

Brass banding Down Under Part 1



In the first of a two-part series, **Merv Collins** and **Howard Taylor** delve into the history books to look at how Australian banding has developed since the 1840s.



Though the recorded written history of brass banding in Australia is scant and fragmentary, there seems no doubt that the first Western music heard in these parts was introduced to the new penal settlements in the early 19th century by the troops employed to keep the British convicts in order and to play for parades and ceremonial occasions. These ensembles are more likely to have been concert or military bands rather than pure brass.

Civilian brass bands started to appear from the 1840s as free settlers arrived in Australia. Many migrants came from the mining and industrial regions of the UK and they brought their instruments and brass band culture with them. Consequently, some of the first bands were formed in the coal and steel mining areas around Newcastle in New South Wales (NSW) and the copper mining areas in South Australia (SA).

Community brass bands became increasingly popular, and in an era before radio, played an important role in social life. The population relied on them for entertainment and musical education when there were few other opportunities for both players and listeners. Their importance is illustrated by the picturesque band rotundas in virtually every park in rural Australia.

There are some grounds for dispute, but the Tanunda Band in South Australia claims to be the oldest continuing band in the country. It was founded in 1857 and drew on the German banding roots of many who settled in the wine-producing area.

The first contests seem to have been held toward the end of the century, one of the earliest being at Gympie in rural Queensland in August 1877. Of the three bands which registered, only one, the

Malvern Tramways Band 1921 (Conductor Harry Shugg), multiple prize-winning band in the 1902s)



Cympie Oddfellows Band, turned up to play and, perhaps for the only time in recorded history, there was no dispute over the adjudicator's decision!

The Royal South St Eisteddfod in the historic gold-mining town of Ballarat in Victoria, which, prior to the setting up of a national body, was recognised as the premier musical competition in the country, started its band sections in 1900. It has maintained its prestige through to the current day.

Few bands in Australia were 'works' bands and most of those that were received quite minimal support from their employers. The Malvern Tramways Band offered its players employment and provided a bandroom, and the short-lived Tooth's Brewery Band had uniforms supplied by the company. The most successful works band was probably the Newcastle Steelworks Band which, in 1924, under its conductor Albert Baile, stunned the UK public by winning the British Open title at Belle Vue, Manchester. After a month at sea, the band toured the Midlands and some northern towns. It won another contest at Halifax before arriving, in great form, at Manchester. Chris Helme, the British band historian, records that 'the band played 50 concerts, a performance at the Palladium and made 18 78rpm records with three different companies.'

Newcastle Steelworks could boast an outstanding cornet soloist in Arthur Stender, who introduced the UK audiences to the delightful and distinctive solos of the Australian composer Percy Code. It's worth noting that the outstanding euphonium soloist Dr Matthew van Emmerik's excellent recording of all of Code's solos was nominated for British Bandsman's Solo CD of the Year in 2018.

Newcastle Steelworks Band's pre-eminence in Australian banding was short-lived: it disbanded in 1932 though Albert Baile, who like Percy Code had completed his musical education in England and went on to conduct the St John's Ambulance Band (NSW) to six A Grade Championship wins in the 1950s.

The champion cornet player, Stender, was later to become Principal Trumpet with the ABC Military Band and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. But other fine bands were emerging to take the place of the Steelworks. Frank 'Massa' Johnston built a formidable reputation and conducted the Collingwood Citizens Band in Melbourne for 50 years. He became Australia's first professional bandmaster and led numerous bands, including the original Melbourne Fire Brigade Band which visited every State capital and won the National title in 1936 and 1938 and post-war in 1946 and 1947. Johnston could eventually claim over 600 contest successes, but his finest legacy was probably in the hundreds of students he taught and brought up to A Grade standard.

'Massa' Johnston's Fire Brigade band was disbanded in 1950, but reformed in the late 60s under the leadership of the effervescent Principal Trumpet of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Merv



Simpson. The band recruited some of Melbourne's leading players and almost immediately won A Grade Championships in 1968 and 1970. The Fire Brigade Band folded again in 1971 and Simpson took several of his players across to the Footscray-Yarraville Band, where he presided over another great era.

A hat-trick of Championship wins from 1972 - 1974 preceded a tour to Canada, where the band won the Canadian National Exhibition Band Contest. It toured the Philippines, Switzerland and Canada again in 1978 and six years later played at the Edinburgh Festival. It was a golden era for the band which has maintained a high standard over the years right down to the present.

In November last year, the Footscray-Yarraville Band undertook a successful and demanding tour to Europe in November 2018 to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. It presented a unique programme using the band as backing for singers, both classical and rock, and some dramatic presentations with four archetypal characters: the soldier, the mother, the girl and the bandsman. Its major brass work was *The Silent Anzac*, written especially for Footscray-Yarraville by young Australian composer, Todd Smith. On tour, the band played at the Australian War Memorial at Villers Bretonneux in France, the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium, as well as presenting its Silent Anzac concerts in York and Leicester, and Australia House in London.

Hawthorn City Band, also from Melbourne, had a wonderful



Hawthorn City Band, 13 times winners of the Australian Championship

run of success between 1975 and 1995 winning the Championship 13 times, including three hat-tricks. Their conductors during the period included the very demanding Squadron Leader Laurie Hicks, from the RAAF Central Band, and ex-pat Ken McDonald, who had a fine British playing career at both Grimethorpe Colliery and Black Dyke before emigrating to Australia some 20 years ago, to the benefit of banding in the Southern Hemisphere. Hicks led the band to five wins between 1975 and 1981 and MacDonald between 1986 and 1995. Both conductors could boast a hat-trick in their CVs.

In 1982, Laurie Hicks took the band to England to compete in the British Open. Its Principal Cornet was a young David King from Cooranbong, a little coastal town in NSW, two hours north of Sydney. The band was awarded a creditable eighth place and King virtually stayed on to become all-England cornet champion and, later, Professor David King, one of the world's leading brass band conductors and educators.

Since 2005, Brisbane Excelsior Band, from Queensland, have been the pace-setters under their conductor, Howard Taylor, another ex-pat whose West Country burr still stands out like a beacon amongst flat Australian vowels. Howard's band, too, stands out amid its A Grade rivals in the 21st century, having eight wins in the last 14 years. It would be a brave man who would bet against them making it nine in the forthcoming National Championships to be held in their home state over Easter. ■



A young David King