

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

GRANADA TV

FIFTY YEARS AGO, THE GRANADA TV BAND OF THE YEAR FESTIVAL APPEARED ON OUR TELEVISION SCREENS AND INTRODUCED A NEW DIMENSION TO BRASS BAND CONTESTING.

BAND HISTORIAN TIM MUTUM CHARTS THE RISE AND FALL OF A SERIES WHICH CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF BRASS BAND AUDIENCES – AND DID MUCH TO SHOWCASE BANDING TO THE WIDER PUBLIC.

Why would a well-established television company, once described as 'the greatest television company in the world' and boasting programmes such as *Coronation Street* and *World in Action*, suddenly want to get heavily involved with brass bands? That is exactly what north-west based Granada TV did 50 years ago in 1971, 25 years after its first broadcast in 1956. The simple answer is that Granada, a company listed on the Stock Exchange, went into takeover mode.

As one of the founding executives, the late Denis Forman was a major influence at Granada, backing high-quality programme making and regarded as one of the godfathers of commercial television. Arthur Taylor, then a young producer at Granada, was charged with bringing brass bands to the small screen and is pretty sure Forman was behind the spate of acquisitions that led him to a new role which saw him producing the *Granada TV Band of the Year* contest and writing two major books on brass bands.

Taylor had already been involved in a series called *Out Front*, with each programme featuring a different form of 'minority music' which had an enthusiastic following. He did a programme with Fairport Convention then an episode about brass bands. The

production team went to New Brighton, which has a lovely park and bandstand, and did a programme with Besses o' th' Barn. As Taylor recalled: "Now, Besses o' th' Barn was a pretty good band in those days and there was the added convenience that it was just up the road from Granada. It's a small village, part of Greater Manchester.

"The other thing was the band had this incredible history, which I didn't know anything about at all until I met it. I knew a bit about brass bands, my grandma used to take me to the park to listen to them when I was a kid, and I like the sound. But I had no idea of the history so that was very interesting."

Soon afterwards, a series of takeovers began to take place. Granada took over Collins, the book publisher, followed by the music publishing firm Novello in London. "The main reason must have been that Novello owned the Elgar catalogue", said Taylor. "It had the rights to all Edward Elgar's music. But I suspect what Denis Forman didn't know was that, since 1880-something, it had been publishing brass band music. So the takeover happened."

Taylor then established that Bram Gay, who had played principal



Grimethorpe Colliery Band on stage at the *Granada Band of the Year* competition in 1981. The Yorkshire band enjoyed a fine record at the event.

cornet at Fodens Motor Works before going on to an orchestral career playing trumpet, was the brass band music adviser to Novello. “Bram was very interested and he wrote a letter to Denis Forman saying ‘You’ve taken over Novello. Why did you do it? What on earth are you supposed to do? Do you realise there is this fantastic brass band catalogue, and the brass bands are northern? Shouldn’t you be doing something about it?’ So, I get hauled into Denis’ office, and he showed me this letter and he said, ‘I think you should get together with this chap and do something.’ So I did.”

Taylor’s views on band contesting offer a fascinating perspective. He considered them to be like typewriter contests; every band plays the same piece and the band that makes the fewest mistakes wins. Indeed, he told Bram Gay: “There’s no way. That’s not television. Why don’t we get them to play a programme that will entertain a television audience?” Bram was taken aback, took it on board and said yes.

The next debate was over which bands should be involved so Bram sifted through past contest records and came up with a list of ten each of which would play for 30 minutes. It was to be called the *Granada Band of the Year Competition 1971* and Taylor commented, and one wonders with a hint of irony added, that it “would be held at Belle Vue, which is a traditional home for brass bands and elephants.”

Having decided on their list of invitees, Bram knew it wouldn’t be quite as simple as that. As he later told Taylor: “All the contest organisers hated it because there have always been too many contests and they didn’t want this one at all. The National didn’t like it and what influence they exerted at the time must have



The late Bram Gay played a key role in bringing the contest together.

been discouraging. Belle Vue didn’t care for it although they were getting the business – they didn’t actually like it that much at all.” All this came before engaging with the shortlist of proposed participants. Bram knew the bands would be reluctant. It was new and nobody had really seriously thought about an entertainment contest. The best bands were very reluctant, not least because they already had enough contesting at that level.

Bram next wanted to test how serious Granada’s board of directors really were about staging the event. He determined the costs would be so high that only a really interested top team would undertake the venture. They agreed to meet the biggest cost of all

as part of the prize, a TV appearance, and paid amateur players the Musicians' Union rate for the 'lap of honour' performance which would be broadcast in full. They also met all the other costs, with Belle Vue looking after the groundwork and in return pocketing the box office money. There was no possibility of Granada TV making any money from the venture.

With that commitment in his back pocket, all Bram had to do was convince the bands themselves and out went the invitations. "Some of them said they would come and came; some of them said they would come and didn't come," Gay later said. "We were very badly let down – without very good reason – by some very celebrated people. What I took a dim view of was bands which messed us about." The first withdrawal was GUS (Footwear) which, having won the Wills contest in the April and the World Championship in the October, decided to keep out of contests over the winter leading up to its tour of Canada the following spring. Then Black Dyke Mills, in the throes of a conductor change, was obliged to pull out.

It did, however, see bands appearing which may not otherwise have been there. "We invited Cory," said Bram. "The band didn't



hesitate. There were only three weeks left before the contest – Cory won it. That wasn't sheer genius on its part – the band had done something very similar a couple of weeks before in its region for Harlech Television and it knew what to do."

Bram despaired whether there would be an entry at all. "I knew it was going to work only when I came into the Belle Vue car park and saw all the buses there. Then I went into the hall and saw the crowds arriving so I knew something was going to happen that day." The final line-up on November 28, 1971 was Brighouse

and Rastrick (Walter Hargreaves), Carlton Main Frickley Colliery (Robert Oughton), City of Coventry (Albert Chappell), Cory (Major Arthur Kenney), Fairey (Kenneth Dennison), Grimethorpe Colliery (George Thompson), Ransome Hoffman Pollard Works (Denis Masters), Wingates Temperance (Dennis Smith) and Yorkshire Imperial Metals (Trevor Walsmsley). Morris Concert was listed in



Grimethorpe performing at *The Band of the Year* competition in 1985, when it tasted another victory.

the programme but didn't appear.

The television aspects were, of course, in the hands of Arthur Taylor, who explained how it went: "It was to be a local programme. So, there I am with the outside broadcast unit at Belle Vue – thank God for Eric Harrison, because he was the director and he did it all – but we looked through the programme. The band told us what the programme was going to be and gave us the music. We looked very carefully through the programme and decided which was the interesting piece of each band, made sure that we recorded that and we'd take a punt on which bands were going to come in the top three and record all of their programmes, hoping that we could stitch together an hour-long show which would be bits and pieces of eight bands and a full programme from the winning band, which we did."

'The list of winning bands suggests that only two really cracked the format – the ability to play a balanced, imaginative and entertaining programme'

Although Taylor was the producer, he spent the day adjudicating. The Belle Vue adjudicators were Eric Bravington and Alex Mortimer and the Novello adjudicators were John Lanchberry and Harold Nash. Taylor was on his own as the

Granada adjudicator and commenting on how he would approach it he explained in the programme: "It's very simple. I keep my eyes and ears open and try to think how I would react as a television viewer. I don't want the cloth cap image, just something interesting and entertaining."

It was a new method of adjudication as the three panels did not confer. The mandate of the Belle Vue Panel was technical excellence. The Novello Panel was charged with considering the musicianship and the aptitude of the music for its purpose. The purpose was defined as 'a programme for TV presentation at a peak period, taking into account the need to retain the audience while promoting the brass band as a medium not only of entertainment but of musical communication.' Taylor awarded points for visual effect, variety and interest of the music. Cory's victory was a godsend because he had produced a local programme for the north-west but suddenly Welsh TV wanted it as well. As Taylor said: "Once Welsh television wanted it, other companies did too so it gradually grew to be a proper network programme and that lasted until 1988, so 17 years or something."

The following year the event was held the day after the British Open then moved to May as part of the Belle Vue Spring Festival. Following the closure of Belle Vue in 1981 the event went to the Spectrum Arena near Warrington and when that closed the last contest was held in the Isle of Man in 1987, with only eight competitors. Ironically, for a TV competition the cameras weren't present in 1978 or 1979 because of Musicians' Union (MU) objections, a problem solved when players in the ten bands who were not MU members agreed to join in the event of winning.

The list of winning bands suggests that only two really cracked the format – the ability to play a balanced, imaginative and

Granada Band of the Year Winning Bands

- 1971 Cory (Major Arthur Kenney)
- 1972 Grimethorpe Colliery (Elgar Howarth)
- 1973 Grimethorpe Colliery (Elgar Howarth)
- 1974 Stanshawe (Walter Hargreaves)
- 1975 Brighouse and Rastrick (James Scott)
- 1976 Grimethorpe Colliery (Bryden Thompson)
- 1977 Grimethorpe Colliery (Elgar Howarth)
- 1978 Carlton Main Frickley Colliery (Denzil Stephens)
- 1979 Fairey (Walter Hargreaves)
- 1980 Fairey (Walter Hargreaves)
- 1981 Grimethorpe Colliery (Ray Farr)
- 1982 Desford Colliery (Howard Snell)
- 1983 Desford Colliery (Howard Snell)
- 1984 Desford Colliery (Howard Snell)
- 1985 Grimethorpe Colliery (David James)
- 1986 Desford Colliery Dowty (Howard Snell)
- 1987 Britannia Building Society Foden's (Howard Snell)



entertaining programme. Perhaps it is more accurate to say there were only two conductors who cracked it: Elgar Howarth and Howard Snell, as these men were instrumental in Grimethorpe Colliery's successes (six wins) and those of Desford Colliery (four wins – plus one with Britannia Building Society Foden's). In Grimethorpe's case Howarth didn't always conduct and indeed in 1985, nobody did until David James came on for the last four bars of the last piece of its winning programme. The following year, Steven Mead preceded his Desford colleagues, coming on stage alone and starting what turned out to be its winning programme with Irving Berlin's *Anything You Can (I Can Do Better)*. Both programmes can be found and enjoyed in grainy colour via a quick Google search.

Why did it end? A range of factors would have come into play. Nobody knows the listening figures but they would have been minuscule, not helped by the programme of TV highlights being shifted from 10.30pm to 11.30pm in the days before video recordings. And advertisers need audiences. Granada TV was pumping money in to make the event happen and the accountants would have been alive to that. Maybe, like so many things, it had its day and the world moves on. Perhaps it was simpler than that? Maybe Taylor knew all along that brass bands were simply not entertaining enough? The importance of Granada's decision to promote the contest should not be under-estimated, at least in terms of its value to brass bands which cannot seem to shift away from the gladiatorial element of music making. It may have prompted the BBC to launch *Best of Brass* on BBC 2 in the 1980s and it certainly generated a new competitive genre which exists to this day, most notably in Brass in Concert. Fifty years later, the concept of the entertainment contest, where marks are given for entertainment value, programme content and the standard of execution, remains; perhaps that is its greatest legacy.