

Exploring Samoan Brass Bands: Notes on their Development and Performance Practices after Independence

Sala Seutatia Telesia Mata'utia Pene Solomona & Dan Bendrups

Abstract

This article seeks to expand global knowledge of brass bands by providing an overview of brass band performance in contemporary Samoa. It aims to consider the place of brass bands within the broader scope of Samoan music culture. While brass bands may be seen as an extraneous, colonial format for music making, this article demonstrates that they have historically appeared in contexts that are considered to be traditional and important to Samoan culture, and that they have musical and social characteristics that reflect a Samoan "way of knowing." It presents tacit knowledge gleaned from personal "insider" experience as well as "outsider" participant-observation, including many details of cultural practice that are otherwise absent from scholarly literature.

Introduction

European brass bands have a strong presence in many colonized, settler colonial and post-colonial societies. Arising in tandem with nineteenth-century Euro-American imperialism and missionary efforts, the brass band was, in its hey day, an unrivalled source of sound, symbolic power and public entertainment that was enthusiastically adopted around the world. While the popularity of the brass band format has waxed and waned, contemporary studies point to its endurance and transformation in music cultures from Africa (e.g. Boonzajer Flaes 2000) to India (e.g. Booth 2005) and beyond. In many of these contexts, brass bands have been absorbed into other extant musical practices, and/or invested with new local meaning.

Apart from one excellent recent scholarly compilation (Reily & Brucher 2013) and other occasional case study projects (e.g. DeCoste 2017, Hebert 2008), these diverse and often vibrant musical cultures are insufficiently documented in ethnomusicological literature. Reasons for this include the overtly imperialist characteris-

tics of the brass band format (instrumentation, uniforms, etc.), the social positioning of bands (as an amateur or, conversely, as a military ensemble), or simply because other musical subjects have been of greater or more urgent interest to scholarship (Brucher & Reily 2013:2). However, in this article we demonstrate that globalized brass band cultures can reveal new insight into a diverse range of music cultures, and that brass bands can, for that matter, take on new life as indigenized components of post-colonial societies.

The purpose of this article is to expand the global scope of brass band research by offering new insight into the nature of the brass band in one little-documented cultural context: the Pacific island nation of Samoa. While infrequently mentioned in academic sources, brass bands have had a presence in Samoa for over a century. In his seminal ethnography of Samoan music, Richard Moyle (1988; see also 1974) described brass bands as an important part of Samoan music, though without much further elaboration. Mervyn McLean (1999:156) provided a historical glimpse of early Samoan brass band culture, depicting a brass band conducted by one Mr. Busch giving weekly concerts in Apia under German colonial rule. Peter Hempenstall (1978) provided a broader elaboration on Samoa under German administration, during which time a vogue for brass bands (and German brass instruments) was apparent. Further references are rare. Samoan interest in brass bands waned after the World-War-I accession of Samoa to New Zealand administration. However, through the mid-twentieth century, brass band instruments were used sporadically in missionary activities, with bands set up as an activity alongside participation in church choirs. Many Samoans' first encounter with a brass instrument would have been through their church activities.

In contrast to the academic literature, public and archival records of performances by Samoan brass bands in Samoa and overseas abound, but to date there has been little written about the characteristics of Samoan brass bands, or how their presence in Samoa was sustained after independence. This gap can be contrasted with the lived experience of contemporary Samoan musicians who have grown up listening to village and church bands, participating in local and national brass band competitions, and even extending their participation to brass band contexts in New Zealand, the main destination for the Samoan diaspora. It is this tacit knowledge that this article seeks to convey, with a focus on band development and performance practice.

This article is not intended as an exhaustive depiction of every element of Samoan brass band music, but rather an ethnographic overview of the Samoan brass band's constituent elements. As a preliminary account, it is deliberately descriptive and non-analytical. It does not seek to compare Samoan brass bands with other colonial or post-colonial brass band cultures, but rather to invite the reader into a domain of tacit knowledge, as experienced through both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. Most of the information presented in this account draws from Tia Solomona's personal knowledge and involvement in Samoan brass bands over many decades, as well as interviews with and observations of Samoan brass band performers. Solomona was raised in a family of musicians and her grandfather, Mata'utia Pene Solomona-

na was an influential figure in Samoan music. In her youth, Solomona accompanied her grandfather Pene on many of his trips to teach choirs and bands around Samoa in the 1960s and '70s. Over time, she became a more active participant in these efforts, eventually developing her own musical expertise, studying overseas, and ultimately leading to a position teaching music education at the National University of Samoa.

Additional observations on Samoan brass band culture have been provided by Dan Bendrups, an Australian trombonist and ethnomusicologist who has been active in brass bands in Australia and New Zealand, and who has written extensively on the music cultures of the contemporary Pacific. Bendrups is, however, not an expert on matters of Samoan music, and his contribution is closely entwined with and informed by that of Solomona. The groundwork for this article commenced in 2007 and 2008 during Solomona's tenure as a student of music at Otago University, working under Bendrups' supervision. Additional participant-observation fieldwork took place in 2009, with Bendrups at that time offering a series of brass band workshops in Samoa. This was followed by further interactions between Solomona and Bendrups over the intervening years, ultimately resulting the account presented here.

Solomona's capacity to describe and engage with Samoan brass bands reflects an accumulation of personal, empirical cultural knowledge, as Cheiner (2002) once described in her useful exposition on what she calls "insider ethnomusicology." Cheiner used the terms "native researcher" and "insider ethnomusicologist" to refer to researchers who are experienced musicians from within the tradition they turn to study (2002:457). For Solomona and for Bendrups, this also meant drawing on certain principles of research engagement that reflect the Pacific context. This included an interview process based on the *talanoa* research method described by Vaioleti (2003). Setsuo Otsuka also depicts *talanoa*, originally a Fijian word, as a culturally appropriate method for research in the Pacific, stating:

Tala literally means to inform, tell, relate, command, ask and apply. *Noa* literally means any kind, ordinary, nothing-in-particular, purely imaginary. Hence, *talanoa* literally means a face-to-face conversation whether it is formal or informal. It is commonly practised by the Pacific Islanders (...) While *talanoa* is about chatting, it involves a deep, interpersonal relationship, the kind of relationship on the basis of which most Pacific activities are carried out. In *talanoa* research, researchers and participants share each other's time, interest, and information, but also emotions of both parties. In fact, *tala* holistically intermingles researchers' and participants' emotions, knowledge, experiences, and spirits. Hence, *talanoa* research is collaborative, and removes the distance between researchers and participants, and provides respondents with a human face they can relate to since *talanoa* is all about "sharing," based on face-to-face verbal interactions between researchers and participants. (2005:3–4)

Drawing on these processes of *talanoa*, participant-observation, and personal recollection, we now present an account that portrays the manner in which brass bands came to be developed in post-independence Samoa, and which conveys an understanding of the social processes and understandings that support brass band activities in Samoa through to the present. Firstly, we describe the activities of key individuals involved in setting up new brass bands in the 1960s and '70s, and the

manner of and motivations for this work. We then explore the taxonomies and other social and musical elements associated with Samoan brass bands, providing a basis for future comparison with other brass band cultures. In conclusion, we offer our own thoughts on the place of the brass band within the broad scope of contemporary Samoan music.

Part 1: The Post-Independence Development of Brass Bands

As related by Hempenstall (1978), brass bands were a feature of German colonial rule in Samoa. After World War II, under New Zealand administration, this influence receded. However, a revival of interest in brass bands occurred after Samoan independence in 1962, largely due to the influence and advocacy of key individuals. One of these, Solomona's grandfather Pene, was well known throughout Samoa for his musical expertise, especially his contributions to religious music, which included dozens of hymns and a Samoan translation of the Latin Mass. An active, self-taught proponent, teacher, conductor and arranger of brass band music, he was invited to establish bands in villages throughout the 1960s and '70s, including at Samauga (in 1962), Fatausi (in 1973) and later Lalovaea (in 1975).

Each of these initiatives involved substantial investment of time and resources from the village community, and each was enacted through traditional cultural and ceremonial processes. For example, Pene's initial invitation to Samauga was conveyed by a delegation of several *matai* (chiefs), as well as young men and women who were selected by their community to travel to Apia to specially and personally approach him. To further support the work of the delegation, the village families were asked to contribute food and fine mats to be presented as tribute. Inter-island traveling in the 1960s was difficult, with only two kerosene-powered boats available, and even transportation from the wharf to the village required scarce and specially arranged transport. Negotiations with Pene were conducted in a formal Samoan manner, with the delegation spending the night at his house to negotiate the terms of his assistance, and then bringing him home with them the following day. The training of the band was undertaken within the village in one of the High Chief's *fale* (a house intended for multi-purpose use by the *matai* and the community, as can be found in all Samoan villages). On this and other occasions, Pene would spend at least a week intensively training the band as well as identifying and empowering potential local leaders to continue his work, before returning to his home.

Another notable contributor to the post-independence revival of brass bands was A'eau Semi Epati, who established a band in his village, Saleimoa, in 1974. Epati's father had been the village's church choir conductor, and was influential in his education, as he relates:

My father taught me how to read music. He had taught himself, so he thought there was no reason why his children can't learn the same way! He was the *faipese* (leader) of the Saleimoa church choir. One day he fired his organist. So the next day he got

his children together and proceeded to teach us music so that one of us can become the organist. Two weeks later, I became the organist and my two brothers Satini and Sani played trumpet. I was about 11 or 12 years old! From then on I was his organist everywhere he went in Samoa and Tutuila teaching choirs. (Personal communication with Solomona, 12 June 2007)

Epati gained a scholarship to study in New Zealand in 1966 and attended the Waitaki High School, where he developed his musical knowledge by joining the high school brass band. When he later commenced his studies in Law at Otago University, Epati continued his interest in music, joining a Samoan dance band as an organist.

The impetus for the creation of the Saleimoa brass band was a competition held in honour of the 1974 Independence Celebrations. The community wanted to participate, and so they asked Epati and his father, as known musical experts, to take charge of this. Epati wrote to his former brass band colleagues in Dunedin to ask for help, and they donated instruments and music. The band competed at the 1974 Independence Celebrations Band Competition and won second place. Later that year, they performed for the King of Tonga when he visited Samoa.

In addition to village-based, community-driven brass bands, both Samoa and American Samoa established brass band contingents within their police forces in the 1970s. In both cases Pene and his son Vui Solomona were called upon to provide support. In Fagatogo (American Samoa) Pene acted as the band's conductor for its first two years. The then Governor of American Samoa, Fuimaono Asuemu, had himself been an enthusiastic brass band member in his home village, and he authorized salaries for the police band members, making participation very popular. At its inception, the band had around 40 members.

Meanwhile, in Apia (independent Samoa), the Royal Samoa Police Band was assembled with instruments donated by local businesses, as well as a substantial donation from the German government. In 1987, the band toured to New Zealand, securing yet further donations of instruments and sheet music, and setting up opportunities for future musical exchanges between the two nations' police forces. As a result of these efforts, most of the regular Samoan Police Band members have advanced musical training, and some have gone on to study music overseas. This band maintains a strong presence in contemporary Apia through a schedule of formal duties. At the time of writing, they still conduct formal parades every weekday morning (at 8.50 am) to raise the Samoan flag and play the national anthem out the front of the Samoan Government Building. They are also involved in commemorative events like Flag Day celebrations, ANZAC day celebrations, and other government and public functions.

All of these examples suggest that, post-independence, brass bands were regarded with enduring respect and goodwill by Samoans. The creation of the Police Band suggests a degree of continuity with past uses of brass bands in formal events, and the creation of numerous village bands indicates a willingness by many Samoan communities to imbue brass band music with local meaning and identity, or, con-

versely, to employ the brass band as a vehicle for the expression of this identity. In the section that follows, we now turn our attention to other elements of Samoan brass band practice that suggest further connections to identity and culture.

Part 2: Samoan Brass Band Characteristics and Practices

Samoan brass bands were initially modelled on international examples in terms of instrumentation, performance repertoire and function, but they also developed cultural practices and processes that are unique to the Samoan context. In the section that follows, which draws largely on Solomon's insider knowledge of Samoan brass band performance and participation, we aim to reveal those aspects of Samoan brass band culture that reflect the uniqueness of their Samoan context. Our discussion focuses on four key topics: instrumentation, participation, repertoire, and performance contexts. Much of this information is common knowledge for brass band participants in Samoa, however it is (to our knowledge) absent from international scholarly literature.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation of brass bands in Samoa tends to vary, depending on the interests of players and the availability of particular instruments. Of the bands that were active well into the second half of the twentieth century, only the Sala'ilua band had exclusively "brass band" instruments. Other bands extended their instrumentation to include whatever was available, including trumpets, clarinets and other woodwind instruments. Maintaining a full cohort of players is a challenge, and in Samoan bands it is common for players to swap around to different instruments, depending on the band's needs. Instruments also have a perceived hierarchy, with the lead trumpet/cornet position seen as being the most important and most valued. Proficient players will often aim for this role, or it may be that individuals with high social or ceremonial status claim the lead trumpet or cornet role for themselves as a band-based reflection of their social rank.

Throughout their history, Samoan brass bands have sourced instruments from abroad. Under German colonial rule, instruments were procured from German manufacturers, and this continued well into the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, in part due to increasing brass band interactions between Samoa, New Zealand and Australia, Samoan brass bands have been more actively obtaining instruments through relationships with brass band community members in Australia and New Zealand. Even at the time of writing, brass bands in New Zealand are periodically approached to contribute instruments or other items to be donated to bands in Samoa.

Due to the cost and difficulty of transporting large percussion instruments, there are not many bands that have a full compliment of standard brass band percussion.

Xylophones, marimbas, side drums, drum kits, bass drums and tympani are all known in Samoa, but only the brass band connected to the Mormon congregation of Upolu is known to have had a full complement of percussion instruments. Other bands tend to make do with just snare/side drum, and bass drum.

Since the 1970s, especially in competition contexts, Samoan bands have also incorporated the Samoan slit drum (*pate*) in their instrumentation from time to time, expanding the scope of the percussion section with a sonic signifier of local place and culture. More recently, conch shells have been added to the band instrumentation as a further connection to Pacific traditions. The introduction of conch shells to the band context is often associated with prominent public events, such as the annual Teuila festival. In some performances, rolled mats are also used as percussion instruments, resembling traditional performance genres.

Samoan names are used to describe the instruments that are used in brass bands. This practice has been informed by the long-standing connection between bands and choirs, as band instruments were named after (or include the names of) the choral voice that they represent: soprano (*usu*), alto (*oloto*), tenor (*ato*), and bass (*malu*). These names transfer to their corresponding brass instruments as follows (in Fig. 1):

Trumpet, cornet, flugel horn and bugle:	<i>pu-usu</i> (“ <i>pu</i> ” refers to a blown instrument)
Clarinet:	<i>kalalineta</i> or <i>fagufagu</i> (antiquated)
Saxophones:	<i>pu-pi’o</i> (“ <i>pi’o</i> ” means “crooked” or “bent”)
Tenor horn and French horn:	<i>pu-tata</i> (“ <i>tata</i> ” is an onomatopoeic reference to the sound of the accompanying lines often played by the horn)
Trombone:	<i>pu-toso</i> (“ <i>toso</i> ” means “pull”, which reflects the movement of the trombone slide)
Euphonium, basses:	<i>pu-malu</i>
All drums:	<i>tagi pa lau</i>
Cymbals:	<i>pati</i>

Fig. 1: Samoan names for brass band instruments.

Participation

A typical Samoan brass band might comprise up to ten trumpets/cornets, two tenor horns, one euphonium, one bass, up to four trombones, and one alto and one tenor saxophone. Some bands also have baritone saxophones. Bands often include a contingent of four or five drummers. This said, bands can often grow to include many more members in anticipation of a significant performance. Even at rehearsals, vil-

lage-based bands will often attract a wide audience, as their rehearsals take place in *fale* (open-sided village houses) that are open to the public.

There are various layers of participation in Samoan brass bands. At the village level, *matai* (chiefs) will usually take responsibility for administering their bands. It is important for *matai* to have this kind of a role in the overall management of the bands because they are both responsible for funds and for the ceremonial activities that are required when engaged in performances in other places. Every band appoints a Director (a prestigious position), who is expected to be knowledgeable in all of the band's instruments and able to lead the band. The age range of participants can be quite wide, as villages must often draw on any willing players to be able to fill their ranks.

The players are predominantly, though not exclusively, male; there is a perception that woodwind instruments are the most appropriate for women. A wider network of women support each band through traditional, formal women's committees, called *auaaluma*, who undertake village tasks at the direction of *matai*. Where the band is concerned, this may include fundraising, sewing uniforms, and other domestic tasks. These roles are particularly important when bands travel to participate in festivals and competitions, as the *auaaluma* may be called upon to cook and clean for the band while on tour.

Village bands are usually responsible for training their own members. In the 1960s and '70s it was common for well-known local bandleaders to be invited to a given village to oversee short periods of intensive training, as described earlier in this article. More recently, New Zealand or Australian brass band members with connections in Samoa have been invited to provide brass band workshops, sometimes in conjunction with officiating at brass band competitions. While band directors are assumed to possess the skills necessary to teach all instruments, it is also common for new members to learn directly from their peers.

When new members seek to join a brass band, they often do so after some time observing the band's activities and developing a spectator's knowledge of how the band works. This informal education is a very important part of the learning process for new musicians, as it ensures that they become accustomed to the protocols and methods of functioning of the band. Usually, new players will be invited to start as percussionists, and will continue in that role until they decide to take an interest in another instrument. Band directors often let performers decide what instrument they would like to play, and strongly encourage performers to learn a second or third instrument as well, in order to have the necessary flexibility to adjust the band's instrumentation should the need arise.

Another unique aspect of Samoan brass band culture is the practice of conducting "Samoan style." This refers to the long-established practices of Samoan choir conductors, who signal instructions to the choir through a broad range of elaborate body movements, hand signals and facial expressions. This tradition has been taken up by brass band directors (some of whom also conduct choirs), and flamboyant conducting has become a feature of brass band competitions, where the style of con-

ducting may be taken into account in the judging. A physically engaging conductor will often influence the audience's reception and enjoyment of the music as well.

Repertoire

Samoaan brass band repertoire reflects the contexts in which the bands have traditionally performed. Much like brass bands elsewhere in the world, their main repertoire falls into three categories: religious music, marches, and popular or dance music. However, printed music has historically been difficult to procure in Samoa, and for most of their history, band directors were tasked with writing out parts for the band by hand, sometimes working from church song books, while at other times working by ear. While few brass band players past or present ever receive a formal education in music, the ability to play from staff notation is highly respected.

The general term used for band repertoire is the Samoan word for song, *pese*, with different qualifiers for hymns (*pese lotu*), marches (*pese savali*) waltzes (*uosi*, as well as *pese siva telegese*, “slow dances;” *siva pipi'i*, “hugging dances”), medleys, or “selections” of popular songs (*su'ifefiloi*), and songs derived from other Samoan repertoire (*pese siva fa'a Samoa*). Traditionally, marches (*pese savali*) were used for marching as a community activity, formal occasions such as *ta'a lolo* (gift giving ceremony), and in national holiday celebrations. Some bands have also marched for weddings (for example, to escort the bride from her house to the church and back) and funerals (to lead the hearse from the house to the church and back). *Pese savali* are almost always in duple metre, and their tunes are often derived from or resemble marches that are already established in the international brass band repertoire.

Brass band waltzes became popular in the mid-twentieth century, appearing in celebrations such as weddings, balls, birthdays and other anniversaries, as well as for general village entertainment. While their function has been largely replaced by technology (sound recordings, or live performances by smaller amplified ensembles), bands will still be called upon from time to time to perform for a dance. The waltz repertoire contains established international tunes (such as the “Blue Danube”) alongside tunes derived from popular Samoan folk songs. They are generally performed in triple metre, with the melody carried by higher pitched instruments and all others sustaining the rhythmic accompaniment.

“Selections” are medleys of popular songs, and there are two main types: dance selections and hymn selections. The function of dance selections is purely entertainment, and like waltzes, there is now less call on contemporary bands to provide this entertainment than in the past. Historically, they included many Samoan tunes for dancing in their repertoire, usually high tempo, high-energy songs, with some band members singing as well as playing. In contrast, hymn selections were used in worship as preludes to hymns, at beginning and end of a service; and also during collection time (*faiga me*). These still feature prominently in massed bands formed at the annual *Lotu tu'ufa'atasi* (multi-church congregation) in Apia, where each de-

nomination provides hymns and instruments to be integrated with voices. This performance is referred to as *salamo* (large choral music with band instruments).

Performance contexts

In addition to the *ad hoc* performances that brass bands might provide for their village community, there are two major cultural events that are of significance to the history of brass bands in Samoa: Independence Day celebrations, and the Teuila festival. Previously, bands would also perform publicly for village-to-village fundraising, particularly on New Year's Day, but this no longer occurs.

Samoa became an independent nation state in 1962, and for the first decade or so of independence, brass bands were used for escorting a street procession to the flagpole, after which, they dispersed around Apia to provide their own performances as public entertainment. This was followed by a formal competition for brass bands. The formal street procession and public performances were discontinued in the 1970s, with these duties taken over by the Police Band. The brass band competition tradition endured for longer, and competitions may still be held from time to time where there are sufficient bands available to do so.

For the Independence Day celebrations, the band competition was based on marching prowess and performance flair. The victorious band was given the honour of raising the flag in the following year's celebrations, and to be the main band for government functions such as the independence ball. In 1962, the year of Samoa's independence, the Le Lepa brass band performed Samoa's new national anthem under the direction of its composer, Sauni Kuresa. In 1975, a standard "set piece," arranged by Ueta Solomona was selected for the competition, and the practice of having a set piece continued over two more decades. Judges for the band competitions were usually recognized musicians of high social rank, though many were not brass specialists.

Teuila (literally, ginger flower) is a cultural festival involving performances and traditional arts from Samoa. It was established 1992 by the then minister of tourism, based on the long-established model of the Fijian Hibiscus Festival, and intended as a means of attracting tourism to Samoa (for a broader discussion of Pacific cultural festivals see Bendrups 2008). Teuila originally included a "music extravaganza." Other events have been added over the years. Typically, the early format for Teuila commenced with a choir competition on Sunday to open the festival, then an opening ceremony on the Monday accompanied by cultural group performances and a choir. Following this, a range of competitions in traditional music (village by village), coconut palm climbing, traditional games, food making demonstrations, a "Miss Samoa" pageant, *fautasi* (longboat) race, and traditional dance competitions would occur. Teuila also carried on the tradition of Samoan brass band competitions that had previously accompanied Independence Day celebrations. In this context, bands were subject to a much more rigorous set of grading criteria, including assess-

ment of tone quality, balance, intonation, articulation, dynamics, music interpretation and style.

Conclusion

The inclusion of brass bands in national festivals, and the many decades of their existence within village contexts, has provided brass bands with a special place in Samoan public culture. While their popularity has waned in the twenty-first century, bands still perform for state functions and occasional competitions, and the Police Band maintains a public profile through their formal activities in Apia. While it is tempting to dismiss the past popularity of brass bands as simply a reflection of external cultural influences of the time, this would ignore the influence of other forces that perhaps help to explain brass bands' longevity and position in Samoan culture. Firstly, it is worth noting that the 1960s revival of brass bands was largely a grassroots process, where villages independently decided to establish bands to support village needs. Secondly, the structure of the band lent itself to be used to reflect the social hierarchies and traditional organizational structures (village committees, etc.) of Samoan village society. Thirdly, brass bands enabled broad participation from across village communities, giving a role to anyone who wanted one. Fourthly, bands became a vector for representations of collective identity and village pride, both through invitations to perform in other villages, and through the glory of participating in and even winning national competitions associated with independence.

These identity-marking forces persist in Samoan cultural memory wherever brass bands are heard. They are also carried by individual Samoans who have gone on to study or perform music overseas. This has especially been the case for Samoans living in or migrating to New Zealand (where a vibrant brass band culture exists), and the various members of the police and armed services who have undertaken secondments with New Zealand and Australian counterparts, where they have engaged with brass bands. While located beyond the scope of this study, another strong nexus for brass band performance exists between American Samoa and the mainland United States of America, which has its own vibrant tradition of marching bands. In light of these enduring connections, we consider it timely that the knowledge of Samoan brass band culture discussed in this article be brought into the public domain.

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