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The (Un)popular Brass: Evidence from Czechia, Switzerland, and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article examines the (un)popularity of brass bands in Zimbabwe, Switzerland, and Czechia from a comparative transnational perspective. Although shaped by distinct histories and cultural frameworks, brass bands in each country face declining participation and limited appeal among younger generations. In Zimbabwe, brass music is largely confined to military and

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church institutions and has failed to permeate the broader popular music scene. In Switzerland and Czechia, brass bands have shifted from once central cultural practices to niche roles, despite various modernization efforts. Drawing on interviews, survey data, and literature, this study identifies socio-cultural, institutional, and generational factors influencing the status of brass bands across diverse musical landscapes. It also questions the extent to which their participatory ethos aligns with evolving musical tastes. The article contributes to discussions on cultural sustainability, offering insight into the global challenges confronting traditional amateur music-making.

Keywords: brass bands, tradition, Czechia, Switzerland, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Brass band music exhibits significant regional differences in popularity, public engagement, and cultural positioning. These differences have been shaped by distinct historical, institutional, and societal factors. This article examines brass band traditions in Zimbabwe, Switzerland, and Czechia, three countries that, despite their contrasting contexts, face shared challenges in sustaining brass music's relevance in contemporary society. The selected countries have strongly contrasting socio-cultural contexts, as they comprise a postcolonial African state, a Western European nation with strong participatory brass music traditions, and a Central European country with a rich history of folk brass music that was distorted during a socialist dictatorship. In all three countries, brass bands operate in a relatively niche environment today, struggling to capture widespread attention, particularly among younger generations. Together, they provide complementary perspectives on how brass band traditions navigate diverse cultural, institutional, and societal contexts, and why they may now be deemed unpopular. In highlighting the interconnected challenges faced by brass bands on a global scale, this contrast emphasizes the role of cultural, social, and educational frameworks in shaping musical tastes and participation.

More specifically, this article explores the key barriers to the broader appeal of brass bands in Zimbabwe, Switzerland, and Czechia, asking how these bands can navigate generational and societal shifts to remain sustainable and culturally resilient. Taking a comparative transnational and transcultural perspective, it examines the factors shaping the (un)popularity of brass bands in contemporary Zimbabwean, Swiss, and Czech society. In this context, (un)popularity refers not only to declining membership, visibility, and active engagement with brass bands, but also to their incapacity to adapt to contemporary cultural and musical trends. This includes considering how many individuals actively participate as band members, listen to brass music, attend performances, or engage with the genre through other forms of

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participation, such as online platforms or community events. While participation rates provide quantitative insights, the qualitative dimension of public perception is equally crucial in understanding the broader appeal—or lack thereof—of brass bands within a given cultural context. Although social and musical life in Zimbabwe has evolved in a manner distinct from that in Central and Western Europe, a comparative transnational analysis of the reasons for the unpopularity of brass music allows the authors of this article to identify either the individual or intersecting reasons why brass music has not become part of, or has ceased to be part of, the popular music scene of each country.

This article also presents a historical overview, derived from the existing literature, demonstrating that the current status of brass bands is often linked to their historical associations with—depending on the country—the state, military, rural communities, certain social classes, and/or folk and folklore music, as well as their struggle to adapt to modern cultural contexts. The authors explore how the historical development, training structures, and organizational frameworks of brass bands have shaped their contemporary importance, perception, and (un)popularity within different societies. A defining characteristic of brass bands across different cultural contexts is their strong participatory ethos, which emphasizes collective music-making and community engagement. Rather than focusing on refined, presentational performances, brass bands often prioritize their social and communal functions. How this participatory nature influences their popularity, audience engagement, and ability to adapt to contemporary musical landscapes remains a key question in this study.

The research is structured around three distinct case studies, drawing on empirical data from interviews and media analysis and complemented by quantitative survey data and a comprehensive literature review. The three case studies were conducted independently, with each study employing its own focus and methodology. A joint comparison was developed at the request of the editors of this special issue. Thus, the individual case studies are not the result of a pre-planned comparison. However, the specific focus of the design of each case study, based on the local situation, makes it possible to better capture the distinctive cultural function of brass bands, rather than applying the same approach in different societies with different historical developments.

This article first examines Zimbabwe, followed by Switzerland, and concludes with an analysis of Czechia. Each country's section begins with an overview of the current status of brass bands, followed by a detailed case study and a brief conclusion. Finally, this article presents a comparative discussion that synthesizes the key findings across all three regions, leading to the authors' final conclusions.

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Brass Music in Zimbabwean Popular Music

The emergence of brass music and brass instruments in Zimbabwe—and across Africa more broadly—is closely linked to European colonization. European settlers arrived in Zimbabwe as early as 1890, led by Cecil John Rhodes and the British South Africa Company (BSAC), and established control over Mashonaland and, later, Matabeleland (Manyame and Muranda 2023: 28). Scholars agree that brass instruments were introduced primarily through colonial encounters, with missionaries and military forces playing a central role in disseminating them across the continent (Chikowero 2015; Turino 2016; Kaminski 2022: 401). As Dordzro (2020: 142) notes, colonial brass bands—both military- and mission-based—embodied nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial culture. He further argues that these bands not only served functional roles but also carried symbolic power, thereby reinforcing colonial authority and shaping the colonial image.

Within the context of this discussion on the (un)popularity of brass music and instruments in Zimbabwe, the researcher seeks to investigate the early political usage of brass music and instruments as tools meant to emphasize European colonists' notions of oppressiveness, authority, and discipline. Such appropriation took place on the basis of European cultural domination, to which Zimbabwean music styles were destabilized and suppressed (Chikowero 2008). Based on the strong colonial-political strategies of using brass music and instruments as the colonists entered Zimbabwe, it is the researcher's view that the resulting scenario was one in which brass music as a genre had little connection to the grassroots community. This study was necessitated mainly by the invisibility and absence of brass music as a genre in Zimbabwean popular music. Despite the presence and visibility of brass music in a variety of institutions, such as the Salvation Army, the Zion Christian Church, and military organizations, brass music remains largely unpopular within Zimbabwe. This study explores the underlying reasons for this lack of appeal and examines why brass music has yet to find a strong foothold in the country's contemporary music landscape.

Methodology

This research is based on personal experiences of playing brass instruments (trumpet and tuba) with the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), as well as primary and secondary data gathered through interviews, observations, discussions, and literature reviews. Based on these experiences, eight practising or former directors of music from military organizations were selected for in-depth interviews. Ten prominent Zimbabwean popular musicians were also recruited as interviewees. The researcher, who is a module leader for

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wind instruments at Midlands State University (MSU), also initiated some focus group discussions with 12 wind students drawn from two university campuses in Gweru and Harare. Additionally, questions such as, why brass music is failing to make an appeal in Zimbabwe popular music were posed on two WhatsApp groups: “All Zim Music” with 317 participants and “Africa Musical Arts Centre” with 59 participants. Three elders were interviewed to determine the ZCC’s ideology regarding the participation of females, as well as the use of brass instruments in the popular music arena and for monetary gains. Another five active female brass players from the Salvation Church and military brass bands were purposively selected and interviewed to obtain their perspectives on gender disparity in brass music performance. An ethnographic approach was favoured, in which the researcher became immersed in the activities of various brass band players from the Salvation Army, military organizations, and the ZCC. In 2024, as a participant observer, the researcher attended some scheduled Zimbabwe state functions (i.e., the Independence, Heroes, and Zimbabwe Defence Forces celebrations, as well as the ZCC Easter and Defe conferences). In line with the ethnographic qualitative research approach, the collected data were analysed thematically. According to their descriptive nature, the data were sorted and coded based on responses to the posed interview questions, as well as their foci, to facilitate thematic analysis.

The State of Affairs for Brass Music and Brass Instruments in Zimbabwe’s Popular Music

The purpose of this study was to determine the current position of brass music and instruments in Zimbabwean popular music, which has also been discussed in some instances within studies on the Zimbabwean music industry (Nyathi and Maguraushe 2023: 11; Mhiripiri 2010: 209). While the entrance of brass music and instruments into Zimbabwe has been much discussed, this study proceeds to provide evidence and findings from primary sources that point to the reasons for either the popularity or unpopularity of brass music and instruments in Zimbabwe. The findings are therefore organized and discussed with a focus on illuminating, where necessary, the impact of colonization, militarization, and the church ideologies on the current state of affairs of brass music and instruments in Zimbabwean popular music.

Popular music in Zimbabwe includes “all the music that is widely played on the radio and which has dominated the radio charts” (Chiweshe and Bhatasara 2013: 153). Maguraushe and Muranda (2013) have posited that “in the Zimbabwean urban context popular music business is hinged upon profit making” (36). In this regard, it could be argued that a music style or genre, such as brass, would have to have some appeal to the audience for it to gain

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popularity. In this study, popularity is regarded as wide appeal to the majority audience. The remarks by Chiweshe and Bhatasara above suggest that, besides the wide involvement of grassroots initiatives, both urban and rural listening and consumption of a given music style or media have a reciprocal influence on ensuring the popularity of a specific music genre like brass.

Colonization

Colonialism, as a political, economic, and social institution, brought forth challenges as well as opportunities for the diverse aspects of African development, which included cultural and musical performances (John 2014: 19). Regarding the specific effects of colonization, Freddy L. Changundega, one of the earliest Black music directors of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), who had taken over the position from the colonial administration, stated the following:

> Brass music and instruments came with the colonial rule. All the songs we were playing in military brass during the colonial administration were European songs. We were not allowed to play local music. It was only after independence when we started to play local music songs. (i/v, Beatrice, 8 December 2024)

According to Charles Meki—one of the more experienced bandmasters of the Salvation Army Corps who served in colonial times, as well as in the postcolonial period—brass music and instruments came to Zimbabwe with the colonists and missionaries, most of whom were from Britain (i/v, Gweru, 15 October 2024).

The perspectives above underline how the legacy of colonial-era brass practices has continued to influence the perception and performance of brass music in Zimbabwe today. Despite the fact that, during colonial times, the colonists directed the brass bands to play sheet music, Western hymns, and classical music, Zimbabwe had an abundance of opportunities after gaining her independence 45 years ago to initiate the playing of local Indigenous music tunes in this context. It is interesting to note that other cultures and nations that suffered similar colonial oppression of cultural practices such as brass music, including Ghana and South Africa (Dordzro 2020: 142), have since managed to establish community brass bands—which Zimbabwe to this day is still struggling to achieve. Apart from the colonial repertoire, *hosho*, *mbira* and *ngoma* instruments have yet to find a place in the ZRP music section more than 40 years after independence (Manyame and Muranda 2023: 30).

In relation to local brass research in Ghana, Dordzro (2020) speaks of the "localisation and indigenisation of the European classical music into a range of local popular cultural expressions as well as providing an account of

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amateur brass band music as observed in Ghana today" (2020: 143). Likewise, Waterman (1990) suggests that "one can view popular music as a means of making history—not only as a form of social action directed at realising a future but also as a medium for redefining a tradition" (369). When asked how countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa managed to establish brass community bands, Joseph Kunnuji, a Nigerian music lecturer and ethnomusicologist at Free State University in South Africa, as well as a trumpeter, composer, and popular music artist, had this to say: "You need to start it at community level, mainly by including short Indigenous tunes. Encourage the bands to play local Indigenous music styles at national events as well as during festivals, [and] I trust this will make a strong impact" (i/v, Free State, South Africa, 28 March 2025). The researcher is of the view that in this postcolonial period, Zimbabwe needs to reconsider brass colonial practices not as a setback or digression, but as a progression and a means of shaping the future for community development.

Militarization

In this section, the researcher outlines the influence of European military band strategies—referring to the manner and administrative ways in which the emerging bands emulated, assimilated, and adapted their formations, whether directly or indirectly—as a form of militarization. After Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980, the Black majority government inherited most of the systems of colonial governance in the political, economic, social, and military domains (Manyame and Muranda 2023: 30). Freddy, L. Changundega, the former music director of ZRP, and Walters Masona, the current music director of the Zimbabwe Prison Correctional Services (ZPCS), concur that during colonial rule, Zimbabwean military organizations were required to play from European music scores (i/v, Harare, 16 September 2024). In general, these bandsmen were expected to play only the given and prescribed music (Manyame and Muranda 2023: 32). The Rhodesian regimental band, now Zimbabwean, was actually an extension of the police band in England in terms of focus, repertoire, and administration. What this suggests is that the military bands were a form of "conduits" and platforms designed to instil British administration legacies (Manyame and Muranda 2023). In a similar vein, Nzewi (2024) has argued that the practice of playing written music is actually a Western tradition.

For the present study, the researcher engaged two WhatsApp groups—"All Zim Music" with 317 participants and "Africa Musical Arts Centre" with 59 participants—to gather their viewpoints on why brass is found to be unappealing in Zimbabwean popular music. A cross-section of responses was

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posted, and through a thematic analysis, three key ideas emerged. First, brass music is still perceived as mainly confined to parades, military funerals, and marching campaigns. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to suggest that for foreign (European) instruments, such as brass, to be familiarized within a host culture (the colonized)—in this case Zimbabwe—there is a need to consider the potential role of Indigenous skills in the playing and making of the music. Such African and Zimbabwean music-making skills include improvisation, spontaneity, and orality (Nzewi 2024). In another study, Brucher (2016) has spoken of the global brass band traditions that have survived beyond colonial encounters precisely because they have provided powerful articulations and experiences of community, often in the very places where these communities have been overlooked by the colonizers and composers. As the focus of this study is on the appeal of brass music in Zimbabwe, it appears that the limited incorporation of local music styles, such as *chimurenga*, *jiti*, *mbende*, *mhande*, and *dinhe*, into brass band repertoires may have contributed to its reduced popularity in broader Zimbabwean musical contexts.

Church

In this study, the three key Christian institutions referred to as "the church" are the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the ZCC. While the Roman Catholic Church played a crucial role, mainly during the colonization process, in introducing brass music performances at its mission stations, the Salvation and the ZCC are the two institutions that are currently very active and visible with respect to brass music performance in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The researcher is privileged to be a brass band member and senior leader in the ZCC, through which it was possible to observe an increased growth of brass music and instruments mainly confined within Zimbabwean church boundaries. It is the major purpose of this section to establish those reasons that have limited the growth of brass music only to the church and thus not within Zimbabwe popular music. On this issue, Bright Mutyandaedza, a Young People's Band leader with the Salvation Army, said the following:

> Brass music as a genre is conceived largely to include classical, rehearsed Western hymns and tunes that are performed within church context programmes. In Zimbabwe, popular music venues initially emerged as beerhalls, and this became a huge deterrent factor to many brass players especially from the church background. Maybe, only and until the bandsmen are perceived as any other musicians from the local community—we may begin to witness the gradual growth of brass music penetrating Zimbabwe popular music. (i/v, Harare, 18 February 2025)

These ideas suggest an urgent need to decolonize European music cultures and Indigenize them with African and Zimbabwean local music-making traditions,

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such as improvisation and spontaneity (Dordzro 2020: 143; Chipendo 2022: 322; Ekal, Wanyama and Mochere 2025: 14). This Indigenization and familiarization of European music styles and instruments, such as brass, can take place by engaging the community at the grassroots level, as well as the education system, so that they are empowered to utilize brass instruments in local music-making performances and for popular music purposes. In this regard, Joseph Makan'a, a bandmaster and teacher in the ZCC brass band structures, has advised the following:

> Brass music and instruments, especially in our church, are highly treated as sacred, holy, and we conceive them with very different conditions to the brass instruments that we may see in the popular music domain. As bandsmen in the ZCC, it is a requirement that before we get hold of our instruments, be it for rehearsals or church service performance, the routine is that one has to be showered with holy water. (i/v, Mbungo Estate in Masvingo, 22 March 2025)

Against the backdrop of these insiders' views, an argument can be made that the traditional performance of brass music in the Zimbabwean church context gives the impression that brass music and instruments are primarily for sacred and state ceremonies, with limited availability in public schools. A similar observation was emphasized in a focus group discussion initiated with 12 MSU students who specialized in different wind instruments. Ideas raised from the focus group discussions suggest that brass instruments need to be taught in public schools, so that Zimbabwean artists are empowered with music business and entrepreneurship skills. Popular music styles and repertoires in Zimbabwe are mostly developed with a business and market value orientation and dominated by *sungura* songs that mainly speak to issues of love (Maguraushe and Muranda 2013), a tendency not common to most church songs. Usually, church music in general and brass music in particular are performed for deliverance purposes, which might not be a favoured theme in popular music. The religious connotations attached to brass instruments, especially within ZCC circles, might thus deter the usage of these instruments for popular music purposes.

Prices of instruments

Some observations were made through this study that point to a trend in which Zimbabwean popular music and Indigenous instrumentalists normally must make sacrifices to purchase their own instruments, such as guitars, keyboards, *mbira*, *ngoma* (drums), and *hosho* (handshakes). However, the situation is not the same with brass instruments. Two Zimbabwean artists were interviewed to give their side of the story, and Nyika Muchenu had this to say: "Personally, I have a keen interest in brass—trumpet in particular, but

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I have since realised it is a bit expensive. I will have to work for a while in order to buy one for myself" (i/v, Zvishavane, 30 April 2025). Taurai Mukege, who besides being an artist and a dancer, is also a music director with the Zimbabwe Army Band in Harare, stated the following:

> The cost of brass instruments in Zimbabwe is beyond the reach of most people. For that reason, most of the aspiring brass players usually get the necessary exposure either with the church or military organisations. And if not, it is remotely through the institutions of learning—schools, colleges and universities. (i/v, Harare, 26 March 2025)

As a follow-up, the researcher conducted a survey to check the costs of brass instruments in Zimbabwe. Four retail shops were selected. First, there was the Music Conah shop—the only shop selling musical instruments in the whole of Masvingo province. From Harare, the researcher selected the three busiest outlets: Hard Sounds, Kadir, and Sons and Tropical Sounds. As of 26 March 2025, the cost of a trumpet ranged from USD $150 to $950, depending on the brand. In this case, the Dream Maker was the cheapest, followed by the Sonata, Nova, and Mason, with the Yamaha being the most expensive. The trombones ranged from $150 to $424, and euphoniums were listed at $725 to $855. Tubas were selling for $1,200 to $4,785. For an average middle-class worker in Zimbabwe, such as a government teacher, for example, a payslip from March 2025 would show a gross salary of USD $250. Accordingly, the prices of brass instruments in Zimbabwe are considered very expensive and are thus emerging as a limiting factor that has influenced the unpopularity of brass.

Gender disparity and cultural views of brass bands

Gender disparity in musical performance, especially the low female involvement in instrument playing, is a global phenomenon (Ibekwe 2018; Sergeant and Himonides 2024). In Zimbabwe, the participation of females in brass playing is even more depressed (Mutiza 2019). The reason for exploring gender disparity in this study was inspired by the suspicion that the low turnout of females in brass might be a contributory factor to brass's invisibility in Zimbabwean popular music. Based on the ethnographic fieldwork observations conducted by the researcher, it was noted that very few females were involved in brass music. For example, only 10 females out of 60 members participated in the Zimbabwe National Army band for the Zimbabwe Independence celebrations on 18 April 2024 at Murambinda Growth Point in the Buhera district. Eight female members were also recorded to be in the Zimbabwe Prison Correctional Services brass band (ZPCS) for the same Zimbabwe Independence celebrations. With respect to the Harare Metropolitan Police band, the music

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director, Simba Kasanga, reported that "currently, our brass band has a total of 25 members, of whom only nine are females" (i/v, Harare, 20 March 2025). The average female representation pattern in the Zimbabwe military bands therefore translates to about 29%. One reason for this was mentioned in an interview conducted with Walter Masona, the director of music in ZPCS, who reported that brass performance required constant attendance and participation, which female players most likely cannot achieve due to maternity leave conditions (i/v, Harare, 16 September 2024).

One of the five female interviewees, Madombwe Fadzai, an MSU student, as well as a Salvation Army band member, revealed that there are actually many reasons why so few females might be involved in brass bands:

> Brass leaders usually look down upon the aspiring brass women in most cases [based] on the individual attitude or behaviour [expressed] by other female brass players. Brass instruments need determined and constant players. By the time I joined the Salvation Army band, we [consisted of] eight females and five males. However, only two females and four males remained in the band. (i/v, Harare, 30 December 2024)

There are many reasons that might be responsible for a higher female dropout rate in brass performance practice, and they might manifest in varied forms. Research has shown that the underrepresentation of women in brass bands is more accurately attributed to structural discrimination, gendered expectations, a lack of support or role models, and the historically male-dominated culture of brass music (see, e.g., Schmalenberger and Maddox 2019: 20; Frisch 2022; Maddox and Schmalenberger 2024: 206).

However, in the African context, there are some cultural considerations that discourage, and to a certain extent prohibit, females from participating in instrument handling and playing, particularly in the case of brass music in the ZCC. An elder in the ZCC confirmed that females are not allowed to join their brass bands due to church beliefs. It can therefore be concluded that in the Zimbabwean context, because of their monthly menstrual periods, women are in some instances restricted from participating in performances, as well as handling musical instruments, such as the brass in the ZCC, though the Salvation Army has no such restrictions.

The future of brass music in Zimbabwe

It is critical at this stage for Zimbabwean communities to begin considering brass as a music style or genre of its own that requires just as much promotion as other music styles, such as *chimurenga*, *sungura*, and Afro jazz. In modern times, several musicians and performers are taking advantage of the rich cultural heritage that lies in Indigenous African music to develop modern genres

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that appeal to many (Mauwa 2022: 25). Brass instruments need to emulate the route taken by the guitar, thus fusing the Indigenous Zimbabwean styles with modern instruments to birth a new contemporary genre, like the *sungura.* While the factors that can influence the popularity or appeal of a particular music genre are numerous, Muranda and Maguraushe (2014) have noted that the fusion of contemporary and traditional music styles, as we see in *mhande*, *mbakumba*, *mbende*, and *jiti*, is necessary to influence and develop the popularity of a musical genre like the *sungura.* Brass instruments, just like the guitar has demonstrated, need to be used to play a diverse range of Zimbabwean Indigenous styles, such as the *mbende*, *dinhe*, *chinyambera*, and the few others mentioned earlier. The popularization of *chimurenga* music was ensured due to the fusion of guitars with Indigenous Zimbabwean instruments, such as the *mbira*, *ngoma*, and *hosho* (Chipendo 2022: 322). As such, it should be emphasized that brass music instruments strongly need to be adapted and assimilated to the music played by instruments that are already well-known in Zimbabwean Indigenous community music-making.

Popularity and Popular Music in Participatory Swiss Brass Bands

Amateur brass bands in Switzerland are—based on the personal experience of this particular researcher—often perceived as antiquated, militaristic, conservative, or dull by members of the general public and may therefore be characterized as unpopular and not well liked. However, they remain integral to the cultural and social fabrics of many towns, especially in rural areas. These bands contribute to the musical education of children and teenagers, provide a participatory artistic outlet for individuals of varying abilities, and offer local musical entertainment. As of early 2023, 1,862 bands were registered under the Swiss Wind Band Association (SBV), with 54,606 people—representing 0.6% of the population—playing in at least one of them (Schweizer Blasmusikverband SBV 1997–2023; Bundesamt für Statistik 2021).

Swiss brass bands, though widespread, have faced notable challenges in the twenty-first century. Membership in the SBV has dropped by 37.9%, from 87,873 in 1997 to 54,606 in 2023 (Schweizer Blasmusikverband SBV 1997–2023), indicating a significant decline in popularity. In its 2019 annual report, the SBV states that "our way of making music, ... our cultural model, is still far from being recognised"[1] (Schweizer Blasmusikverband SBV 2020). Blogger Alexandra Link has highlighted a persistent image problem within the brass

1. All quotations from interviews and online debates in the text have been translated by the respective researchers.

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band community, attributing it to outdated performances, poor public relations, and a lack of innovation (Link 2019).

This section of the article explores the decline in membership numbers and hence popularity of brass music in Switzerland, offering unique insights gained through a mixed-methods approach that integrated data from a 2020 survey with the results of qualitative interviews. The survey was distributed in the spring of 2020 via the Cantonal Bernese Wind Band Association (BKMV), ensuring coverage across diverse ensembles in the region. A total of 761 participants completed the survey, representing 10.8% of all active musicians in the Canton of Bern at the time (Chapuis 2024). Efforts were made to ensure a balance of demographics, with gender and age distribution closely matching what the researcher had observed in actual bands, although no official data on these distributions were available (Chapuis 2021: 51ff). While the survey reached active musicians of all age groups, responses from older participants may have been underrepresented due to the online nature of the survey.

In addition to the survey, qualitative data were gathered through narrative interviews. This method allows participants to share their experiences and perspectives in a storytelling format (Hopf 2010: 355–56). Interviews were conducted by the researcher with key stakeholders in the Musikgesellschaft Lyss (MG Lyss)—a band of which the researcher is also a member—including the conductor, the president, and five regular members of different ages and genders. These interviews were analysed using the grounded theory methodology, an inductive approach that identifies patterns and themes directly from the data rather than testing predefined hypotheses (Corbin and Strauss 2015). This approach allowed the researcher to uncover insights about the motivations, challenges, and perceptions of the brass band members that may not have been evident through potentially biased, predefined categories or a structured analysis.

Historical Background

While not strictly necessary, an attempt to understand the (un)popularity of Swiss brass bands today can benefit from a brief exploration of their historical development during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first amateur brass bands were founded after the establishment of the modern Swiss state in 1848. These ensembles provided a space for citizens to exercise their newfound freedoms in a democratic society (Mattmann 2002: 102). Strongly influenced by military music, they were also expected to promote patriotism (Blaser-Egli 1939: 282). This focus on marching and military music reflected the broader militarization of Europe at the time, which was driven by ongoing conflicts (Reily and Brucher 2013: 9). During

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this era, music played a vital role in forging identities, and brass music, with its outdoor adaptability and powerful acoustics, was ideal for public displays of strength and unity (Boisits 2013: 13ff), both in Europe and in the colonies. This association with military music and patriotism suggests a mostly functional usage of brass music similar to that seen in Zimbabwe. The continued use of uniforms, marching music, and veteran appointments in many brass bands today serves as a relic of these historical origins (Mattmann 2002: 17).

Another key characteristic that defined the early popularity of brass bands was their role in democratizing music. As noted by musicologist Christoph-Hellmut Mahling (1978: 137), early brass bands brought art music to a wider audience. Their repertoire combined transcriptions of art music with popular dances, folk songs, and marches, thereby catering to broad public tastes (Mahling 1976: 116; Biber 1995: 61). Over time, the role of brass bands evolved, and in the twentieth century, they began performing more original compositions (Schweizer Blasmusikverband SBV 1987: 165). However, bands continued playing traditional dances and marches, even as these styles declined in popularity. The result is that today's bands play an eclectic repertoire of original works, traditional music, marches, and arrangements of modern pop songs, resulting in a musical selection that is difficult to define as well as hard for members to identify with (Chapuis 2024: 203–207).

Swiss Brass Bands in the Early Twenty-First Century

In the survey conducted in the Canton of Bern, the difficulty in identifying with brass music is evident in the responses to the open-ended question, "Why do you rarely or never listen to brass music?" This question was posed to participants who reported listening to brass music less than once a month. Four key reasons emerged through coding the freetext answers, according to the grounded theory methodology, and summarizing these codes into categories. Of the participants, 16% stated that the context often does not fit their listening habits (e.g. they primarily listen to music in the background, attend live performances rarely, or their friends and family dislike brass music). Another 21% indicated that they prefer actively playing brass music in a community over passively listening to it. A further 25% described brass music as difficult to access, citing its limited presence on the radio or challenges in finding recordings. Finally, 30% said they simply do not like brass music or prefer other genres. These responses indicate that brass music is often perceived as an insular subculture. Survey respondents frequently described it as rooted in traditions that feel disconnected from modern cultural experiences. This perception arises at least partly from the ceremonial and uniform presentation of brass bands, which is reminiscent of their military past, as

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well as their functions in Zimbabwe, and contrasts starkly with contemporary popular music's informal and individualistic identity.

The survey also included an open-ended question that asked participants to describe how they viewed the future of the Swiss brass band scene. Of the 761 participants, 44% predicted a rather negative future, describing it as bleak, declining, or difficult. Many respondents saw the reasons for the decline in brass band membership as stemming from societal trends, such as urbanization, growing individualism, and shifting leisure priorities. Respondents reported that younger generations, influenced by modern lifestyles, often prioritize activities that offer personal expression and flexibility, making the structured and hierarchical nature of brass bands less appealing. Others suggested that increased geographic and professional mobility tends to weaken long-term community ties, disrupting intergenerational continuity within bands and reducing their ability to retain members. Additionally, the decline of community-focused events in which bands once played prominent roles has diminished their visibility and cultural relevance, further distancing them from contemporary audiences. These findings of largely external reasons for the decline in membership numbers echo the conclusions of a similar study by Bossard et al. from 2004: "The brass band is ... portrayed as a kind of victim of external circumstances" (Bossard et al. 2004: 92). Among the most pressing issues identified by the participants of this study's survey was the lack of young musicians. Recruiting younger members seemed to be particularly challenging due to the long-term commitment required. The increasing expectations of the audience were mentioned as a further difficulty. It can thus be concluded that today, a band can no longer legitimize itself simply by playing for the local community; instead, it must offer more to remain of interest.

Meanwhile, 19% of respondents believed that significant changes were necessary for the survival of the Swiss brass band scene. One participant succinctly summarized the issue: "If we want to be perceived by society as modern and dynamic, then we have to present ourselves as such—through repertoire selection, appearance in social and print media, etc.". On a more optimistic note, 15% described the future as generally positive, albeit with fewer bands, while only 9% foresaw a wholly positive future.

When asked about their motivations for playing in their bands, 56% of participants highlighted social aspects or a sense of community as key reasons, whereas only 30% emphasized musical aspects. These results align with the researcher's previous observations (Chapuis 2024) that amateur brass bands function primarily as participatory music-making spaces, wherein the activity of making music and the social connections outweigh the importance of the final musical product (Turino 2008). As further support for this idea, when

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the participants were asked what they disliked about their band, 25% mentioned a lack of commitment from other members, 20% cited musical issues, and 19% pointed to social problems.

The Case Study—The MGL Unique Horns

The Musikgesellschaft (MG) Lyss is actively pursuing a process of modernization to address the challenges facing Swiss brass bands. As a member of the ensemble, the researcher is able to provide an insider perspective on these developments, which were shaped by the broader issues described earlier.

In an interview with this author, a fellow member of the MG Lyss noted that "younger people ... don't want to join a brass band because it has the reputation of being a bit boring and marches and stuff. It's just the image of brass band music that isn't very attractive to younger people" (i/v, Suberg, 21 September 2020). Recognizing this image problem, the MG Lyss initiated significant changes starting in 2020, which were designed to directly address the declining appeal of brass bands among younger audiences. The band shifted its repertoire entirely to contemporary popular music,[2] aiming to engage younger audiences more effectively. One band member commented about the first such concert: "It was very cool. I really hadn't heard of anything like this before, in this form, and therefore it was truly very innovative, and I feel like it was well received" (i/v, Bern, 29 September 2020). Alongside this musical pivot, the band discarded its traditional militaristic uniforms, first adopting black shirts with blue bowties and later, in early 2024, transitioning to colourful patterned shirts that emphasized individuality rather than uniformity. The band's performances are now amplified, featuring improvised solos and singers for selected songs, as well as a light show reminiscent of popular music concerts. In early 2024, the band rebranded itself again, dropping the traditional "Musikgesellschaft" in favour of the more modern and dynamic name Unique Horns.

These changes helped address multiple challenges. By adopting a more pop-oriented repertoire, the younger musicians now feel a stronger connection to the music they perform. The change in the band's name facilitated a departure from the outdated image traditionally associated with brass music. Additionally, the introduction of individualized, colourful clothing better aligns with the values of a modern, individualistic society, as perceived by the members. Together, these transformations set the band apart not only from other brass bands, but also from competing leisure activities. The president

2. The first such programme in 2020 presented, for example, 'Dance Monkey' by Tones and I, 'When the Party's Over' by Billie Eilish, a hip-hop medley, and 'Welcome to the Jungle' by Guns N' Roses.

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of the Unique Horns emphasized the importance of innovation in an interview, stating that bands must "break away from the uniformity" (i/v, Surberg, 7 October 2020). With increasing individualism and an expanding array of hobbies available, bands can no longer rely on tradition alone to attract members. The Unique Horns illustrate how brass bands can thrive by embracing change and aligning themselves with contemporary trends.

The participatory nature of brass bands provides a crucial lens for understanding their current challenges. As Turino (2008) suggests, participatory ensembles emphasize social engagement over polished musical production, which contrasts with broader cultural trends favouring highly presentational, commercialized music. This disconnect has contributed to brass bands' marginalization within contemporary popular music culture. Cultural sustainability frameworks (Titon 2009; Schippers and Grant 2016) further suggest that traditions must actively adapt to changing societal contexts to remain relevant. Early brass bands successfully integrated elements of popular music of their time, such as military marches and folk dances, ensuring their relevance within the musical landscape. The Unique Horns exemplify how similar adaptive strategies can work today. By incorporating a modern repertoire and allowing for greater individuality within performances, they have strengthened their communal identity while simultaneously appealing to new audiences. This raises the question of whether similar approaches could support the sustainability of brass band traditions in other contexts where their popularity has declined.

Marginalization of the Brass Band Music in Czechia

While brass bands, in conjunction with folk-like music, constituted one of the most popular musical genres in Czechoslovakia during the twentieth century, they have experienced a sharp decline in popularity since the end of that century. The decline in popularity of brass band music can be understood as a situation in which the genre has simultaneously disappeared from nationwide radio and television stations, except for marginal ones. Furthermore, the genre ceased to be perceived as a unifying element of Czech society and experienced a decline in its position within surveys of listener preferences. To comprehend this fundamental shift, it is essential to start with the changes in the relationship between the genre and Czech society that have emerged over the course of its history.

The Journey from Popularity to the Margins

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the popularity of military brass bands performing in public spaces inspired the Czech and German bourgeoisie

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of Bohemian and Moravian towns, as well as their workers, to form civilian brass bands. Such bands were associated with the nascent civic society that they came to represent, as well as the national aspirations of the Czech population (Kotek 1994: 140–42). As a result, there was a growing desire for a "Czech" character in musical production. This led to the popularity of the work of František Kmoch, who adapted folk songs to the fashionable rhythms of marches, waltzes, and polkas and composed new pieces in a folk-like style (Kapusta 1974: 118, 129). During the first half of the twentieth century, brass bands became an integral part of social life in both urban and rural areas, with numerous bands belonging to various associations, including small village bands (Kotek 1994: 142).

The genre's popularity reached its zenith during the interwar period, drawing inspiration from tango and jazz (Kotek 1998: 358). Following the Second World War, the development of popular music underwent a significant shift, and musicologists anticipated a decline in brass bands due to the emergence of Western pop and rock bands in both urban and rural areas (Kapusta 1974: 191). However, this trajectory underwent a significant shift with the innovative approach pioneered by Jan Slabák's Moravanka band in the early 1970s. The band's trained professional musicians reinterpreted South-East Moravian folklore, which was accompanied by a shift towards a more folkloric appearance in costume and stage design. This resulted in a surge in popularity during the final socialist decades of the 1970s and 1980s (Koukal 2007: 173). This period was characterized by the prevalence of pop music, particularly disco, and brass band music on radio and television.

Ultimately, this surge resulted in the development of a perceived association between brass band music and socialism, as well as rural life. This association subsequently gave rise to mounting opposition from younger generations and urban classes. In the 1980s, and even more so in the 1990s, brass band music was perceived as a declining, nostalgic form of music associated with conservative rural communities and gradually became an emblem of bad taste. In the 1990s, a period of liberalization following the end of state socialism, brass bands disappeared from the national media, surviving only on regional radio stations or listened to by fans on Austrian and German stations. This strong aversion was a matter of defining oneself against the backward (post-)socialist countryside. Such attitudes were part of a wider trend of distancing oneself from the rural areas that had not easily followed the path of capitalist development (Daniel and Machek 2015: 77–80).

Brass Bands in Contemporary Czech Society

A 2003 survey conducted by Mikuláš Bek on the popularity of musical genres confirmed that brass bands were most popular in rural areas among older,

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less educated individuals (Bek 2003: 164, 165). Despite the absence of additional research as comprehensive as Bek's, none of the more recent studies have documented any shift or dissemination of brass music preferences to younger generations or to urban settings (Konopásková 2013; Plašilová 2017; Prudičová 2017; Turčanová 2021).

Bek's research indicates that there is a clearly delineated group of listeners who express a preference for brass bands and folk(-like)[3] music while also rejecting other genres. Conversely, a significant proportion of listeners in Bek's study demonstrated an ability to appreciate a diverse range of musical genres, with the notable exception of brass band music, against which they strongly defined themselves. The popularity of brass music and the modernized folk-like music associated with it thus represent a significant dividing line in Czech society (Bek 2003: 163–65). The marked distinction in listening preferences observed between different demographic groups in society suggests a strong link between listening habits and group identity. Social distinctions among groups are expressed through their preferred tastes, and as Pierre Bourdieu points out, musical taste is a significant indicator of an individual's class position and an important factor in defining the boundaries of social groups (Bourdieu 1984: 18). This is also evidenced by recent sociological studies on the relationship between consumption and social background in Czechia (Šafr 2008; Špaček et al. 2023), as well as by the researchers' previous work.

The Case Study—Online Debates about Brass Bands and their Music

The two researchers of this case study were both raised in a rural environment in which brass music was commonplace, yet neither of them developed a passion for listening to or playing this genre. Following their relocation to an urban environment for our university studies, they repeatedly found themselves taken aback by the intensity and rationale of the rural culture's rejection of urbanites, which served as a catalyst for their academic investigation into the subject.

This particular study was grounded in a semantic analysis of online discussions initiated by articles concerning the successful development of audiovisual media specializing in brass music and the related folk-like musical scene.[4] A thorough analysis of the content of these impassioned debates

3. In his study, Bek referred to this genre as folk music. However, the findings presented here suggest that it may be more accurately described as a genre of folk-like music.

4. The posts from online discussions were collected by Tereza Prudičová as part of her master's thesis (2017). A terminological problem thus arises with a genre that requires a brief explanation; the term *šlágr* ("schlager") was used in Czechia mainly in the inter-war

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enabled the researchers to identify the prevailing codes through which the participants conceptualized and articulated their perspectives on brass music and, furthermore, to understand how the participants conceptualized themselves, their positions within society, and the values and beliefs that ought to guide society.[5] The analysis encompassed articles from the second decade of the twenty-first century, drawn from the primary Czech online news media outlets, which had previously avoided reporting on brass bands (aktualne.cz, idnes.cz, and novinky.cz). These sources were supplemented by an extensive discussion on Jaroslav Konáš's blog concerning a post that offered a critique of the production of the Šlágr TV ("Schlager TV") channel and its viewers.

The participants most often positioned themselves within the discourse through their ages, their relationships to the national culture, and less often through their urban or rural residences: "In my opinion, the launch of Šlágr TV was a great, good thing for us older people"[6] (hudebnimasakry.cz 2012). The two groups involved in the debates defined themselves primarily along the following axes: older/younger and national/global (and less urban/rural). As one respondent stated, "We 'younger' people have Óčko, MTV etc., so why shouldn't the older generation have their own music channel?" (Idnes.cz 2012). Consequently, it was also necessary for certain participants to explicitly state in their posts that their musical preferences did not correspond to the expected division (i.e. younger participants who tolerated brass music, or older participants who disliked brass music).

The participants, who defined themselves predominantly as younger and more urban, perceived themselves as more educated and in tune with global

period and was later almost forgotten. Consequently, the typical listener of the early twenty-first century did not associate it with any music. It was not until the entrepreneur Peterka adopted this basically abandoned term as the name of his Šlágr TV channel that it began to regain public recognition. The music played on this channel is perceived by those discussing it as a single scene, ranging from classical brass bands to their electrified versions based primarily on the sound of synthesizers. These originated as a simplified, more economical substitute for brass bands playing similar folk-like repertoire (synthesizer version with an often broader genre scope) at countryside festivities, especially weddings and birthday parties. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has not yet been described in the literature, nor did Bek include it in his research. The analysis of the discussions reveals that the distinction between these two types of bands was not predominantly recognized by the participants. In fact, in the original research sample, the names of brass bands are mentioned markedly more frequently than those of keyboard ensembles. For the purposes of this study, comments mentioning non-brass bands (or their characteristics, such as keyboards) were not included.

5. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, please refer to Daniel and Machek (2021: 96).

6. Quotes from the discussions have been made anonymous, so just the link to the blog or website and the year have been provided.

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cultural trends. In this way, they distinguished themselves as more competent and superior to the inhabitants of the somewhat mythologized countryside. According to one participant, "I think we know who the Šlágr TV channel is for. But we also know that their music is trashy. The pensioners don't care—it's enough for their intellect and they just want to sing or listen to an entertainment act without any other motives" (hudebnimasakry.cz 2012). The music itself was often considered primitive and decadent and was seen as undermining the authenticity of Czech folk music. As one respondent reported, the music contained "nothing original, nothing of high quality craftsmanship, combined with commercialism masquerading as Czech" (hudebnimasakry.cz 2012).

The long-term condemnation of rural tastes and the entire rural population, which was brought about by the mostly urban-oriented main Czech media from the 1990s onwards, led to the formation of defensive attitudes that began to grow stronger around the beginning of the twenty-first century. This was at a time when the transformation consensus on the rapid Westernization of Czech society was falling apart after the first economic problems emerged. The intensification of these defensive attitudes occurred in parallel with the economic crisis that ensued in 2008:

> You stare at the West with your mouth open and your pupils dilated, you spit on your own roots, and you turn up your nose at your own mother tongue. Because all you know is rock, metal, soul, techno, and rap. You only sing in the original. English. Anyone who doesn't is an idiot worthy of your contempt. (Idnes.cz 2012)

A counter-discourse was formulated in defence of the musical taste of the older rural inhabitants. This discourse was based on a condemnation of the pretentiousness of groups considered to be urban elites and their perceived cosmopolitan, alienated, and overly complicated musical preferences. According to one participant, "You're all pretty poor losers, dumbed down by … American culture and English bullshit" (hudebnimasakry.cz 2011). The tastes of the urban elite were criticized as decadent in comparison with genuine Czech folk culture: "Let intellectual Joe not watch the show, so as not to spoil his 'taste'. Let him watch the boorish Prima or Nova [popular TV channels], full of American shit and tabloids, that's probably for losers like him" (hudebnimasakry.cz 2012). Defenders of brass band music positioned the genre as an authentic form of Czech folk music, emphasizing an additional pivotal code that characterized the music—the 'Czechness'—and associating their preferred genre with the nation's traditions. This tendency was also linked to the advocacy of Czech lyrics that were accessible to the listener, as "this is what people understand and this is a guarantee that folk songs will not die out in our country" (Idnes.cz 2013).

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Furthermore, proponents also responded to the emerging discrepancies between listening communities. They rejected the notion of urban elites, and their tastes were considered superior. The quality of the preferred music, they argued, lay precisely in the simplicity and ordinariness that was often criticized by the elites: "They are not curious about technical solos, polished arrangements and precise performances of the musicians ... They just want to sing with people who are not making stars of themselves and who are their equals" (hudebnimasakry.cz 2012). Ideal music was considered to be based on songs to which everyone knew the lyrics and could sing along. Such music fostered a sense of collective belonging, creating a sense of community and cohesion within the audience:

> The listeners are not interested in the perfection of the music being broadcast. Rather, it is humanity and good interpersonal relations that radiate from the station. It makes you feel like you're one of their own. And that's what counts! (hudebnimasakry.cz 2012)

The Present State of Affairs

Following a gradual decline in popularity in the early 2020s, the record label Česká muzika ("Czech music") and the television channel Šlágr TV, which specialized in the dissemination of brass band music, underwent a transition to online broadcasting. A parallel development was observed with Dechovka ("Brass Band") Radio, which was formerly transmitted on medium-wave frequencies.

In the contemporary era, brass bands continue to be met with rejection by the majority of the population, primarily due to their association with the oldest segment of the population and their residual connection with state socialism. Even institutional support for brass bands, in the form of public primary art schools with their student brass orchestras, has not been effective in promoting interest in the genre among younger audiences. As both Konopásková and Plašilová discovered, young pupils are frequently introduced to brass instrument lessons by their parents or grandparents. However, the primary motivation for these young players is to gratify their elders or foster positive relationships with their fellow musicians. Research findings indicate that the majority of young people who participate in youth brass bands do not listen to the genre (Konopásková 2013: 39, 40; Plašilová 2017: 64), a situation comparable to that observed in Switzerland.

Even in the Czech context, several attempts have been made to work innovatively with the brass band format in recent years. The parodic use of brass band music may be set aside, although even parody has, on occasion, been accepted as part of the genre. A more pronounced appreciation for

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brass bands was evidenced by the project of the artist František Skála entitled František Skála and DH ("Brass Band") Provodjané. This combination of traditional brass band music and surreal lyrics was well received by urban cultural elites. Nevertheless, the favourable response to this production was entirely outside the realm of the traditional brass band audience. A comparable phenomenon can be observed with regard to the popularity of Balkan brass bands among urban alternative listeners, which has also resulted in the formation of local ensembles inspired by the Balkan sound. Examples of such ensembles include Circus Problem, Balkan Party Band, or Kapela Lipno. These bands self-identify as Balkan brass bands and are affiliated with the alternative music scene, participating in shared festivals and performing in similar venues. They have been documented in the same specialized media, operating in complete separation from the brass band milieu. The acceptance of these bands can be attributed to their global popularity and, most crucially, their disconnection from the Czech countryside and its local brass bands. As a result, the audiences of these two types of bands do not intersect and have not led to an increase in the popularity of traditional Czech brass bands.

If we consider the future, it is conceivable that brass bands are at risk of losing their fan bases. The path of innovation and new repertoires associated with the younger generation, as observed in neighbouring countries (Germany and Austria), has yet to be discerned in Czechia. As the aforementioned research indicates, conservative listeners are not interested in such changes. They prefer what they call traditional Czech music, which is characterized by a simple style, Czech lyrics, and a tendency to stick to the established repertoire. This preference is evidenced by the success abroad of some Bohemian and Moravian bands with an innovative musical style, such as the Brass Band Gloria, Kumpanovi muzikanti (aka Vlado Kumpan und Seine Musikanten), and Moravská 12 (aka Mährische 12), which is not reflected in the domestic environment (Turčanová 2021: 91).[7]

Discussion and Conclusion

In both the Czech Republic and Switzerland, brass bands, once central to civic and cultural life, have gradually lost their popular appeal, as musical tastes and cultural trends have shifted, resulting in their relegation to niche, often anachronistic, spaces in the twenty-first century. Today, younger generations largely perceive brass bands as antiquated and overly traditional, often carrying connotations of military or rural heritage. This perception has contributed

7. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in the scheduled concerts and the predominantly German-language web presentations of these bands.

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to declining participation in both their production and reception, as fewer musicians enter the tradition, and audience interest wanes. Additionally, the limited visibility of brass bands in the media and on digital platforms further restricts their distribution, thereby reinforcing the tradition's marginalization in contemporary music culture. The combination of these factors—a negative public image, dwindling engagement, and reduced accessibility—has led the researchers to characterize the tradition as unpopular with large segments of the population. In contrast, in Zimbabwe, brass bands have historically been confined to military and ecclesiastical settings, thus maintaining associations with either sacred or militaristic traditions. Furthermore, the colonial introduction of brass instruments imbued the genre with associations of prestige and elitism, though these perceptions have not translated into its integration within the broader popular music culture—precisely due to its association with the colonizers and their oppression of the local population and its culture.

This article's comparative analysis reveals that the popularity of brass bands in all three countries has historically been confined to specific social segments, but their trajectories illustrate different lessons about adaptation, intersections with popular music, and sustainability. In nineteenth-century Europe, the wealthy bourgeoisie emulated the then-popular military brass bands to project the goals of societal democratization. This tradition contrasts with those found in Zimbabwe, where brass music was institutionalized under colonial rule, symbolizing the European state and military power while limiting broader communal engagement. In Europe, brass bands benefited from associations with civic society and accessible instruments, fostering their appeal among rural and working-class communities. In Zimbabwe, however, the genre's localization was hindered by restrictive institutional settings, its perception as a tradition of the colonial elite, and limited access to its instruments.

The patriarchal legacy of brass music, rooted in its historical association with militarism, is another persistent barrier. In Czechia, women predominantly participate only as vocalists or majorettes, with instrumental roles largely reserved for men, except in more inclusive student ensembles. In Zimbabwe, gendered norms around instrument assignments reflect broader societal inequities. Conversely, Swiss brass bands exhibit more significant shifts towards gender inclusivity—similar to trends in Czechia, especially among younger musicians. These shifts in gender representation underscore the potential for inclusivity, which would further support modernization and sustainability efforts. By broadening participation and adapting to changing societal expectations, gender inclusivity helps brass bands remain relevant and attractive to diverse audiences.

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A common challenge across the three contexts is the separation of brass bands from prevailing musical trends. In Czechia, brass bands once achieved global recognition by incorporating contemporary trends like jazz and tango during the interwar period, which showcased their ability to blend tradition with popular music influences. However, their later confinement to rural, nostalgic forms of cultural expression restricted their modern relevance. Similarly, Swiss brass bands face challenges in modernizing their image and repertoire, although examples like the Unique Horns demonstrate that innovative strategies—including rebranding and adapting more modern performance styles—can reconnect the genre with younger audiences. In Zimbabwe, limited access to instruments, deeply entrenched institutional practices as well as brass band's failure to include local popular musical traditions in their repertoire constrain brass music's potential for modernization and broader appeal.

This disconnection between cultural trends and brass music is also evident in the participatory nature of the tradition in Switzerland and Czechia, which prioritizes collective music-making over the highly rehearsed, mediated, and perfected performances typical of popular music today. While fostering strong community bonds, this ethos limits the genre's accessibility and appeal to broader audiences. At the same time, the shared activity remains essential for community building and plays a vital role in preserving the cultural relevance of brass traditions. However, to remain sustainable, brass bands must balance their participatory approach with adaptability by embracing innovation without abandoning their roots. This reflects broader principles of sustainability, as described by Schippers and Grant (2016), which emphasize resilience and responsiveness to societal changes. By adapting their traditions to navigate evolving musical and cultural landscapes, brass bands can transcend their traditional limitations and reassert their significance in contemporary cultural contexts.

Modernization strategies, including repertoire diversification, rebranding, and adapting contemporary performance styles, demonstrate significant potential for revitalization when implemented in ways that respect and build on existing traditions. These strategies, exemplified by efforts such as those of the Unique Horns, must be tailored to each context. In Zimbabwe, the focus should be not only on overcoming infrastructural limitations and including local musical styles and instruments, but also on decolonizing brass music by moving beyond its historical associations with the military, church, and colonial institutions, which have hindered its broader cultural integration. Additionally, addressing the limited accessibility of instruments and formal training opportunities remains crucial for broadening participation and fostering grassroots engagement. In Czechia and Switzerland, modernization

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must navigate the tensions between deeply rooted communal rural traditions and the growing preference for personal expressions. This involves reconciling the community-oriented nature of brass bands with a rising interest in solo performances, individual creativity, and media-driven musical practices, which may appeal to younger generations but nevertheless challenge the collective spirit that brass bands traditionally embody.

Ultimately, the sustainability and resilience of brass bands depend on their ability to balance their traditional roots with adaptability while simultaneously engaging with popular music trends and evolving cultural dynamics. Although brass bands in Zimbabwe, Switzerland, and Czechia are shaped by unique historical and social contexts, they all face the broader challenge of staying relevant in an era marked by increasing individualism and shifting cultural priorities. This challenge encompasses not only issues of production, such as institutional frameworks, training structures, and access to instruments, but also reception and distribution, particularly the visibility of brass bands in contemporary media and the cultivation of new audiences. The future of brass bands will likely depend on their ability to innovate while maintaining the ethos of community building at their core. To remain resilient, brass bands must embrace change without sacrificing their core values, thus ensuring that they remain vital and connected to their respective contemporary cultural and musical landscapes.

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