

2008 U.S Open Brass Band Championships

St. Charles, Illinois, USA

By Michael Boo

In celebrating the start of its second five years, the U.S. Open Brass Band Championships moved from its larger venue to an even larger auditorium, necessitated by the growing success of the contest to attract new and old brass band fans from the United States and beyond.

On November 8, 2008, seven top bands from the eastern half of the United States gathered at the beautiful and immense Norris Cultural Arts Center in the far west suburb of St. Charles, Illinois, celebrating the fact that the British brass band movement is alive, well and is growing in America.

New this year is the strategic partnership between the U.S. Open and the United Kingdom's Brass in Concert, the model upon which the U.S. Open is based. The winner of the U.S. Open will be automatically invited to perform at November's Brass in Concert next year and this year's winner of Brass in Concert will receive an automatic invitation to attend next year's U.S. Open.

For the sixth year, fans were delighted by the emcee expertise of BBC 2's Frank Renton, who is a veritable fount of knowledge on all things brass band. Frank kept the audience continually informed about each selection to be played by the next band, offering insights that added tremendously to the entertainment value.

Each band was judged by Dale Lonis, Bill Himes and Peter Griffin, each an esteemed musical educator.

As always, bands were judged in Music and Entertainment, Music worth a maximum of 100 points and Entertainment 25 points. As opposed to the British model of traditional brass band competitions, where the judges record errors heard from each band and subtract points from the top down for each error, the judges at this event assign a score from the bottom up. The "Most Entertaining" award is presented to the band with the highest combined Entertainment scores from the three judges.

In addition, awards are presented to the band deemed as offering the Best Performance of a March, the Best Featured Solo, the Best Original Composition or Arrangement of the day, and the new Most Outstanding Percussion Section Award, each award coming with a monetary award.

As always, a blind drawing was held to establish the position of performance, the drawing conducted several days prior to the event by a party with no vested interest in any of the bands.

Many of the band performances were preceded by buskers performers, short solo and/or ensemble offerings that are judged by an anonymous person somewhere in the audience. The winning performance is presented with the monetary contents of a hat set in the front of the stage, in which audience members are encouraged to show their support by way of bills and coins.

A large number of brass instrument manufactures filled the concession area at the U.S. Open Marketplace, as did exhibitors selling a wide selection of brass band recordings and other items.

When the smoke cleared, Fountain City Brass Band successfully defended its previous year's championship by outscoring its nearest competitor (Brass Band of Central Florida) by three points, 348 to 345, with one point separating the two bands on each of the three judges' score sheets and all three judges awarding the band their top number in Music. (The band scored 288 out of 300 possible points in Music and 60 out of a possible 75 in Entertainment.)

"Liberty Fanfare" by John Williams, arranged by Steve Sykes, opened the band's set with a brash flurry of 16th note runs, rhythmic punctuations and antiphonal exchanges. This most American of offerings was

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immediately followed by William Rimmer's arrangement of "Viva Birkinshaw," a most distinctly British contribution with an electrically charged forceful sound courtesy of the trombones and tubas.

Band member Nate Gay not only arranged Hugo Schmidt's "Die Teufelszunge" ("the Devil's Tongue"), but he won the Best Featured Soloist award, sponsored by Buffet Crampton, for his euphonium solo. Both the soloist and the entire band fired off successive volleys of double and triple tonguing as if a machine gun. The somber, lyrical strains of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Prelude '49th Parallel,'" arranged Roy Douglas, filled the hall with the aural temperament of a pipe organ.

"Horo Staccato" of Grigoras Dinicu and Jascha Heifetz, arranged by Goff Richards, featured the cornet section in such a frantic tempo that there seemed no way the fingers of the cornetists could keep up. One could be forgiven for waiting for the entire section to wave a white flag of surrender. Lee Harrelson's arrangement of "Feeling Good" by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley featured a variety of soloists as in a no holds barred burlesque review, a most personal and unexpected treatment of a pop classic.

Peter Tchaikovsky's "Finale from 'Symphony No. 4'" Peter, edited by Lee Harrelson, closed the band's set with a continuous flood of unison runs up and down the entire range of the instruments, avoiding a near collision of notes that risked turning the horns into road kill.

In short, Fountain City Brass Band laid out a stunning display of...well...everything.

Brass Band of Central Florida, in scoring just three points under Fountain City, outscored its main competitor by one point each from two judges in the Entertainment caption, tying Fountain City from the other judge. The results were so tight it's certainly arguable that under a different panel, the placements might have been reversed. (The band scored 283 in Music and 62 in Entertainment.)

"Ballet Suite No. 4 – 1. Introduction" by Dmitri Shostakovich (arranged by director Michael J Garasi) opened the production with nothing but tubas on the stage, along with some deep-pitched drums rolling as if reflecting on the aftermath of a thunder strike. The effect was not just haunting; it also made the bones vibrate.

For a total change of pace, it's hard to argue with Chris Sharp's riotous arrangement of Chick Corea's "La Fiesta," featuring Dee McAfee on soprano cornet, Bob Hinkley on cornet and Charlie Peshek on flugelhorn. With the entire band set up as a jazz band, the piece could have raised concerns among show sponsors that the fire marshal would come stop the show for fear of the seats combusting.

It was delightful to listen to the band's attention to the tapering of crescendos during William German's "The President," one element that might be responsible for winning the band the Best Performance of a March award, sponsored by DF Enterprises. Gail Robertson's arrangement of Hugh Nash's "Demelza" featured Juan M. Barrios on tenor horn, wringing every ounce of possible emotion out of the flowing melody.

Arranger Sandy Smith treated Stephen Sondheim's "Comedy Tonight" as if "Comedian's Gallop" met the theme from "The Simpsons." There was nothing subtle about this piece. To end its set, the band concluded with Paul Lovatt-Cooper's vibrant "Where Eagles Sing," featuring a plethora of inner voice notes too fast for mortal ears to lock onto. Standing and facing the audience for its final chord, the horns forcibly opened up any eyes in the audience that might have been resting.

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Eastern Iowa Brass Band placed 3rd with a score of 331 by taking 3rd in Music from all three judges (for a total Music score of 278). The sound of this band has improved exponentially over each of the past two years. (A score of 53 was awarded in Entertainment.)

Ken McCoy's arrangement of "Fanfare" from James Newton Howard's score to the film "Grand Canyon" first gave notice of the brass line's new massive, deep and full-bodied sonority. Claude Debussy's piano work, "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair," arranged by Peter Parkes featured cornetist Dennis Modracek in a lovely lyrical solo. "The Late, Late Movie Movie on Channel 88—or—It was a Dark and Stormy Night" by John Berners, arranged by Casey Thomas, would suffice as a perfect film noir soundtrack for one of Rod Serling's old "Twilight Zone" television programs.

A xylophone trio was featured in the delightful "The Clock and the Dresden Figures" by Albert W.I Ketelbey, arranged by Howard Snell. The toy-like effect of the piece was akin to the spinning gears of a music box. Director Casey Thomas arranged Robert Jager's march, "Esprit de Corps," based on the United States Marines Hymn. The arrangement earned the band the Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band, sponsored by Smith-Watkins.

Despite placing 4th, the Ohio Brass Band (in its first year of existence) walked away with three important honors. Scoring a total of 316 points, the band scored 249 in Music and 67 in Entertainment, giving it the Most Entertaining award, sponsored by Willson/Getzen. The band also won honors for Best Percussion Section, sponsored by Yamaha Corp., and Best Cornet, sponsored by Buffet Crampon.

To put it mildly, this show was a hoot. "The Evolution of Brass Bands," arranged by director Paul Droste and tubist Pat Herak, was a costumed spectacular inspired by the madcap 1940s mayhem of musician/comic Spike Jones. The evolution of rhythm and melody commenced with cavemen pounding out a simple beat. "Seventy-Six Trombones" from Merideth Willson's "The Music Man," arranged by Duthoit, was complete with an accomplished marching band twirler and the conductor soloing on a double-belled euphonium.

"William Tell Overture" by Rossini, arranged by Grant, set the stage for cops and robbers in the old Wild West, punctuated with sound effects galore. It was combined in medley form with Rossini's "William Tell Overture," used here as the old-time theme to the "Lone Ranger." Tubist Pat Herak was then featured in Newsome's "The Bass in the Ballroom." Herak also arranged "Holiday for Strings," incongruous for being a piece for strings that was performed by a brass band with a solo by almglocken (tuned cowbells).

The Russian folksong "Minka," arranged by McCoy, featured Tony Philipp on B-flat cornet, earning Philipp the Best Cornet award and a new, engraved cornet courtesy of Buffet Crampon. It was like a big band swing rendition of the folksong, infused with healthy doses of vodka. Herak's arrangement of von Suppe's "Poet and Peasant Overture" was chalk full of intentional mistakes, utilizing tuned beer bottles among other special effects, and, as they say, everything but the kitchen sink...Except, there really was a kitchen sink at the end.

Madison Brass Band took 5th place with a score of 305, scoring 257 in Music and 48 in Entertainment.

T.J. Powell Welshman was known as "The Sousa of Wales." His traditional march, "Castell Coch," opened with the horns spread across the stage in an arc, light and airy one moment and intensely bombastic the next. Nathan J.W. Pierce's arrangement of Franz Biebl's choral work "Ave Maria" provided a sonic test of the auditorium's ability to resonate, its continuous sonic masses floating over the heads of the audience.

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Philip Sparke's shimmering chorale, "Aria," featured Andrea Palm on tenor throughout. The band was able to make the obligato countermelodies sound as if played by woodwinds. One had to do a double take to make sure the band hadn't snuck in a couple of flutes and clarinets. Stephen Bulla's "Chorale and Toccata" gelled impressively during its powerful impact points, the volume of the piece increasing exponentially.

Svien H. Giske arranged Norwegian tubist's Oystein Baadsvik's "Fnugg Blue," played here by tubist Mike Forbes. The solo commenced with an unaccompanied Mike playing multiphonics and climbing scale patterns infused with a liberal amount of ghost notes, as if he was plugged into a synthesizer of some sorts. One could be forgiven for not knowing that sounds like that could come out of a tuba, as well as stratospheric screeching and the effect of droning bagpipes. A bagpipes feel was also heard in the knee-slapping band accompaniment, as if a set of bagpipes fell into a vat of whiskey.

Only three points behind, Prairie Brass Band took 6th place with a total score of 302 and a 256 in Music and 46 in Entertainment.

Ray Farr's arrangement of Bridget Fry's "Softly, Softly" was based on the British television show theme of the same name. Frenetic and seemingly in a hurry to be somewhere, the big band sound and consistent tuba ostinato kept one's toes tapping. Joseph Turrin's "Arabesque" featured Karen Griffin on cornet and Mark Fenne on soprano cornet, the duet layered over the top of the propulsive piece like thickly spread frosting.

Kenneth J. Alford's vigorous "Voice of the Guns" and Allan Street's "Nott'num Town – 3. Goose Fair" led into Derek Ashmore's arrangement of Rimsky-Korsakov's spry "Dance of the Tumblers. For a total change of pace, director Dallas Niermeyer's arrangement of Leonard Bernstein's "Make Our Garden Grow" from "Candide" highlighted one of Broadway's most emotionally charged emotional build ups, featuring Dan Mueller on euphonium and Karen Griffin on cornet, the yearning melodies of the two soloists soaring explosively into the audience.

Milwaukee Festival Brass took 7th place with a score of 288 and a 249 in Music and a 39 in Entertainment. Peter Graham's march, "Celebrate Rotary" was followed by Phillip Sparke's contemporary classic, "Music for a Festival," in which the band's adrenaline kicked in a big way. Harold Burgmayer's lovely and sweet full-voiced chorale, "Tis So Sweet" preceded the John Mortimer arrangement of "My Name is Bond," a high energy romp through many of the most famed tunes from the James Bond series of action films.

Craig Mason and John Zwolanek are members of the Madison Brass Band. While John has attended every U.S. Brass Open, this is the first time he was able to talk the rest of the members into attending as a performing group.

According to Craig, "This took about a year of preparation. We picked our summer repertoire so we could start getting prepared for this competition. It's wonderful. Our band members have been taking a lot in. Now that we've been here, it will have positive effects on the group for the long run."

John added, "One of our members said he wished he'd come to this years ago when I first mentioned it."

Joe Parisi is director of the champion Fountain City Brass Band. This is his second year as director and he was the principal solo cornetist when the band first came to the event. He proclaims, "What's exciting is the preparation for the performance, There's nothing like getting music together for a festival. There's

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laughter, joy and celebration and then we come and try to make music of the highest caliber. We spent ten hours on a bus. There's a sense of community and an energy I cannot define.

"We do lots of performances in our community, but the level of focus and energy for this far exceeds that. There are so many options here. Every band has to play a march and have a soloist, but after that, it's all up to the individual band. I'm really excited about this venue for this event. The crowd enjoyed the facility."

Next year's U.S. Brass Band Championship will be held on November 7, 2009 in St. Charles, Illinois. If you've never been to the festival...well, don't just read about it. Go! You will be thankful you did.

Michael Boo writes extensively for Drum Corps International, creating text for program books, CD and DVD liner notes and content on www.DCI.org. He also writes for BOA (Bands of America) and WGI (Winter Guard International). His many contributions to such activities have resulted in him being dubbed "The Pen of Pageantry." Information about his concert band and percussion compositions can be found at www.michaelboo.com and he can be reached at boomike@aol.com.