

Brass Band Repertoire History

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Brass band repertoire - it's development from 1821 to the 1990's.

What changes have been evident to the repertoire of brass bands since they made their appearance early in the 19th Century?

To examine the choice and style of this repertoire, one must have a basic understanding of the historical background of, what we now can term, the brass band.

In Britain, brass instruments had been played together, or with other combinations of instruments, since Tudor times. The natural trumpet, trombone (sackbut) and horn moved in and out of favour in the intervening time up until around 1815 when the piston valve, as a means of changing pitch, was invented by Blumel and developed by Stozel. This gave upper register brass players the potential to carry chromatic lines more effectively, without having to rely upon clarinets and flutes.

Village wind bands were an important part of community life and provided ".....a tradition of literate.....music.....outside the professional and middle and upper class enclaves in which such activity had previously been centred".

The first all-brass ensembles appeared some time around the 1820's and mid 1830's. Brass instruments quickly became popular, not unlike the guitar of today. With no commercially available repertoire, early bands had to rely upon manuscript books provided and arranged by the resident conductor. These arrangements are indicative of the musical tastes and abilities of these early ensembles.

I have deliberately chosen the year of 1821 as the starting point for my investigation. In that year, the Besses o' th' Barn Band (then still a brass-and-reed ensemble) took part in an apparently ad hoc band contest and won by simply playing the anthem God Save the King. After one listen to the top grade 1996 test-piece Isaiah 40 by Robert Redhead, it does not take a musical genius to conclude that the playing standards required to perform both it and the English National Anthem are far apart indeed! In this assignment, I shall endeavour to note certain key points in the evolution of brass band music and, where possible, give a brief background of relevant composers.

So, what music was actually played by early Victorian era bands? Few original sources still exist and, even then, a few have been unfortunately barred from the eyes of the musicologist. According to Butterworth (1970), due to a lack of "a really professional (or even good amateur) orchestral tradition, (brass bands) satisfied a thirst for good music" and that transcriptions of popular classical music and operatic themes "became the basic element" of band repertoire. He also contends that the classic English Quick March is their sole indigenous art-form given it's use in religious processions, gala days, military functions, contests and the like.

A rare example of early, purpose-composed band music still exists courtesy of the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum in Wales. Quite possibly the first piece written especially for brass band, it is entitled Tydfil Overture from the pen of Joseph Parry, "who became the most celebrated Welsh composer of the 19th. century". It was written for the Cyfarthfa Band which was active and quite successful throughout the second half of last century. The Cyfarthfa repertoire can be roughly divided into three categories: the first consists of art music in the form of complete symphonies, operatic transcriptions and arrangements; the second would best be described as light music, being popular dances of the era while the third and final category would be of a miscellaneous nature, including Parry's work mentioned above. This repertoire appears to have consisted of mainly of special hand written arrangements in a nearly complete set of 105 manuscript books, although published band journals were also in use.

As mentioned previously, customised arrangements of this kind are an invaluable insight into the musical taste and ability of a given ensemble; the Cyfarthfa repertoire is also indicative of the gradual standardisation of brass band instrumentation over a period of about 70 years, from keyed bugles and ophicleides to the equipment of the 1880's that would be recognised today. The first published band music appeared in the 1830's, to be followed during the next decade by the innovation of band "journals". A band would subscribe an annual fee to a publisher and would receive in return an agreed number of musical arrangements. Many brass band journals were published from mid century, some of which were from Jullien, Boosey, Wessel, Distin, Chappell, Wright & Round and R. Smith & Co., the last two still to this day deal mainly with brass band repertoire.

Due to a lack of standard instrumentation, early contesting relied upon each participating band choosing their own competition music. This however caused difficulties with adjudication, hence the first purpose-written test-piece, Orynthia by James Melling, made it's appearance at the 1855 British Open contest at Belle Vue, Manchester. The predictable use of operatic selections or collections of a particular composer's themes as test-pieces continued throughout the second half of last century, with Verdi's *Il Travatore* (1857) and *I Vespri Siciliani* (1880), *Reminiscences of Auber* (1864), Meyerbeer's *Le Prophete* (1869) and *Gems from Sullivan's Operas* (1900) being typical "stock in trade".

To this point in time the band movement had continued in partly self-enforced removal from the British musical mainstream. During the Boer War, an important event occurred which was arguably the first meaningful contact with Britain's musical mainstream. John Henry Iles, owner of publishers R. Smith & Co. and *The British Bandsman*, persuaded Sir Arthur Sullivan to conduct his own arrangement of Kipling's patriotic poem *The Absent Minded Beggar* at the Royal Albert Hall. The event was highly successful with Sullivan highly impressed by the band's skill to the point of being moved to tears. Iles continued to be an force for innovation when he commissioned Percy's Fletcher's *Labour and Love* for the 1913 National Championships, despite rumbling's from reactionaries within the band movement. Within the next two decades, this and other new works entered the collective repertoire despite a slight regression to older works during the Great War of 1914-18:

Cyril Jenkins became active with *Coriolanus* (1920) and *Life Divine* (1921);
Hubert Bath *Freedom* (1922);
Henry Gheel Oliver *Cromwell* (1923) and *On the Cornish Coast* (1924) ;
Percy Fletcher again *An Epic Symphony* (1926).

This period saw an obvious “breakout” for composers within the movement itself. The banding scene was active throughout the Empire thanks to the many British migrants to many parts of the globe. Throughout the 20th Century, Australia contributed to the movement with several composers and/or musicians of note, the first being Percy Code. Born in Melbourne in 1888, he initially learnt several from his bandmaster father, ultimately becoming one of the nation’s finest brass exponents. After touring with the visiting *Besses o’ th’ Barn* band in 1912, he was invited to return with them to Britain where, among other activities, he studied orchestration and composition with Alex Owen and gained his Associate and Licentiate Diplomas from the Royal London College of Music. While Code deeply admired Elgar, particularly *Falstaff*, his works compare more to those of banding greats Rimmer, Round and Hartman with a stronger placement and emphasis on the melodic aspect. While he is more famous for his world renowned solo compositions, managed to write some band pieces, including the marches *Peace for Victory* and *The City of Ballarat*.

More importantly however, the late 1920’s witnessed a pivotal development with the first commissioned work by a recognised mainstream composer in the guise of Gustav Holst with *A Moorside Suite* in 1928. Although Holst was, among other things, a trombonist, he had no previous links with brass bands. His contribution is vitally significant, as V. and S. Gammon cite:

"In the mid 19th. century, working-class took a great step toward European art music. In the early 20th. century, English art music found a new basis for itself in some of the previously despised and rejected music of the English working class. *A Moorside Suite*, the work of a socialist composer who had played trombone in a theatre band, represents the coming together of two highly significant musical impulses. We find the irony compelling."

It ensured other commissions from the likes of Elgar (*Severn Suite* in 1930), Ireland (*Downland Suite* in 1932) and Bliss (*Kennilworth* in 1936). Only later in the 1950’s were several new tests based again on 19th. century works (by Berlioz etc.), often arranged by expatriate Australian Frank Wright.

On the more popular scene, orchestral medleys became less acceptable with the general public after World War One as it was now possible to hear original orchestras play complete works over the radio without leaving home. Even ‘light’ music tastes were altered thanks to ‘the slick style’ of 1920’s and 30’s dance bands.

To at least the 1950’s, the typical brass band concert programme was closely based upon that of the last century with the inclusion of an overture, instrumental solos, waltz,

religious work and march. With rapidly changing leisure patterns and popular music trends in full swing, brass bands fought an ever increasing battle to attract more than just their own die-hard following. Even someone from within it's own ranks once admitted that the musical tastes of the banding fraternity 'lags far behind it's (remarkable) technical standards'. By the late 1960's, bands were facing the difficult situation of having to play light music in a (vain?) attempt to please an audience for fund raising purposes and coming to terms with harder test music for contests. Bram Gay (1970) bemoaned the lack of established composers like the era when Elgar, Holst and company were active. He observed banding to be 'in a vacuum.....largely oblivious of musical progress' and, in 1968, undertook in his position at music publishers Novello to invite new composers to write for bands who had no prior experience therein. Bryan Kelly and Joseph Horowitz came from this opportunity.

With the formation of the National School Brass Band Association in 1953, attention turned to the provision of appropriate repertoire for the younger, less experienced brass musician. By 1970, several composers with no band experience had produced new works for the associated National Youth Brass band of Great Britain.

Come the mid 1970's, the repertoire had been added to by such luminaries as Ralph Vaughan Williams and Malcolm Arnold. Specialist writers like Gilbert Vinter (Spectrum and James Cook, Circumnavigator) and a young Edward Gregson (The Plantagenets) made their mark with works of ever increasing complexity. Composers from outside the movement found an almost blind adherence to tradition at times. Derek Bourgeois observed that the notion of introducing a trumpet into a brass band was tantamount to being 'a heinous crime' by many and that his impression of banding as a whole was one of 'a living (and) very enjoyable fossil, but unchangeable'.

The Seventies produced a few interesting expeditions into the pop music genre. Probably the most famous from that era was Derek Broadbent's upbeat arrangement of the traditional tune The Floral Dance by the Brighouse and Rastrick Band. In every instance, these fleeting exposures to the general public did little or nothing to change a general perception of bands by the media as 'a pleasant nostalgic oddity'. Observers within the movement hoped that the image of banding would be better served by the 1990's movie *Brassed Off*.

Despite these somewhat negative viewpoints, the movement has been dragged into the modern era with some startlingly modern sounds from many present-day works and refreshingly new approaches to performance. At a tertiary education level, brass musicians in institutions worldwide are discovering the joys of traditional British brass bands, as in the music course at the North Carolina State University, U.S.A. Naturally, one would expect Britain as the home of brass bands to lead the way in tertiary education. The University of Salford, 'Europe's largest centre for specialist education in Band Musicianship', offers a Grad. Dip. in Band Musicianship with some it's more illustrious alumni being of the virtuosic calibre of Steven Mead (Euphonium) and Sheona White (Tenor Horn).

Most of the recent test repertoire appears to be firmly planted in the 20th. century in terms of style and sound. Elgar Howarth's 1975 Fireworks caused just that with some traditionalists who were upset at an apparent 'overuse' of percussionironically, this work is now firmly set in the repertoire and widely accepted as a kind of 'Young-Person's-Guide-to-the-Brass-Band'! However, Mr. Howarth cannot stay out of trouble for long it would seem. His Songs for BL commissioned for the 1995 British Nationals, 'ruffled feathers' much to his surprise, given that he had attempted to give it 'sparer, newer textures and slighter sounds' in comparison to some frantic tests from the 1980's.

In keeping with modern compositional techniques, his Ascendit in Coeli utilises a diatonic approach. He is of course very aware of the age-old problem in test-pieces of pandering too much to populist forces:

'....if you try to please an audience you finish up a gum tree'

That comment interestingly enough comes from a man who composes wickedly amusingly works under the pseudonym of W. Hogarth Lear! It is obvious to me that the man makes a very clear delineation between his role as a composer of high grade test works and popular entertainment pieces.

It would be easy for me to go on endlessly about many modern composers and their works. However, before ending this assignment, I find it prudent to return to the work Isaiah 40 by Robert Redhead. The Salvation Army held itself in self-imposed exile from the secular band movement for the best part of a century with few members 'defecting' in the manner of Eric Ball around 1950. Redhead himself summed up the final loosening of the bonds:

"Things needed to open up, for too long we had been isolated, yet we had so much to share. When examined, it was clear that the (Salvation) Army's long held position (of non-contact with secular bands) was historical rather than ethical. "

Redhead's test-piece was described by fellow Salvationist and composer Kenneth Downie as not following the pattern of recent tests by following the path of 'absolute' music. Isaiah 40 he maintains a reflection.....

".....of a man who, although a very experienced composer of music for brass bands, is by profession and proclamation, a minister of the Christian Gospel, working in the Salvation Army."

Conclusion:

In this work, I have tried to chart the difficult evolution of the repertoire of a highly individual and, more recently, isolated genre of music. For the better part of this century, this voluntary brass band movement has had to juggle the financial interests of staying afloat and the musical pursuit of ever increasing difficulty of test music.

Some outside of the movement may feel that a 'test-piece driven' mentality is a somewhat negative motive. Apart from time itself, the reliance upon such repertoire is arguably the very facet which separates the fledgling bands of 1821 to those of today.

Test-pieces are the greatest source of original repertoire for brass bands and most.....regard them as a necessary evil which push back the boundaries of contemporary literature, without which bands would most certainly be seduced to rehearse and play less challenging material.