

The Historical Formation of Brass Band Identity

Military influences in Post-Napoleonic Europe to independence in late-Victorian Britain

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Brass Bands - Who are *they*?

The peculiarities of brass band identity are often a great source of mirth to those interested in, but working outside of, the ‘movement’. The question of why bands present themselves the way they do is one asked by newcomers and old hands alike. The perceived public identity of the brass band lies somewhere between that of a Victorian para-military regiment, and a friendly society for light entertainers. The informed reader knows of course, that this does not define the boundaries of bands’ performance capabilities. However, the unshakeable spectre of the old-fashioned does, to a large degree, define *the way they seem*.

Some are troubled by this identity-perception, feeling it a perpetual thorn in the side of a grand quest for musical legitimacy. I contend that it is something to be admired, celebrated, and most crucially, *deeply understood*. I argue further, that the British Brass Band is an historically exceptional establishment, straddling the boundaries of musical, social, political and economic history in a way that few, if any institutions can.

So then, what are the origins of this *way of being*? Why, historically, have the bands of Britain and the commonwealth dressed, played, and promoted themselves the way they have?

I cannot provide conclusive answers to all these questions. However, I have set out to survey the development of brass band identity in the 19th Century, so that it may point readers, players, and audiences to a better understanding of *who they are*. In order to do this, I have necessarily limited the scope of this study to the parameters below. There are of course, many other means by which one may survey the history of the British Brass Band, and these will form the basis of subsequent investigations.

Musicological framework – identity

The Oxford dictionary defines identity as “The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is”. In considering brass bands, these characteristics may be musical or extra-musical in nature. Musical identity concerns factors such as repertoire, sound, and instrumentation. Extra-musical identity concerns the associated cultures, activities and attitudes which surround the activity of playing music in brass bands. Brass band identity has been shaped largely by extra-musical forces. Therefore, although musical identity is important, it is extra-musical identity to which I give greatest attention in my research.

Salvation Army brass bands, paramilitary bands and brass ensembles are not directly considered in my broader body of research. Though close relatives, they sit outside the ‘line-of-succession’ which runs from early 19th Century British military bands, to

the amateur civilian brass bands which populated Britain throughout the Victorian era.

The British Military, and the origins of Brass Band identity

The British military was linked inextricably with the rise of the brass band movement in early 19th century Britain. Though elements of a shared heritage between brass and military bands persisted beyond this time, several factors contributed to brass bands developing a significantly more independent identity between 1840 and 1890. Before 1840, the military made two principal contributions toward the development of brass band identity. The first was the endowment of an authoritative, recognisable aesthetic which lent legitimacy to the fledgling brass band movement. The second was in the provision of competent and disciplined musical leaders - men who through their example, shaped the norms which in turn defined brass band culture. From the mid 19th Century onward, a more distinctive brass band identity was forged by the confluence of class-defined workplaces and Victorian social idealism. Brass band identity then grew further independent with the emergence of competitive musical performance, a trend that intensified toward the end of the 19th Century. In the 1880's, brass band identity reached its fullest maturity with the rise of a niche brass band publishing industry.

Military Bands, the development of the 'box', and musical disciplinarianism

The first civilian brass bands in 19th century Britain deliberately appropriated an aesthetic which capitalised on the authority and legitimacy of the British military. This aesthetic identity manifested itself in the adoption of military uniforms, regimented playing formations, and a disciplinary culture fostered by military-trained leaders. As the most outwardly visible marker of band identity, military uniforms were adopted en-masse by early 19th century British brass bands. Some authors have argued that this was driven by base economic realities, as military uniforms were cheap and readily available. However, given the omnipresent legitimacy of military authority in post-Waterloo Britain, it is more likely that brass bands' adoption of military identity through uniform-wearing was deliberate and aspirational, not merely pragmatic.

Also almost certainly deliberate was brass bands' adoption of a boxed, inward-facing performance layout. Military bands pioneered boxed formations in the late 18th Century, in fulfilment of prescribed battle orders (*Figure 1*).

In the 19th Century, military bands continued to use the box-shape for concert performances (*Figure 2*). Though no drawings or photographs exist of the earliest civilian brass bands in performance, later photographs of bands performing at London's Crystal Palace (*Figure 3*) show the box-shape still in use. There is scant evidence to suggest that playing formations were normally arranged differently at any time during the 19th Century, although on small outdoor bandstands some flexing of lines would have been necessary. The regimentation of straight lines of players, with the bandmaster stationed at the centre as commander reinforced the adopted military identity of early civilian brass bands.

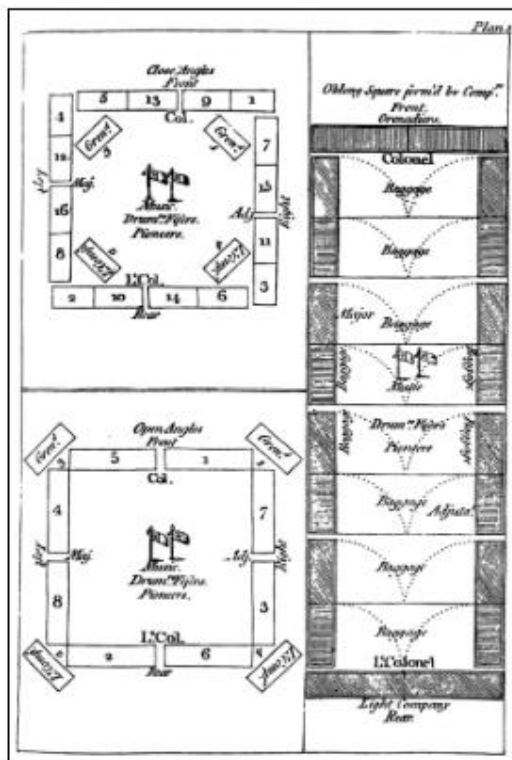


Figure 1. A diagram illustrating late 18th Century box defence formations. The “Music” is stationed in the middle. (Source: Simes, 1772)



Figure 2. At Woolwich in front of the Artillery Barracks. (Source: Scharf, 1825)



Figure 3. A Brass Band performing in box formation at London’s Crystal Palace contest in 1902. (Source: Holman, 2020)

Military uniforms and playing formations are further tangible characteristics of early brass band identity. They also provide evidence for the presence of a more abstract identity; that of disciplinarianism. Music’s role in disciplinary culture was incubated in Napoleonic Europe, with disciplinarianism eventually becoming an admired characteristic of early 19th Century British military officers. In the aftermath of the British victory at the battle of Waterloo, officers were demobbed en-masse, with scarcely enough provision to sustain themselves. As the military wound down after 1815, the skilled bandmasters amongst these ex-servicemen flooded the civilian musical marketplace. It follows that conductors of early 19th century British brass bands were predominantly military men with leadership qualities rooted in the disciplinary culture of the Napoleonic era. Men such as John Distin, who served in the Grenadier Guards Band at the time of Waterloo, acted as Bugler to King George IV, then left military service to work with civilian bands, typified this pattern of influence. As Trevor Herbert writes, “the debt of amateur brass bands to the military lies in the benefit they gained from the experience of former military men.” It is clear that the singular identity of the Bandmaster as disciplinarian musical leader contributed profoundly to the collective military identity of early British brass bands.

Reform, Rational Recreation, and the rise of the working-class band

Ironically, just as Waterloo pushed swathes of military men into the employ of brass bands, it was Peterloo that sowed the first seeds of a shift away from military identity, toward a distinctive working-class identity. The presence of civilian bands at the St Peter's field massacre in 1819, and at the head of subsequent reform movement parades first linked the brass band movement and working-class struggle together in the public imagination. As the century progressed however, brass bands evolved to be more than mere adornments to working-class advancement. They themselves became experiments in social improvement.

From the 1840's onwards, brass band identity was shaped by the emergent social theory of rational recreation. This reformist ideal behooved the more fortunate classes to encourage controlled, ordered, and morally sound leisure activity amongst workers. Many middle-class industrialists responded by sponsoring brass bands for their workers. Paternalist band owners aimed variously to curb anti-social behaviour, or more altruistically, to elevate workers' morality through artistic education. Deserved or not, both aims propagated an identity of bandsmen as unruly, irresponsible citizens. A good example of paternalist middle-class attitudes toward worker-musicians lies in the memoirs of prominent 19th Century cleric and author, the Reverend Hugh Reginald Haweis, who believed music would, "help the working class to save, it would keep them from drink, it would recreate them wholesomely, and teach them to govern their feelings – to use, and not invariably abuse, their emotions."

Like Haweis, brass band owners professed a desire to elevate workers' hearts and minds. However, there is no evidence that they desired to elevate workers' fundamental class status. Thus, the ultimate effect of the factory band was to further perpetuate the image of the brass band as a workers-only institution. Dave Russell has termed this the "Social stratification of musical activity." He further illustrates how middle-class industrialists managed and promoted brass bands, but viewed with disdain the idea that they themselves might join in the playing. Certainly, middle class objection to joining in musical communion with workers would not have been a contentious position in 19th century Britain. It does however highlight how the collision of Victorian ideals and societal realities crystalised the working-class exclusivity of brass band identity.

There are competing narratives which challenge brass bands' working-class identity. There is some evidence to suggest some middle-class professionals infiltrated the ranks of workers' bands. These documents however appear only after 1850, and appears limited to bands in West Yorkshire county. Whilst the apparent egalitarianism of these bands makes for a peculiarity worthy of further investigation, it is not a nationally significant trend. Some have also argued that bands were often staffed with professional players, employed to promote owners' commercial interests and win prize money at competitions. Whilst it is certainly true that some leading bands hired professionals to bolster competition ranks, analysis of contest entry records has shown this brand of musical mercenarism was typically limited to bandmaster or lead soloist roles. Rank and file players were rarely 'bought'. *Figure 4* shows how bands were required to certify their amateur status by listing player occupations on contest entry forms.

rivalries, and a nascent civic prestige amongst leading bandmen. From this civic identity sprang a newly emergent national identity, influenced by military roots, but distinctive of brass bands themselves. *The Morning Chronicle* of July 11, 1860 confirmed this phenomenon, commenting, “We are apt to associate something national with brass bands. There is a bold and war-like tone about them which stirs up the spirit of the multitude”. Though the heritage and aesthetics of military identity remained, it is clear that by 1860, brass bands were progressing toward a more public, independent identity.

Broad participation in contesting also produced a growing discourse surrounding brass bands, signalling a shift toward a more mature, self-defined identity. This eventually led to the founding of a series of brass band journals. Publications such as *Brass Band News* (1881-1958), and *The British Bandsman* (1887-) provoked discussion surrounding the contest activities of leading bands and conductors. This effected the emergence of a celebrity class within brass bands, providing players and audiences with their first internal figures of influence and aspiration. Amongst the most prominent members of this celebrity class were the bandmasters John Gladney, Alexander Owen, and Edwin Swift, referred to collectively by the new brass band press as “The Great Triumvirate”. Undoubtedly, the founding of brass band journals gave unprecedented visibility to the movement’s leaders, reinforcing the increasingly independent identity of the brass band in the late 19th Century.

Some authors maintain that the mission of the brass band press was to further legitimise the identity of brass bands, allowing them to more easily assimilate into broader musical society. Whilst this was undoubtedly the *intention* of the brass band press, I contend that paradoxically, reportage on figures like Gladney, Owen and Swift, and an editorial focus on contesting actually drove brass band identity further away from the musical mainstream.

My comparative survey of *Brass Band News*’ in its first and tenth years of publication shows that the journal which purported to elevate brass bands into the musical mainstream had devolved into a niche publication that few outside the movement would have engaged with. Issue 1, from 1881 (*Figure 5.*), shows a front page covered in high-minded prose, extolling the intrinsic values of artistic musical expression (Wright & Round, 1881, pp1). Issue 111, from 1890 (*Figure 6.*), is a decidedly more commercial publication, replete with industry advertisements and celebrity endorsements (Wright & Round, 1890, pp1). One can draw their own conclusions as to which type of publication might have better promoted the ‘higher’ ideals of brass band musicianship. Regardless of intention however, value judgements on the journal’s philosophical integrity are somewhat irrelevant. The pertinent reality was that by 1890, with their own celebrities, journalists, and advertising markets, brass bands were independent enough to sustain an ongoing industry discourse, generating an identity distinctly separate from the musical mainstream.



Figure 5. The front page of the founding edition of *Brass Band News* in 1881. The tone of the publication is both refined and aspirational. Much space has been devoted to philosophical arguments surrounding the magazine's founding, and the moral function of music in society. (Source: Wright & Round, 1881)



Figure 6. *Brass Band News*' 111th edition, published in 1890. A more commercial approach is evident. The headline article is actually a celebrity endorsement from the eminent conductor, John Gladney. (Source: Wright & Round, 1890)

Conclusions

Unquestionably, the military was the defining influence in the development of brass band identity in early 19th century Britain. In this essay I have argued that by adopting a military aesthetic, and by drawing on military musical leadership forged in the Napoleonic era, brass bands gained the musical and cultural discipline which defined their foundational identity. From 1840, subjected to the pressures of industrialised, class-stratified society, this identity began to morph. I have argued that regardless of intention, middle-class attempts to elevate workers' morality ultimately served to highlight the working-class exclusivity of brass band identity. As bandsmen discovered the personal esteem of contest success, so too did a stronger collective identity emerge. This has been supported in the evidence, with historical newspaper articles cloaking the movement in civic and national pride. Finally, I have illustrated how brass band identity came to maturity between the years 1880-1890, with the advent of brass band journals. These periodicals have provided two-fold support to the arguments within this essay. Firstly, they have evidenced the presence of a celebrity class as a benchmark of independent brass band identity. Secondly, their very existence highlights the fact that in the late 19th century, brass bands no longer needed to rely on an external set of societal values in shaping their collective identity. By 1890, brass bands had achieved a mature, self-sustaining identity.

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