

U.S. Open Brass Band Championship By Michael Boo

Let's start with the most important fact you need to know about the U.S. Brass Band Open: The next one will be held on November 8, 2014 at the Norris Cultural Arts Center in St. Charles, Illinois, straight west of Chicago. Go ahead and put it in your calendar now...I'll wait.

DO IT!

Okay, now that we've taken care of that...

In 2003, after the very first U.S. Open Brass Band Championships, I wrote, "If you've never been to such an event, and you live within a hemisphere of Chicago, you should consider putting the U.S. Open Brass Band Championship on your calendar for next year."

That sentiment remains unchanged, now that we've just enjoyed the first U.S. Open of the event's second decade, featuring stunning performances from seven bands representing five states. The event was once again held at the magnificent acoustical enclave of the Norris Cultural Arts Center, which, as you already know, is in St. Charles, Illinois.

Also unchanged is the annual presence of emcee Frank Renton of BBC Radio 2, "The Voice of the U.S. Open." For the 11th year, Frank has enlightened all with his insights into the musical selections presented during each band's performance. With Frank, there is no such thing as dead time, as he's an encyclopedia of musical and cultural knowledge and presents that in quite an amusing and captivating manner. While the U.S. Open is unique on this side of the pond for having an Entertainment caption on the judging sheets, if Frank was a brass band, he'd win it every year with a perfect score.

The 11th annual U.S. Open Brass Band Championships, hosted by Prairie Brass Band and sponsored by Besson, once again brought some of the finest and most exciting music making to the heartland of America.

The judges for the U.S. Open were Dr. Paul Bauer, Director of Bands at Northern Illinois University, and Raymond Tizzard, Yamaha trumpet and cornet clinician and Orchestra Personnel Manager and Music Administrator of the National Ballet of Canada. Each participating band drew for performance order.

Fountain City Brass Band

1st place-239 points total (195-Music/44-Entertainment)

Repeating as Champion for the third year in a row, Fountain City Brass Band from Kansas City, Missouri and under the direction of Joseph Parisi, has now won six U.S. Open titles, over half those presented in the history of the event.

The band won the Championship trophy and \$1,000 from Buffet Group, a Partnership Sponsor, plus a \$100 Sam Ash gift certificate. In addition, the band automatically received an invitation to return to the 2014 Brass in Concert, the world's premier entertainment brass band contest held at The Sage Gateshead in England just two weeks after the U.S. Open. (Or, as Frank Renton stated, "...a fortnight.")

The band performed a more traditional-sounding program than what we heard from the band in the past, a Scottish repertoire dedicated to the Estes Park Longs Peak Scottish-Irish Highland Festival in Colorado. The band performed at that festival this past September, just one week prior to a devastatingly deadly flood that swept into the area and forever changed lives and landscapes.

Fountain City's set opened with "Riverdance" by Bill Whelen, arranged by Lee Harrelson. The many muted brass in the opening chorale, "Cloud Song," hauntingly re-creating the vocal opening to the popular worldwide sensation. In the spirited section that followed, the brass split up into different pods across the stage.

(For those who have never been to this festival, the bands frequently employ segments of their show in which they don't sit on chairs, allowing them to move around and explore different instrumental configurations.)

Philip Sparke's "Dundonnell" came next, the clarity of the myriad individual parts helping explain how the band won the Music caption by 7 points over its nearest competitor. The sudden mood changes—one second passive and restrained and the next aggressive and forceful—kept the audience guessing what was coming next.

Kenneth Downie's "Piper O'Dundee" featured soloist TJ Menges on tenor horn, as the rest of the horn section impeccably nailed the rapid-fire after-beats. The final selection was a medley of "Irish Tune from County Derry" by Percy Grainger, arranged by Denis Wright, and "Finale" from "St. Magnus" by Kenneth Downie, arranged by Lee Harrelson.

One could be forgiven for wondering where the pipe organ was being hidden during the massive euphonious sound of the Grainger. Surely this is what angels sound like when they sing. The instant transition to "St. Magnus" from the Grainger should not have worked, but somehow it did. The sudden crescendos of the numerous chords cut off so quickly that the leftover reverberations filled up one's ears with a sense of wonder. Indeed, this is what a Champion sounds like.

Chicago Brass Band

2nd place-235 points total (188-Music/47-Music)

If Fountain City was going to continue its dominance, someone forgot to tell the members of Chicago Brass Band, whose vast improvement and tighter sound developed by director Colin Holman over the past year was staggering. In addition to receiving the 2nd place trophy, a \$500 award from Woodwind & Brasswind and a \$100 gift certification from Sam Ash, the band captured the Most Entertaining Band Award, sponsored by Smith-Watkins, the Most Outstanding Percussion Section Award, sponsored by Brass Bands International and the Best Featured Soloist Award. Each of those three awards also came with a \$100 gift certificate from Sam Ash.

The show was titled, appropriately, "Going for the Gold," and commenced with "Olympic Fanfare and Theme" by John Williams, arranged by Forster and Dye. This is where the audience immediately recognized the huge sound that the band has developed since their first performance at the U.S. Open last year.

Stanley Boddington's "Silver Threads Among the Gold" is the piece that won the band the Best Featured Soloist Award, with cornet soloist Andrew Malovance risking busting his fingers. Rimsky-Korsakov's "March" from "Le Coq d'Or," arranged by Catherall, was super powerful, rich and full of bombast. (This fit into the theme about gold because the English translation of the title is "The Golden Cockerell.")

Perhaps the single most unforgettable musical moment of the event was the band's performance of "Lux Arumque" by Eric Whitacre, arranged by Smith. Originally a work for chorus, translated as "Light and Gold," the brass of the band dispersed along the two side walls of the auditorium, creating an antiphonal sound that was akin to being miniaturized and waking up inside a Leslie speaker. The beauty of the spatial surround-sound separation kept the heads of the audience turning from side to side, eliciting possibly the biggest crowd reaction of the day upon its conclusion.

The band closed its set with "Finale" from "Goldberg 2012" by Sven Giske. A short classical intro reminiscent of J.S. Bach's original "Goldberg Variations" quickly sequed into a rock rendition that skillfully played around with Bach's famous harpsichord works. There's no question the percussion section won its award due to its sensitive and enthused handling of the mallet ensemble feature that brought Bach's harpsichord to life. There were numerous moments of near cacophony throughout the piece, saved from complete musical anarchy at the last moment. The piece frequently seemed to be ready to spin out of control into the Norris Center's parking lot before Maestro Holman lassoed the errant musical phrases back into the corral.

Capital City Brass Band

3rd place-229 points total (185-Music)/44-Entertainment)

Capital City took home \$250 for 3rd place, a Sam Ash gift certificate for \$100 for its finish and another \$100 Sam Ash certificate for receiving the award for Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band, sponsored by Solid Brass Music.

The show was titled, “All Tied Up,” and featured a creative variety of tie references, starting out with a black tie server passing around “drinks” to the humorous “Champagne” by Goff Richards. The connection to the show title also referenced tying on one with homage to the noble grape. “The Carrollton March” by A. Clifton, arranged by the band’s music director and conductor William Waterman, won the band its arrangement/composition award. Quite unusual in its quiet regality, the march was originally written about a railroad built in Ohio, the first line to carry both freight and passenger traffic simultaneously. What “tied” this piece to the theme? Railroad ties.

“Rainy Day in Rio” by Goff Richards featured bass trombone soloist Christopher Sayles. A beach tiki bar was set up with a large umbrella protecting the spirits from a light rain during the equally light and laid-back samba. After the server took a “drink” to Mr. Renton, he explained that the band subtitled the work, “Mai Tai in Rio,” fitting the title in with the theme, even if it stretched the concept a bit far.

“Soul Bossa Nova” was written by Quincy Jones back in 1962, but it achieved greater fame as the theme for the Mike Myers series of “Austin Powers” superhero movies. For this work, the bar on stage was decorated with psychedelic tie-died accouterments. The band closed their production with Tchaikovsky’s “Finale” from “Symphony No 2” (“The Little Russian”), arranged by William Gordon. Maestro Waterman, returning to the stage in a white tie tux, led the band in what we were told was its symphonic white tie aspirations.

Dublin Silver Band

4th place-228 points total (183-Music/45-Entertainment)

Under the direction of Tim Jameson, Dublin Silver Band’s “The Power of One” was more introspective and darker than the band’s prior productions. “What does it take to change the world?” was the question upon which the show was based, exploring the power of dreams and visions and how one person imbued with determination can change things for the better.

The production started with brass off-stage and a lone female vocalist singing the opening to Barry Manilow’s “One Voice,” arranged by

Joshua Tyler Jameson. Three male vocalists joined in as the band entered from the sides. There was a dramatic pause programmed in as Frank Renton introduced the show, followed by a big, glorious symphonic hit in the face.

“Moses, Get Down” by Barrie Gott was a loud and funky rendition of the church hymn, “Let My People Go,” featuring a jazz trombone solo. The entire band played the music from memory so they could stand during the piece. Johan de Meij’s

“Extreme Make-over” was inspired by the Russian folk song Tchaikovsky used in his “Andante cantabile” from “String Quartet No. 1.” The now-famous bottle-blowing-in-harmony opening segment was accompanied by a fiendish 4-mallet marimba solo, like a great steam engine chugging across the open plains, chords flying all over the stage as if gunfire.

“Kaddish” by W. Francis McBeth, arranged by Joshua Tyler Jameson, was titled after the Jewish prayer in memory of the dead. Photos of victims of the Nazis, including Anne Frank, were placed over bars of concentration camp cells to form a wall that was then knocked down by a defiant survivor.

Good prevailed over evil in Paul Lovatt-Cooper’s “Walking with Heroes,” highlighted by words from heroes such as Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. The band closed its show with “You’ll Never Walk Alone” by Rodgers & Hammerstein, arranged by Joshua Tyler Jameson. A lovely choral rendition with all brass singing in perfect harmony was set atop a soft martial drumbeat, prior to the return of the horns coming in with a big climactic reprise of “One Voice.”

Prairie Brass Band

5th place-215 points total (175-Music/40-Entertainment)

The festival hosts Prairie Brass Band was under the direction of Dallas Niermeyer, who many years back, envisioned bringing the U.S. Open Brass Band Festival to fruition. Their set began with Paul-Lovatt Cooper’s “When Thunder Calls,” its extended fanfare opening sounding like a superhero movie theme.

“A Time for Peace” by Peter Graham, (originally from “The Essence of Time,” taken out of original and arranged by Graham for tenor horn), featured Mary Gingrich as tenor horn soloist, followed by Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Procession of the Nobles,” arranged by Ashmore.

This was the premiere performance of Dallas Niermeyer’s arrangement of “Bright New Morning,” originally written for 12 harps by Janet Harbison. Full of continuously shifting time signatures, this jig is well worthy of further exploration by other bands and it is hoped their directors get ahold of Niermeyer to discuss that.

The band’s march contribution was “Shrewsbury Fair” by Paul Neville, followed by “Caravan,” generally attributed to Duke Ellington, arranged by Sykes. A heavy bossa nova treatment explored themes other than the original melody, reinventing one of the jazz world’s most beloved classics.

Illinois Brass Band

6th place tie-207 points total after a 1.0 penalty (175-Music/33-Music)

The Illinois Brass Band, under the direction of Steve Squires, took a musical excursion through Europe, commencing with “Vienna Philharmonic Fanfare” by Richard Strauss, arranged by William Himes. Cornets started off on one side of the stage, with trombones, baritones and euphoniums off to the other side and the rest in the center.

Percy Grainger’s “Irish Tune from County Derry,” arranged by Denis Wright, featured the euphonium section. Known by a number of different titles, including “Danny Boy” and “Londonderry Air,” it was best summarized afterwards by Frank Renton when he stated, “It doesn’t matter what you call it, it’s beautiful.” This was followed by Geoffrey Brand’s arrangement of “Napoli” by Herman Bellstedt, better known as “Funiculi-Funicula.” Mark Ponso was featured on solo cornet.

“Valdres March” by Johnannes Hanssen, arranged by Herbert Moller, was a delightful march that ended with a solo cornetist walking off the stage alongside a marching snare drummer, as if a traditional patrol,

(a form of music that generally sneaks in and sneaks out to a martial beat). The band's set ended with Manuel de Falla's "Ritual Fire Dance," arranged by Allan Street, followed by three episodes of "An American in Paris" by George Gershwin, arranged by Howard Snell. As Frank Renton pointed out afterwards, Howard Snell is still alive, referring to a running joke throughout the band's set. (You sort of had to be there, and it's a pity if you weren't.)

Eastern Iowa Brass Band

6th place tie-207 points total (173 Music/34-Music)

There was no theme to the show presented by the Eastern Iowa Brass Band, directed by Alexander Beamer. The vigor of John Williams' "Overture to 'The Cowboys,'" arranged by Steve Sykes, captured the austerity of the open American western range. Dennis Madracek was featured as soprano cornet soloist in "On with the Motley" from "I, Pagliacci" by Leoncavallo, arranged by Ray Farr.

"Ol Man River" by Jerome Kern, arranged by Mark Freeh, was a spirited big band treatment, led by conductor Beamer on drumset. Peter Graham delicately arranged the traditional "Swedish Folk Song," (better known as "How Great Thou Art"), as a musical prayer.

The band concluded with an enthusiastic rendition of Karl King's "Melody Shop," arranged by Peter Smalley. The judges liked this rendition so much they proclaimed it the recipient of the Best Performance of a March award, sponsored by Brass Bands International. The band received a \$100 gift certificate from Sam Ash for the award, presented in memory of Dr. Roy Newsome, a beloved and extremely successful director of brass bands in the UK.

The annual buskers presentations were inserted into the festival in between the performances of the brass bands. For those not familiar with the term, "buskers" means to play music or other entertainment in a public place, usually while soliciting money. As each group performed, a buskers babe went through the auditorium and solicited money to be placed in a hat by enthused festival goers. The take, combined with that from the Buskers Preview held at a local bar the

night before, was over \$300. The entire amount was presented to the group selected by an anonymous judge in the audience.

This year's recipient of the buskers prize was the Fountain City quintet, which performed "Chinatown." Other buskers that entertained the audience included the Eastern Iowa Good Will Hunters, playing "Thrift Shop" by Macklemore, the Dublin Silver Band Screaming Shamrocks playing Bill Chase's "Get It On," the Prairie Dogs from Prairie Brass Band playing Steve Miller's "Swingtown," two groups from Capital City Brass Band; Slide Door Four (trombone quartet) playing "Take Five" and Imanadu, (a brass quintet), playing "The Chicken" and "Chameleon;" and Chicago Percussion, from the Chicago Brass Band, performing "Project Marbles" on plastic utility buckets and plastic trash containers.

You now have plenty of notice that the 12th annual U.S. Brass Band Open will be held on November 8, 2014 at the Norris Cultural Arts Center in St. Charles, Illinois. Of course, you've already got that on your calendar, so my job here is done.

Michael Boo is the Staff Writer for Drum Corps International and also writes for Bands of America and the winter guard and indoor marching percussion events of WGI, earning him the nickname, "The Pen of Pageantry." A composer, he is also a recipient of multiple ASCAP Plus Awards "for contributions to American music."