

Tribute

PARAGON OF EXCELLENCE

Brass banding's luminary elder statesman, **Geoffrey Brand**, passed away peacefully on Sunday 5 February 2023 at the age of 96. **Dr. Robert Childs** pays tribute to the great man and his music

I've known Geoffrey Brand for most of my life, having first played under his expert baton as a member of the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain (NYBBGB) and the GUS Footwear Band in the 1970s. We became friends, served as councillors and trustees of the NYBBGB for many years, and often spoke about music and his biggest passion, family. He was a much-loved father, grandfather and great-grandfather, and he and his wife, Violet, had a wonderfully happy and long marriage before her death nearly three years ago. However, he will perhaps be remembered, by most, for his brilliant career as an inspirational conductor, particularly of brass and wind bands, and an imaginative musical entrepreneur.

Geoffrey Brand was born on 9 May 1926 into a strongly connected Salvation Army family in Gloucester. His father, Edward (Ted), was Secretary of Gloucester Salvation Army Band and played Eb Bass. His uncles also played in the band and, at the tender age of five, Geoffrey joined the Young Peoples' Band on Eb bass. After a short time, he was given a euphonium and although content to play euphonium, he always yearned to play the cornet, but had to wait until the outbreak of World War II before there were vacancies in the band. Aged 13, he was invited by Bandmaster Mr. Fred Cullip to swap to his first love – the cornet.

In 2016, on the occasion of his 90th birthday, I had the pleasure of interviewing Geoffrey for Brass Band World and, on that occasion, he told me that he'd had a 'guardian angel' looking after him on several occasions, guiding him through life, and he believed it was a guardian angel that sent five Salvation Army/RAF musicians to a small town (Little Rissington) near to where he lived! One of the five was legendary trumpeter 'Bill' William Overton, who went on to become principal trumpet of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and who made a huge impact on Geoffrey's life as his cornet teacher. After several years of tuition, Bill introduced Geoffrey to the trumpet and took him on several gigs. Just before Geoffrey's 18th Birthday and under Mr. Overton's influence, he entered the Walter Stokes Scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM). This period, however, coincided with his call-up for War service, which was temporally deferred to allow him to audition for the Scholarship. Geoffrey won the Scholarship, but his musical education was put on hold as he was posted to Norfolk to aid the War effort. Whilst in Norfolk, he

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frequently played cornet for Norwich Salvation Army Band and later played cornet in the Staff Band of the Royal Army based in Aldershot.

After the War ended in 1945, Geoffrey left the Army and took up his prestigious Scholarship at the RAM. By 1946, he was there studying trumpet with George Eskdale (principal trumpet, The London Symphony Orchestra). The 'Academy' was also the place where Geoffrey began formal conducting training. Upon completion of his studies, Geoffrey secured a position on trumpet at Sadler's Wells Opera Orchestra, a position he held for approximately three years before moving to a similar position at Covent Garden's Royal Opera House where he remained for a further three years, regularly freelancing as a trumpeter with most of the other professional London orchestras too. In the late 1940s, Geoffrey visited the house of Bill Overton, who in addition to playing principal trumpet in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, was also conducting Lewisham Band where Geoffrey eventually became Deputy Bandmaster. During this visit, he met the love of his life and wife-to-be, Violet Boughton. She was from Canterbury and studying in London, but was also involved with Lewisham Band. In 1950, Geoffrey and Violet married and, shortly after, Geoffrey embarked on a three-month tour of America with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the request of one of the all-time great conductors, Sir Thomas Beecham. Together with the RPO, Geoffrey sailed across the Atlantic for five-and-a-half-days on the Queen Mary and gave concerts every day while in America.

After Geoffrey's time as a professional trumpet player, he joined the BBC's Light Music Department, which produced programmes like 'Friday Night is Music Night' with the BBC Concert Orchestra. At the time, Harry Mortimer was BBC Brass and Military Band Supervisor, responsible for all bands performing on the Radio; he and Geoffrey became very good friends and, when Harry retired from the post, Geoffrey assumed his responsibilities.

Working at the BBC created lots of fascinating links for Geoffrey. His first formal introduction to 'British Bandsman' magazine was supplying Eric Ball (then Editor) with brass band radio information. Eric Ball eventually invited Geoffrey to take-over the editorship of the newspaper, which he did from 1967-1975. Around the same time, he also took ownership of the brass band publisher, R. Smith & Co, and was quick to secure the services of an exciting young composing talent to write new works exclusively for his catalogue. That composer was Edward Gregson, who first met Geoffrey in 1966 following a performance of his *Concertante for Piano and Band* in London and paid tribute: "I shall forever be grateful to Geoffrey Brand for the faith he showed in me as a young 'upcoming' composer, and for the many commissions, performances and recordings he initiated. He will be greatly missed."

It was during his BBC days that Geoffrey also met Dennis Wright (Dr. Denis), with whom he became close friends. Dr. Denis eventually invited Geoffrey to take over leadership of the NYBBGB. It was also his involvement with BBC Broadcasting that led him to meet Roy Newsome and Black Dyke Band, and in 1967, after a radio broadcast, Roy invited Geoffrey to become the band's Professional Conductor. I remember going to the Royal Albert Hall with my dad, John Childs, to listen to the National Brass Band Championship Final that



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year; I was only ten years old, but I remember Black Dyke and Geoffrey Brand's performance of Eric Ball's *Journey into Freedom*... it was so special... so emotional! He won the contest at his first attempt with Black Dyke!

What an impact Geoffrey Brand had on the brass band movement. He went on to conduct many bands after that, including most notably Brighouse and Rastrick, GUS Footwear, Grimethorpe Colliery and Scottish CWS Glasgow. However, the contesting band he will always be synonymous with is John Foster and Son, Black Dyke Mills Band, which he conducted through one of its most successful periods at the time, winning the British Open in 1968, amassing a handful of podium finishes, winning the World Championship in 1970, which he followed with a 'rare double' win at both the 'Open' and the 'National' in 1972. During this period, David Hirst was soprano cornet with Black Dyke and remembers Geoffrey Brand as: "... one of the most inspirational people I have ever had the pleasure of playing under. He had the ability to bring the music to life in an extraordinary way."

Away from contesting, Geoffrey loved his time with the NYBBGB – often joking that it kept him young. As players, we loved him too. He introduced us to modern music, orchestral conductors, tours abroad and, most importantly, a new approach to making music. His approach wasn't about playing louder or softer, slower or faster, it was much more about a narrative. He'd ask us to play *staccato* quavers like raindrops hitting a tin roof, or the climax of a phrase like reaching the top of a mountain. Very often he'd ask someone a question: "What does *scherzando* mean?" Before the player could answer, Mr. Brand would say: "Don't tell me, show me." He was fresh and inspirational, and through his time with the NYBBGB and the National Youth Brass Band of Scotland, he developed so many young musical minds. He would never start a piece of music without telling us about the composer and the context of the music.

During the 1980s, Geoffrey developed the wind band catalogue of his publishing company, R. Smith & Co., and part of that development was forming The City of London Wind Ensemble – a group of professional musicians dedicated to promoting that genre of music. During this time, he also wrote books and toured the World lecturing on all aspects of music.

Eventually, Geoffrey sold R. Smith & Co. to what is now SATCOL, but continued developing a wind band catalogue under the new name of G and M Brand. There is no doubt that Geoffrey Brand led a very active life and achieved more than most. However, it is the positive impact he had on so many others, for which he will be remembered by the brass band fraternity as a paragon of excellence. RIP Mr. Brand. ■

ROLL OF HONOUR Geoffrey Brand's victories

**1967 North of England
Regional Championships**
Crook Hall Bradley
Festival Music – Eric Ball

**1967 National Championships
of Great Britain**
Black Dyke Mills
Journey into Freedom – Eric Ball

1968 British Open Championship
Black Dyke Mills
John O'Gaunt – Gilbert Vinter

1970 World Championship
Black Dyke Mills
Benvenuto Cellini
– Berlioz, arr. Wright

1972 British Open Championship
Black Dyke Mills
Sovereign Heritage
– Beaver, arr. Wright

**1972 National Championships
of Great Britain**
Black Dyke Mills
A Kensington Concerto – Eric Ball

**1978 Midlands Regional Championships
GUS**
The Belmont Variations
– Bliss, arr. Wright

1978 British Open Championship
Brighouse and Rastrick
Benvenuto Cellini
– Berlioz, arr. Wright

1979 Yorkshire Regional Championships
Brighouse and Rastrick
Variations for Brass Band
– Ralph Vaughan Williams

**1981 National Mineworkers
Championships**
Carlton Main Frickley Colliery
An Epic Symphony – Percy Fletcher

**1982 Yorkshire
Regional Championships**
Carlton Main Frickley Colliery
Essay – Edward Gregson

1984 British Open Championship
Grimethorpe Colliery Band
Comedy Overture – John Ireland



Geoffrey Brand at the Royal Albert Hall winning the 1972 National title on Eric Ball's *A Kensington Concerto*



Paul McCartney producing the Lennon-McCartney *Thingummybob* recording with Black Dyke, conducted by Geoffrey for the Beatles' first Apple label single with *Yellow Submarine* on the B side, released in August 1968



Conducting the City of London Wind Ensemble



As Professional Conductor with Black Dyke Mills Band, posed with resident conductor, Dr. Roy Newsome, for the 'Double Champions' album photo to mark the band's 1972 British Open and 'National' wins



Geoffrey and his son, Michael