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2009 US Open Brass Band Championship - Retrospective

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Michael Boo was there for 4BR to report of Fountain City's hat trick victory at the US Open - and they are now heading to the UK...



Hat trick man: Joseph Parisi picks up the US Open title for a third time

For the third year in a row, Fountain City Brass Band from Kansas City, Missouri edged out Central Florida Brass Band from Orlando to take top honors at the U.S. Open Brass Band Championship, held in St. Charles, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago.

Premier

Out of a possible score of 375, Fountain City scored 368 to Central Florida's 361, edging out the former champion by just one point in five of the six categories and two points in the remaining one. (The six categories are Music and Entertainment, a score given by each of the three judges.)

Like Britain's premier Brass in Concert contest, this is an entertainment as opposed to a test piece event, but behind the smiles and the ability to entertain there is a very serious musical intent that wouldn't be out of place in the Royal Albert Hall in London.

Music is king

Therefore, the musical element is still king, with 100 of the 125 points available to be won, but it is those 25 entertainment points that invariably tip the scales when bands of the quality of the top two prize winners are matched together. What entertains one judge, may not appeal to another – it is a tricky balancing act.

Frank banter

Once again, the folks on the American side of 'the pond' were treated to the informative banter of Frank Renton, host of the BBC Radio 2 weekly programme, 'Listen to the Band'.

Throughout the event, Frank offered insights into the brass band movement and individual selections that were being performed and his encyclopaedic knowledge of everything brass banding was both enlightening and entertaining.

Buskers

Meanwhile, in between performances, various buskers performed – and performed very well indeed.

An anonymous judge sat somewhere in the audience (nobody could tell where), taking note of which busker performance was the best, with the winner receiving the top hat of cash that was collected throughout the day from the audience (even Frank put in a few cents of his own we were told!).

In addition, a new element to the audience appreciation angle was added this year, with audience members given the opportunity to put money in an envelope directed to a particular busker.

Judges

The judges this year were Dr. John Bell, Director of Bands at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, composer William Himes, Director of The Salvation Army Chicago Staff Band, and John Phillips, an educator from Toronto who is responsible for the Arts curriculum at the Ministry of Education for the Province of Ontario.

American best

Just a week after the U.S. Open, British audiences will see for themselves what the best in American brass banding has to offer when Joe Parisi brings **Fountain City Brass** to Brass in Concert in Gateshead.

The band received the invitation due to winning the U.S. Open last year and made sure someone had the organisational headache of starting to organise the 2010 trip too if they take up the invitation. They were excellent value for their victory.

The 18-day trip will keep the band members busy; in addition to performing in the Brass in Concert Gala Concert and competition, the band will be doing the same at the Scottish Open and will be participating in a recording session for a forthcoming CD release too. All in all, the band will be performing 25 pieces over the course of their ten performance commitments.

Quality hallmarks

After they had played, there was little doubt they would be right in the mix come the announcement of the results after a performance that had real hallmarks of quality about it from start to finish.

Fountain City opened their set with a memorized rendition of *'The Gael'* by Trevor Jones, and "O.R.B." march by Charles Anderson. The memorization allowed the band to move about the stage at will – something that gave an extra element to the proceedings.

Band member Lee Harrelson arranged Franz Biebl's organ-like *"Ave Maria"*, beginning with a fine piece of singing Gregorian chant. Harrelson won the 'Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band Award', for his arrangement of George and Ira Gershwin's *"Foggy Day"*, treated as a jazz band rendition but with the band set up in a classic stage band formation.

Theo Musick earned the 'Best Featured Soloist Award', for his performance of Joe Green's *"Xylophenia"*, originally written for the xylophone virtuoso George Hamilton Green and arranged for brass band by Howard Snell.

The band's performance concluded with a stunning interpretation of the third movement of Philip Sparke's *"Year of the Dragon"*, the softer dynamic levels fully exploited to give the louder dynamic levels increased impact. Based on the total entertainment score, the band also won the 'Most Entertaining Award' of the festival.

Breathless



Runner up: Michael J Garasi takes the trophy for second place

Brass Band of Central Florida, at just seven points behind Fountain City when the results were announced, also left the audience breathless with an impressively challenging programme.

Due to the luck of the blind draw, the band performed prior to Fountain City and immediately after third place Weston Silver, so that it was perhaps easier for both audience and judges alike to make immediate comparison.

Musical colorations rarely heard in such a setting were dominant in Jerome Kern's "*Old Man River*," arranged by Mark Freeh and featuring some impressive kit playing.

Meanwhile, the smooth jazz of Piazzola's hauntingly lovely "*Oblivion*" led into Malcolm Arnold's amusingly chipper "*Padstow Lifeboat*," allowing director Michael J. Garasi to highlight the recurrent foghorn effect with some deftly animated foot work. The performance won the band the 'Best Performance of a March Award'.

Best percussion

Rick Mizell's arrangement of Gordon Goodwin's "*Hunting Wabbits*" (a bit of a favourite of the band) provided a cute counterpoint and allowed the percussion to strut their stuff once more, contributing in no small part to them winning the 'Best Percussion Section Award'.

The band's set concluded with the finale from Respighi's "*Pines of Rome*" in the classic arrangement by Howard Snell.

It would be an understatement to say the performance was merely spine tingling: The massive build of the volume and the glorious sound unleashed at the end left both the rafters of the Norris Performing Arts Center auditorium and the bones of the audience members shaking.

Splendid effort

Typically, only the top two bands are announced in the results at the banquet after the contest attended by all performers. This year though, the judges requested an exception be made so **Weston Silver** from Toronto could be recognized for their splendid efforts in gaining their third place finish.

This was the first time the band had ever entered an entertainment contest, being used to performing at contests where the focus is on a test piece format.

Director Larry Shields stated, "If we're asked back, we will do more to prepare more movement and different set-ups of the ensemble. What we saw here breaks away from the British brass band tradition that is stoic and regimented, bringing a more fun side to the competition. It makes everyone feel comfortable and at ease."



Making a real impression: Weston Silver from Canada took third place on their debut

Tradition

The band, coming from its tradition, did no choreography and focused on the performance of the music, perhaps contributing to their 5th place finish in the entertainment category.

However, the musical side of their performance was stellar and entertaining in and of itself, and gave the audience a glimpse into the other side of brass band competition.

Right off the bat, the impeccable blend of the band was witnessed in Kenneth Alford's, *"The Thin Red Line"* and continued in Philip Doe's, *"The Bells of Peover,"* featuring a lovely cornet solo.

Kevin Norbury's atmospheric arrangement of *"All Through the Night"* is one of those pieces that holds up the brass band movement as an exemplary example of musicianship – and was played as such.

Paul Lovett-Cooper's *"Neath the Dublin Skies"* led into the concluding work, *"Birdland,"* arranged by Philip Sparke, demonstrating that the band can "get down" with the best.

It is hoped that this band again returns to America in its 89th year to bring us a slice of banding from the other side of the border. On this evidence there will be worthy contenders for the very top prize.

Amusing show

Just four points down in entertainment to Fountain City and tying in the caption with Central Florida, **Ohio Brass** delivered an amusing show based on "The Muppet Show." All this, and the band are in just its second year of existence – a remarkable achievement.

With the cranky Waldorf and Statler characters offering running commentary while sitting in their opera box perch, the show was continually comical.

Jubilant

The jubilant *"The Muppet Show Theme,"* arranged by Philip Harper, featured the band engaging a variety of dance steps, whilst a chorale interlude of *"(You Were) Temptation,"* arranged by Benjamin Tubb, was interrupted by a climax of marching percussion, followed by *"Barber of Seville,"* and *"Rubber Ducky."*

"It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing," re-created the famous "Muppets Show" drum set duo between drummer legend Buddy Rich and Animal, whilst other highlights included a lovely baritone solo by Diana Herak in "Rainbow Connection," "Mahna Mahna" and "Sesame Street".

It was clever, witty, and visually innovative with a good base of solid brass band musicianship and Kim Dekay won the 'Best Cornet Award' - earning her a new cornet courtesy of the sponsor, Buffet Crampon.



Best cornet player: Kim Dekay takes the sponsors prize

Maturity

Over the four occasions **Eastern Iowa Brass** has attended the U.S. Open, the band has come a long way in terms of musical maturity, instantly demonstrated during J.J. Richards' spirited "*The Waltonian*" march.

"*Barnacle Bill*," presented a euphonium solo performing variations on the traditional sailing song, whilst other selections included Aaron Copland's "*Hoedown*" from "*Rodeo*," Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays' "*Minuano*," and Ray Farr's arrangement of "*Intrada*," based on "*Ein Fest de Berg*."

It was another highly encouraging and progressive overall performance.

Varied

For **Motor City Brass** in sixth, a varied program that included a spirited opening item in "*Horizons*" by Paul Lovett-Cooper, "*Concertpiece for Cornet*" by James Curnow, "*The Purple Twilight*" by Robert Longfield, and "*Rolling Thunder*" by Henry Fillmore, was solidly played and presented.

Enjoyable

Meanwhile, **Prairie Brass** in seventh place also produced a varied and enjoyable set that included, "Go!" by Lucy Pankhurst, (commissioned for the event), "*Largo at Factotum*" by Rossini, "*Lezghinka*" by Khachaturian, "*Johnny One Note*" by Rodgers, arr. Dallas Niermeyer, "*Fanfare-March*" by Rodger Nixon and "*The Gael*" by Trevor Jones.

Same

The same could also describe **Madison Brass** in eighth place, whose selection included "*On the Waterfront*" by Leonard Bernstein, "*The Cossack*" by William Rimmer, "*Concerto for Trombone*" by Rimsky-Korsakov, "*Inspiration*" by de Haan and "*Pas Redouble*" of Camille Saint-Saens, arr. Craig Mason.

Spirited

That left a spirited and enjoyable performance from **Milwaukee Festival Brass** in ninth place with a selection that included, "*North by Northwest*" by Bernard Herrman, "*Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*" by Holst, "*Lost in the Night*" by Valerie A. Floeter, "*Death or Glory*" by R.B. Hall and "*Star Wars*" by John Williams.

Worthy winners

For the winners, a trip to meet and compete against the stars of UK banding at Brass in Concert in Gateshead.

Fountain City were worthy 2009 US Open Champions, and will represent the banding movement of United States of America with a great deal of pride and commitment on this coming weekend. They could also spring a surprise we hope too, for they are playing with rare confidence.

The U.S. Open Brass Band Championships will return to St. Charles on November 6th 2010.

Michael Boo

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