufacturers, including General Electric and the Marconi Company, formed the British Broadcasting Company (BBC); they allowed some sponsored programs, although they were not what we would today consider a fully commercial station. Meanwhile, the first radio stations in England were the experimental station 2MT, located near Chelmsford, and station 2LO in London: both were operated by the Marconi Company. By late 1923, there were six stations broadcasting regularly in the United Kingdom: London's 2LO, Manchester's 2ZY, and stations in Birmingham, Cardiff, Newcastle, and Glasgow, all connected to London via telephone lines.

Various demonstrations of the wireless technology took place from 1920 to 1922. On 10th July 1922, Mrs Lloyd George commenced a political tour in the West of England. In the afternoon, she attended a garden party at the Zoological Gardens in Clifton, Bristol, and afterwards, by means of wireless broadcasting, specially set up for the occasion, she listened to the playing of a French military band at the Eiffel Tower, Paris.

On 14th November 1922, the first national radio broadcast was made from radio station 2LO located on the seventh floor of Marconi House on the Strand. At 6pm Arthur Burrows, director of programmes, said: *"This is 2LO calling."*

The transmission was made using a 1.5 kW transmitter. To listen to the radio you needed a licence, which cost 10 shillings. The audience was small to begin with – just 30,000 receiver licences had been taken out across the UK up to that time. However, by the end of 1923, some 250,000 had been purchased, with possibly as many listeners again receiving the broadcasts on unlicensed equipment.



OUR WIRELESS VILLAGE CONCERT.

Mr. A. Lotment: "Would you kindly remove your hat, Madam?"

Originally the British Broadcasting Company oversaw the network of local, separate stations, which were connected to London by telephone links which allowed 'simultaneous broadcasting'. These nine stations were based in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Glasgow, Cardiff, Aberdeen, Bournemouth and Belfast. Each station covered about twenty miles in radius – although the exact distance depended whether one was listening on a valve or crystal set.

In this first year of public broadcasting there were several live concerts given by brass bands. The honour of the first brass band radio broadcast going to Clydebank Burgh Band, probably conducted by William Halliwell, though this is not confirmed.

Saturday 21st April 1923 – Broadcast from Glasgow – 7.00pm - Clydebank Burgh Band, playing *Old Glory Waves*, *Selection "Tschaikovsky"*, *Pat and MacGregor*, *Selection "Romeo and Juliet"*, cornet duet (George MacDonald and Tom Anderson) *Ida and Dot*, *A Day with the Huntsman*, *Selection "William Tell"*, *overture to Bohemian Girl*, *A Musical Switch*, *March of the Mannikins*.



Clydebank Burgh Band in 1922

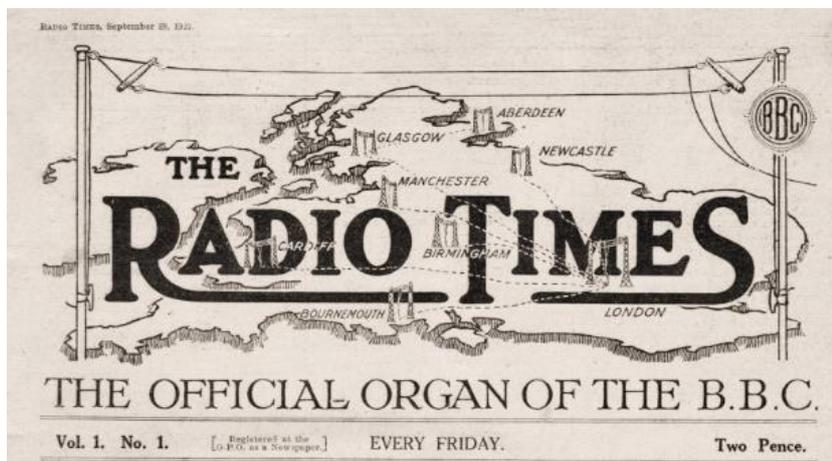
This was only a few weeks since the station (5SC) went on air on 6th March 1923, broadcast from a small attic apartment at Rex House, 202 Bath Street, the first broadcast began with a pipe band playing the popular folk tune '*Hey, Johnnie Cope*'.

Thursday 19th July 1923 – Broadcast from Cardiff (Radio Broadcasting Company of Wales, station 5WA, at the studio in Castle Street) - Cory Workman's Band. Details of their programme are not known.

Wednesday 1st August 1923 – The first known Australian brass band radio broadcast. The Box Hill City Band, playing in Box Hill, had its concert broadcast live.

Friday 17th August 1923 – Broadcast from Glasgow (on 415 metres) – 8:25pm - Barrhead Silver Prize Band, playing *overture to Bohemian Girl*, cornet duet (Messrs Peat and Blamire) *Panorama*, *excerpts from Mirella*, *Punchinello*, *overture Caliph of Baghdad*, euphonium solo (William Ferguson) *Kentucky Home*, *Minstrel Melodies*, *selection from Zampa*, cornet solo (Peter Peat) *Star of the North*, *A Day with the Huntsmen*, *excerpts from Faust*, *selection Sons of Britannia*, *march Le Tour*.

The first edition of the Radio Times was issued on 28th September 1923. It covered the scheduled broadcasts for the week commencing 30th September from each of the stations around the UK.



Sunday 30th September 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 15:00pm - South Shields Corporation Tramways Band, playing *selection from Merrie England (Edward German)*, cornet solo (Gordon Tyne) *Softly Awakes My Heart (Saint Saens)*, *Ballet Music from Coppelia (Delibes)*, euphonium solo (G. Bennett) *Dream of a Garden of Sunshine (Clarke)* and *Red Devon by the Sea (Clarke)*, *The Grasshopper's Dance (Bucalossi)*

Sunday 7th October 1923 – Broadcast from Manchester – 21:45 - The Radio Military Band, conductor Harry Mortimer.

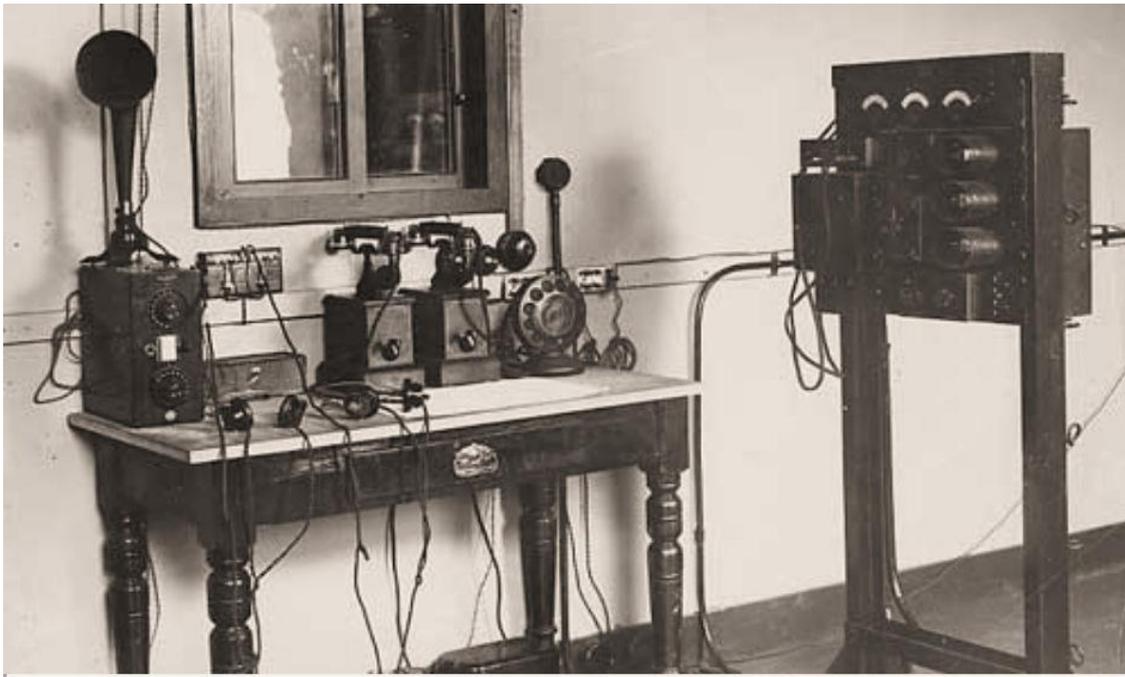
This was an example of a “radio” ensemble created to provide music for the broadcast stations. A few of these were in existence during this period. The BBC Radio Orchestra being the most famous and long lived of such groups. In addition to the brass bands featured here, a number of military bands were also broadcasting to the nation during this first year.

Friday 19th October 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 21:45 - Mr Arthur Laycock (cornet)

Thursday 15th November 1923 – Broadcast from Manchester – 19:35 - Besses o' th' Barn Band, conductor A. Barlow, playing *The Victor's Return (Rimmer)*, *The Jolly Robbers (Sieppe)*, euphonium solo (H. Stott) *The Gipsy's Warning (Hartmann)*, *L'Africaine (Meyerbeer)*, *My Syrian Maid (Limmer)*, *Reminiscences of England (Fred Grapes)*, *A Musical Switch (Alford)*.

Saturday 24th November 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 19:35 - Newcastle Corporation Tramways Band, playing *Silver Wedding (Hume)*, *Poet and Peasant (Suppé)*, *I Puritani (Bellini)*, cornet and euphonium duet (Messrs Birkett and Garrett) *The Moon Hath Raised (Benedict)*, *A Day with the Huntsman (Rimmer)*, *A Life for the Czar (Glinka)*

Tuesday 27th November 1923 – Broadcast from Bournemouth (on 385 metres) – 8:00pm - Boscombe Silver Prize Band, conductor G. Barnes, playing *Cottonopolis (Anderson)*, *selection from La Traviata (Verdi)*, *Triumphland (Stoddon)*, *The Rover's Return (Mayne)*, *Dawn of Spring (Le Duc)*, *Wedding of the Rose (Jessel)* and a cornet solo – *Romany Rose (Nichols)*.



Inside Station 5SC at 202 Bath Street, Glasgow - 1923

Saturday 1st December 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 19:35 - St Hilda Colliery Band, playing *English Ballads* (Baines), cornet solo (Master Alwyn, Teesdale) *The Nightingale* (Moss), *Reminiscences of Balfe* (Rimmer), trombone solo (Harold Laycock) *Lend Me Your Aid* (Gounod), *Maid of the Mountains* (Simpson)

Wednesday 5th December 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 19:35 - Spencer's Steel Works Band, playing *Crispiana* (Rimmer), cornet solo (Mr Oates) *Queen of Angels* (Piccolamia), *Sailor Songs* (Rimmer), euphonium solo (Mr W. Henry) *Kentucky Home* (Hume), *Gems of Haydn* (Rimmer), *Operatic Waltzes* (Rimmer), cornet solo (Mr Waterhouse) *Roses of Picardy*, *Down on the Mississippi River* (Round)

Thursday 6th December 1923 – Broadcast from Cardiff – 19:35 - Pontypool Silver Band, playing *The Allies* (J.H. White), *Morning Noon and Night* (Suppé), *Verdi's Works* (Round), *The Piper's Wedding* (Kennedy Thayne), trombone solo (G. Merritt) *Switchback* (Sutton), *The Indian Love Lyrics* (Woodforde-Finden), *Selection from The Daughter of the Regiment* (Donizetti, arr. Round)

Saturday 29th December 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 7:30 pm - Harton Colliery Band, playing *Prometheus* (Beethoven), cornet duet (Harry Smith and Joseph Rumney) *Ida and Dot* (Losey), *A Military Church Parade* (Hume)

Sunday 30th December 1923 – Broadcast from Newcastle – 20:30 - Band of Sunderland Constabulary, playing *Le Duc d'Olonne* (Auber), *The Wedding of the Rose* (Jessel), *Second movement of the Unfinished Symphony* (Schubert), *Songs of Araby* (Clay) [cornet soloist Sergeant W.L. Allen], *Selection from Il Trovatore* (Verdi)

Monday 31st December 1923 – Broadcast from Cardiff (on 350 metres) – 7:30pm - Cory Workmen's Silver Band, conductor J.G. Dobbing, playing *Ruy Blas* (Mendelssohn), *Sandy's Frolic* (Sutton), cornet duet (A. Trotman and J. Carter) *Badinage* (Rimmer), *Selection from Faust* (Gounod), euphonium solo (W.J. Davies) *Old Folks at Home* (Hartmann), *MacGregor's Wedding* (Campbell)

A transatlantic transmission was received in London on Saturday 29th December 1923, which included some music from the Westinghouse Electric Corporation Band, conducted by T.J. Vastine – which was associated with the K.D.K.A. radio station in Pittsburgh. The newspaper report of the event states:

“The British Broadcasting Company calling. We are now going to switch you over for some more American transmission. Stand by please, for music from the United States.” A few minutes before midnight on Saturday, the London Station raised excitement to the highest pitch by the above announcement. Faintly at first, and coming in bursts, accompanied by heavy crashings and whistling, the music of a brass band could be heard. *“This is K.D. - K.A.,”* announced a deep voice with a decided Yankee twang, splitting the call sign into two words. Then a few seconds' interval, during which Captain Eckersley tried to get better tuning. At last, judging by the heavy oscillations, a change had been made on the set in the Downs. The succeeding announcement from K.D.K.A. was very hazy and ragged, and many parts of speech difficult to understand, but *“Old Duntrune”* and *“Hail, hail, the gang's all here”* and *“We won't be home till morning”*, well played by the Westinghouse Band, were items that were received perfectly. Many other musical items were transmitted, including *“The Turkish Patrol”*, Schubert's *“Serenade”*, *“The Angels Serenade”*, by Braga, and the finale of Liszt's *“Hungarian Rhapsody”*. The transmission was now reaching a high degree of efficiency and very little change of volume was noticeable – a remarkable feat.



GECophone radio crystal detector set, c. 1925

These early pioneers on the air waves were quickly followed by other bands, both in live performances and broadcasts of their recordings, as the radio network grew and came fully under the new British Broadcasting Corporation's control.

Black Dyke Band's first radio broadcast was on Monday 5th October 1925, live from the Wembley Exhibition, at 4.15pm, playing *March from Tannhauser (Wagner)*, *Three Dale Dances (Arthur Wood)*, *Joan of Arc (Denis Wright)*, *Shylock (Thomas Lear)* and *W.H. Squire's Songs (arr. J. Ord Hume)*.

On Saturday 14th Nov 1925, at the City Hall, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the first broadcast brass band contest took place. It was organised by the Newcastle Wireless Station (5NO, 404 metres), the judges listening in on the radio to the unknown bands.

The broadcast ran 11.30am to 12.30pm, 4.00pm to 7.00pm, and 8.00pm to 10.00pm. The contest was open to bands from Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmorland, and also Middlesbrough. 17 bands competed for the four prizes of £25, £15, £8 and £5.

The prize-winning bands were

- 1st Leasingthorne Colliery, conductor E. Smith
- 2nd Spencer's Steelworks
- 3rd Middlesbrough Borough
- 4th Hetton Colliery



From this point onwards the future of radio broadcasting in the UK, and across the world was firmly assured, and brass bands would continue to secure their own places amongst the live and pre-recorded musical broadcast programmes to come.

Further information:

- Holman, Gavin - *The Tyler Family Band - a father and his two sets of children touring the British Isles, 1843-1890* - February 2022. Available from - <https://gavinholman.academia.edu>
- Pathé News film about the first broadcasts from London 2-LO – see: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/london-calling>