

# The History of Brass Bands

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Brass banding is a truly British phenomena which is has it's roots in the working class, something which many forms of music are without. It is unique in it's principally amateur status and remains a home for amateur music makers the length and breadth of the country.

## **Origins of the brass band movement**

The brass band movement has it roots in the industrial revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century. Brass bands flourished in any town of city where there was organised industry, and not just in the North of England as is commonly believed. The bands usually formed away from the big conurbations at the heart of many industrial cities but tended towards the surrounding villages. In these villages there was less in the way of entertainment than in the cities. Therefore a small, close knit community of about a thousand could easily form a large band.

But firstly, why brass bands? The first bands that came into existence around 1815, and were principally brass and wind bands, more akin to our modern day military bands. The most important development for all brass bands was the invention of the valve for brass instruments in 1815. Once applied to the cornet, it enabled the brass to have what would become a leading melody instrument in the ensemble. Second in importance was the invention of the saxhorn family by the renowned instrument maker, Adolphe Sax, in the 1840's. The saxhorn family gave the brass a complete set of instruments from the highest treble to the deepest bass. An instrument that satisfyingly supplied the bass to the ensemble was always a problem, the ophicleide was too weak and hadn't the deep lower notes needed. The primitive tubas used in orchestras at the time were still to weak to support an ensemble. The answer came with the lowest member of the saxhorn family, the BB flat bass, which is now so closely related to the tuba that had become synonymous with it. So with these two developments, the brass had a choir which was homogenous in tone, and so the wind gradually fell out of use in the band.

The music they played were almost exclusively arrangements of classical works of the day, usually opera or symphony related, and published accordingly. The publishing companies themselves were very successful at the height of the brass banding's popularity, although original compositions for band didn't come 'in vogue' till early in the twentieth century.

Bands were usually formed as the result of a large group of people having common interests and needs coming together. The obvious place is the work place. Bands were formed in two ways, either the bands which were self-initiated by the workers themselves or those which were given help by their employers. Those that started off without any help were usually supported by the whole community, by means of subscriptions from fellow work members and people from higher up the social ladder alike. The ones with company sponsorship, or rarely, private patronage were usually the more successful due to the higher money they would have. The more money a

band had, the more attractive it became to players, in return bands could 'poach' players from rival bands by promises of new instruments and the like.

Bandsmen were often trained and conducted by someone with a 'proper' musical backing. Many did it for a wage that could only be described as expenses, some even less. The conductor and bandmaster were responsible for the organisation of the band as a musical force. Only later did subsidiary positions such as secretary, treasurer and the like come into force. These positions would normally be filled by band members.

The bands attained some of their prestige from concerts and more importantly contests. The concerts were usually in public halls to local people. Only bands of some note or fame could fill concert venues in other towns. The contests, though, provided a great avenue for the players to compete against bands not only in their town or city, but nation-wide. Around the turn of the century contests would have audiences of seventy to eighty thousand people in venues such as Belle Vue, Manchester. The contest material would be either own choice or a set piece. They would usually be selections of composers famous works, overtures or opera compilations. In this way, bands of all standards had something to aim for, whether it be to impress at local concert halls or national contests in front of mass audiences.

### **What was the attraction of brass bands to the working class?**

Organised music making of any kind may not be the most obvious activity for a group of workers, but it stems from the working classes at the time having very little distractions from their work. As whole communities would be employed and housed by the same employer, there were no rich cultural diversifications in their societies, the whole street would consist of the same families with the men doing the same jobs. Therefore to do something which was different was seen in good eyes. Some workers, especially those who had had musical parents or relations from the folk traditions of the eighteenth century helped to give brass bandsmen their principals as well as their hereditary talent. The being in a band gave it's members a sense of higher status in the community, more so if the band was a public subscription one. It also had obvious social consequences, so that the like-minded individuals at the band could socialise after rehearsals over a beverage at their favourite local public house. Some bands, more now than in the nineteenth century, actually rehearsed in cellars or spare rooms of public bars with a unwritten agreement that the members would become patrons of the bar. Also there is the factor that banding is thirsty work, something which many public houses capitalised on!

Bands often had a nucleus of one or two families in their ranks, something which had helped banding survive as long as it has. Children of members or band enthusiasts would have a cornet or a horn placed in their hands the same time they would have a pencil or a book. The child would often be encouraged to practice for long stretches by their parents or other relations. Harry Mortimer, recognised as one of the finest cornet players and musicians of his day, is quoted as saying:

*"I don't think I was even asked if I wanted to learn - it was as much a matter of course as cleaning my teeth or polishing my boots."*

With myself a third generation product of a brass banding family, I know how Harry Mortimer feels. As soon as the young fledgling bandsman could hold a cornet or horn and knew his fingerings, he was invited to the band, usually on third cornet or second horn. The bands were structured so that players could see the seats they would occupy when they improved. The usual method was working up the ranks for a cornet or horn player. If a player failed on these two instruments, then they were usually introduced to the lower members of the band until their ideal instrument was found. I myself am a product of such a system. Some bands had junior or 'B' bands which help to maintain the flow of talent into their ranks when players departed.

Another plus in favour of the creation of brass bands, and any music groups for that matter, was the fact that in small villages the nearest theatre, saloon or music halls may have been a lengthy walk away. Instead they could go to a band, make music for two hours and then share a drink with their fellow musicians afterwards. Not only better for the soul, but better for their wallets one would imagine, too. One other point of note is that the membership of brass bands were made up of almost entirely men. To get away from the wife and children of a night may have been more an inspiration than playing the greatest works of Rossini.

### **How did the bands survive?**

Bands had two sources of income; the first was from performances and contests; the second from sponsorship and subscriptions. The money from performances naturally depended on the quality of the band and the prestige of the employment they attained. The more prestigious bands could fill the local halls and theatres for whatever fee they could command. A good secretary could get reasonable work for any band, especially those jobs where the band are there to provide background music such as fairs and carnivals. As no member of the band got paid, and only the conductor and guest players got paid, the expenses of the band could be capped easily.

Money and instruments could also be gained from contests. Apart from the considerable prestige associated with the band playing at the big contests in front of the large audiences, the money to be won was quite considerable. The main prizes were between seventy-five and a hundred pounds for the winners of the top section competitions, a good pay out at the turn of the century. Apart from the main prizes there were subsidiary awards made to best soloists, best euphonium, best horn section and other divisions which may have been cash, but could also have been instruments donated by an instrument making company supporting the event. In any case, a good contesting band found a rich harvest at contest time.

When a band was sponsored by its work place as in the colliery bands and the mill bands, the band would adopt the name of the company that was sponsoring it. Some employers realised that it would be a good thing if some of its members were involved in such an activity after work. They realised that if they were playing with the band, then they wouldn't be in the public bars drinking and rendering themselves ineffective for work the next day. Nearly all of the employers treated the bands well, supplying instruments, music, conductors, trainers, and a decent bank balance. They also took pride in discussing their musical activities when discussing business with fellow entrepreneurs in meetings. A lot can be read into a band's history by its name; the band's which lost their backing either through sponsorship or subscription

usually adopted the term 'prize band' or 'silver band', the reasons for using these particular terms are unknown.

### **What and when did the band play?**

Performances came in various forms. The first were those where the band is employed to provide background music and a secondary attraction at high profile events such as local fairs and garden parties. These jobs would pay quite well, payment usually coming from whoever was running the event. The event would always try to get the most local band to that event, this was strictly adhered to if the patron of the event was also a financial supporter of the band. The second performance jobs were the park jobs. The bands would play in bandstands at local parks where the public could listen to them at their leisure. They would gain payment either through the park owner employing them over a season for a number of public performances for a set fee, or from collections at the venue itself from the members of the public listening. These two traditions still exist today, despite the inclement weather so typical of a British summer. The third performance was the concert, where people would pay an entrance fee to a music hall or theatre to hear the bands play. The programmes would invariably consist of music from popular light classical works from the symphonic and operatic repertoire. A typical concert, this from a Black Dyke Mills Band concert on 26 June, 1911, shows the usual material performed at such concerts:

(Open with National Anthem : God Save the King.)  
March Pomp and Circumstance Elgar (arr. Rimmer?)  
Selection Gems of Schubert Arr. Rimmer  
Largo New World Symphony Dvorak arr. (Jimmy) Nicholl  
Overture Magic Flute Mozart arr. (Jimmy) Nicholl  
Fugue in G minor J.S. Bach arr. (Jimmy) Nicholl  
Tone Poem Finlandia Sibelius (arr.?)  
Selection L'Africaine Meyerberr (arr.?)  
Scotch Patrol Jamie Dacre (arr.?)  
Fantasia Rossini's Works Arr. Round

With the improving standard and number of brass bands, they needed music to play and perform. Often, the bandmaster would arrange specific pieces which the conductor would suggest, but most pieces were bought from specialist publishers such as Wright & Round. These publishing companies would have arrangers on their payroll, ready to arrange any popular classical works that came into the orchestral genre, like the Wagner example I mentioned earlier. At the height of the brass band's popularity at the turn of the century, the publishing companies involved in brass bands were large, profitable firms. Not only did the arrangers produce single works for tender, but they also produced whole volumes of works, usually a specific genre such as marches or waltzes, or whole concert programmes selected by the publishers. These books were affectionately known as 'Band Books'. These were attractive to the bandsmen of the time because of the price of delivery on single pieces was so high.

The main change to the banding repertoire came in 1913. A young composer, Percy Fletcher, was commissioned to write a piece for the forthcoming Crystal Palace contest. That piece, 'Labour and Love' broke the mould of brass band compositions as it was the first that the composer intended to be seen as a serious art work. The

piece was such an outstanding work that it reshaped the ideology of the brass band canon. It encouraged the performance and writing of more original pieces to increase the brass band's musical and artist standing. Various other composers have made a good living and achieved artistic recognition as brass band composers; Eric Ball being arguably the most famous with his genre-defining 'Resurgam' tone poem for brass band. Edward Elgar and Gustav Holst have also written pieces specifically for bands.