# The past and future of brass bands

Nigel Horne
njh@bandsman.co.uk

All around the world the instrumentation used in brass bands has been set in concrete for some time. This essay discusses the formative years of banding in the United Kingdom in the early and middle parts of the nineteenth Century, with an emphasis on the emergence of bands that were all brass, the evolution towards the current instrumentation, the development of the instruments used and the emergence of the saxhorn family as the source of the unique brass band sound. As the future progression of the movement is important, I shall discuss why the instrumentation is so inflexible, whether composers feel constrained by it, what attempts there have been to bypass these constraints and what instrumental experiments are possible.

The Oxford companion to Music in its Tenth Edition has under the heading of Brass Band:

Another typical constitution is as follows:

1 Soprano Cornet in E flat;

4 Solo Cornets in B flat;

1 Flugelhorn in B flat;

1 'Repiano' cornet in B flat;

2 Second cornets in B flat;

3 Third cornets in B flat;

3 Saxhorns called Solo, First and Second [ key not mentioned ];

2 Baritones in B flat (first and second);

3 Trombones (2 B flat and 1 G);

2 Euphoniums;

2 Bombardons in E flat;

2 Bombardons in B flat. [1]

The instrumentation of the modern brass band is now firmly fixed as set out above in both the concert and contest fields and has been so since the middle of the nineteenth century. The only major change has been the acceptance of percussion into contesting following its pioneering appearance in the Edinburgh Festival contest of 1952. In the view of the organisers of this contest there was no reason for it to remain banned as it was already in widespread concert use. Such a "radical" perspective strikes at the very roots of banding; any variance from the accepted norm that has been in use for generations is to be viewed with the greatest of suspicion. This outlook is also used to greet the mention of french horns and the like.

## The Formative Years

Yet this has not always been so. In the early years of the brass band movement there were no rules governing instrumentation, bands having to use the few brass instruments then available which could play a full chromatic scale. With the origins of bands being in the church bands, waits and other musical groups of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, brass bands evolved from a background that was not solely brass.

In the period 1810-1830 the groups that were to emerge as brass bands, Black Dyke (then Peter Wharton's Band), Besses o' the Barn (then Clegg's Reed Band), Stalybridge and the like, were Brass and Reed bands. The move to an all-brass line up seems mostly to have been one of decision rather than evolution. Besses made the change in 1849 (see note one) - though with a predictable reluctance to move over completely they kept a brass clarinet. The rest of the bands consisting of the more familiar line up of cornets, horns, tenor and bass trombones and an ophecleide. Black Dyke often broke up and reformed, the final time being in the 1850s when John Foster and Son took over their sponsorship as an all-brass group, John Foster having played the french horn with them in the 1830s when they had been a reed band. This was politically an important time with the end of the Napoleonic War seeing many ex-military musicians now available for bands. The return of these reed players affected the instrumentation of many bands at the time and will have helped to restrain the trend towards all-brass. Lineups such as those at the Bolton Band with clarinets, piccolos, bassoons and serpents and the Chorlton Band that boasted 24 members including clarinets, piccolos and a bass drum seem to have been typical. The New Mills Prize Band also started as brass and reed. Many other bands of that time had these and older instruments such as keyed bugles, serpents and the like, one such being Bramley Old Reed Band, which became all brass in 1836 when it became a temperance band. The details of the instrumentations used by these and other bands including Stalybridge Old Band display the importance of the military band in the roots of the brass band.

## The Move to Brass

It is open to debate which group was the first to switch to an all-brass line up. One band with a strong case is the Blaina Band based in Monmothshire in Wales, then supported by Brown's Ironworks, which converted during 1832, though there appears to be no record of the chosen lineup. The band used Enbach instruments from Amsterdam, which were dated from the 1830s and were among the earliest successful valve instruments.

Nevertheless, the *en-mass* moves to all brass did not mean the instant appearance of the modern brass band and its instruments. Keyed bugles, also known as cornopeans, as used at the time by the Band of the Coldstream Guards, ophecleides (the spelling varies), bass horns and serpents were in great use before the invention of their modern counterparts: the cornet/flugelhorn and tuba (bass). The keyed bugle was a small soprano member of the ophecleide family. The bass ophecleide (see Figure One) resembled a tall metal bassoon having an eight-inch bell and a series of holes covered by discs and keys not unlike a modern saxophone. Pitched in either C or B-flat, it had a sound quality similar to a euphonium's. There appears to have been no appearance of the alto ophecleide in E flat or F as described by Berlioz, or the double bass ophecleide. Ophecleide means "keyed serpent" in Greek, which is strange given that the serpent, which was also a keyed instrument, looked more like an eight-foot long snake. Made out of walnut, the serpent, having been around since the sixteenth century, was not a brass instrument, although unlike modern woodwind instruments it used a mouthpiece. Its sound was not unlike a double bassoon though it had the range and tessitura of an ophecleide. The bass horn varied from the serpent only in the shape of the snake, instead of being a series of wriggles (like a series of S's) the bass horn merely doubled back on itself.

## The Introduction of the Modern Valve

The modern brass band could not appear before the invention of the three-valve instrument. The cornet à piston produced in France in 1830 was to become the cornopean in Britain after its introduction in 1834. By replacing the keyed bugle a fully chromatic scale was now possible.

Before then only natural horns and trumpets had been available. Haydn's E-flat trumpet concerto of 1796 had been written for Anton Weidinger, the Viennese court trumpeter. Weidinger had invented a trumpet that used a system of holes and keys like a clarinet, enabling it to produce the complete chromatic scale. Any notes not in the harmonic series of a natural instrument are played by the manipulation of the lips and right hand, though often with only a limited success as the quality of such notes could be poor. French horn players used a selection of crooks while trumpets used a selection of instruments to help performance in different keys. Like the modern french horn, the harmonic series of these instruments differs from the saxhorn by an octave. For example a low E can be played open as can a D on the fourth line of the treble clef, indeed low D is playable with only the first valve on a modern french horn. The closeness of the harmonics on these natural instruments also added to their difficulty above the obvious work needed to lip any other notes. The trombone is a much more ancient instrument. It evolved from the medieval Sackbut, which looked like a "pea-shooter" trombone with a small bell.

## The Leading Figures and the Emergence of Adolphe Sax

During the early and middle part of the nineteenth century many companies were involved in the race to perfect valve technology, including John Shaw (Glossop), Enbach (Amsterdam - importantly they were producing three valved instruments) and Wigglesworth. With no standard instrument playing technique or band instrumentation there was the classic "catch 22 situation" with both bands and manufacturers awaiting the emergence of a dominant instrumental standard. Here we see the first reason for the emergence of one all encompassing instrumentation on bands: the company to produce the best valved instruments, which could easily be taught to the large number of budding musicians, would surely capitalise on their investment and ensure that more bands used their instruments. Eventually one market leader emerged and Adolphe Sax won the race.

Sax was the renowned inventor of the families of Saxhorn and Saxophone, the former of which is still used as the backbone of every brass band. The adoption of Sax's instruments in the organisation has been claimed to be the work of John Distin and his family who appeared at the right time to introduce the instruments into the UK, Distin having previously played the slide trumpet then the keyed bugle. Distin toured in 1837 with a family quintet of slide trumpet, trombone, natural (unvalved) french horns and piano, which he had formed with his four sons. In 1844 Distin met Sax in Paris where Sax, though Belgian, was promoting the new instruments he had recently perfected. The Saxhorn and Saxophone families where heavily promoted by Berlioz, though unfortunately he seems not to have used them extensively himself. At a concert organised by Berlioz consisting of a B-flat trumpet (presumably keyed), cornet, saxhorn

(presumably tenor - see note two), clarinet, bass clarinet and saxophone, Distin commissioned Sax to produce a set of instruments for his quintet.

Two factors were destined to establish the importance of the Saxhorn. First, many instrument manufacturers of the time used the Great Exhibition of 1851 as a showcase, indeed many companies used their own bands to show off their latest instruments as the Industrial Revolution helped to introduce new production skills in the manufacture of brass instruments. John Distin used the Exhibition to show his Saxhorns, and we can infer that they were widely admired by the instrument makers. Secondly, and more importantly in the emergence of the saxhorns, the Manchester Belle Vue Contest of 5th September 1853 was won by the Mossley Temperance Saxhorn Band, the only band to fully use the brand new saxhorns that they had brought from Henry Distin. With only ten players, Mossley was a smaller band than the others at the contest, but was judged to have a better sound, and the easier playing allowed them to win (though even as today some felt that the only reason they won was that the draw to play last may have helped). An audience of some 16,000 people heard them, and they would have seen the effectiveness of this instrumentation above all others in the contest field. This seems to have been the case as in 1854 they were no longer the Saxhorn's sole user. Soon after, the modern Brass Band was to take shape, and the instrumentation started to become standardised through many different manufacturers. Boosey's took over Henry Distin's brass manufacturing business in 1865.

Contests were now beginning to appear throughout the country with the arrival of the railway system, and they were becoming grand, and more important, formal affairs. As such, we

now see the second reason for the standard instrumentation: bands with different instruments from different manufacturers would be more difficult to judge between at contests. It was contests that "rationalised" the formats to one set up, otherwise competition was deemed to be impossible. It is worth pointing out here that the diversity of musical sounds and colours at the start of the movement was not because of musical experimentation, but rather simply because no standard had yet emerged. Once it did the possibility for such experimentation was all but dead.

## One Standard Instrumentation Emerges

At the end of the 1860 National Finals held in the Crystal Palace in London there was a massed band concert that contained the players from the 44 bands that were competing. It is worth listing the instruments used in this so called "Handel Orchestra" because of the insight it gives us to the instruments in use at the time: cornets, soprano cornets, E-flat althorns (often known as the clavicor in Britain, the althorn was to become the tenor horn), D-flat althorns, baritones, tenor and bass trombones, euphoniums, ophecleides, E-flat and B-flat basses (out of 1390 there were only two B-flat basses) and percussion. Notice how forward looking it was: in the 30 or so years since the time of Peter Wharton's Band a trend away from the old reed bands can be seen, and there were no longer any keyed bugles or serpents in use by the players attending this contest. The flugelhorn, the descendant of the keyed bugle, was however still to come.

The new instruments were very expensive but extensive sponsorship and contest prizes helped. A contest in 1855 included an E-flat bass as its first prize, valued at £10.50.

The final pressure for standardisation also occurred during the mid-eighteenth Century, namely the emergence of dedicated brass band music and publishing companies. Richard Smith started publishing his Champion Brass Band Journal from 1857, although it was another 24 years before Wright and Round started in 1881. Uniquely, the journal offered original brass band music removing the previous need to borrow from military band scores. Peter Wharton, of Peter Wharton's Band in the time before they turned to the all-brass Black Dike [sic] Mills Band, had to travel from Queensbury to Manchester to obtain music from military bands garrisoned there. Dedicated brass publishers forced one standard line up for obvious commercial reasons, and with the hardening of the 1709 Copyright Act through such means as the 1886 Berne Convention that gave rights to foreign copyright owners in this country, band conductors would find it more difficult to orchestrate the latest operatic aria to their own particular instrumentation. This and the other reasons outlined above lead to the single standard line up. We should further note that, in theory at least, contests restricted only the number of players in a band, it was the musical conventions used in published test pieces that were to establish the exact instrumentation.

With the standardisation in place further restrictions started to come into force further stifling any chance for experimentation. The 1863 Crystal Palace contest rules said that all bands were to be tuned to the pitch of the Crystal Palace Organ, the Belle Vue contest of the same year stated that "all cornets must be in B-flat", the 1889 contest said that "slide trombones

only will be allowed". This latter rule was put in place after a euphonium player from Black Dyke was caught playing a trombone part on a valve trombone.

By the end of the nineteenth century the instrumentation was entirely brass, except percussion, which was not allowed at contests. This is an important point, as it shows that there exists a precedent for concert and contest bands to have different instrumentation, leaving open the opportunity for experimentation, which will be discussed below.

## Does Imagination and Originality Still Exist?

For many years the instrumentation remained unchanged and unquestioned. Only comparatively recently have some arrangers and composers felt that they would like to add to the existing range of tone colours. Nearly all experiments have been from within the system, presumably as this would be more acceptable against the inertia and reluctance to see any change. Here "within" means avoiding the accepted practices by slight alterations rather than the radical uses of new orchestrations to produce different tone colours. It is the difference between deciding which colours can be produced with the instruments available, and what instruments are needed to produce the tone colours wanted. Edward Gregson has experimented with the use of two flugels, though this is not new: John Gladney's Meltham Mills Band in the 1870s had two flugels in its line up, dropping one of their cornet players. Thomas Wilson, as long ago as the early 1960s, used four timpani in his Sinfonietta. Surely an extreme measure taken from within is Sir Harrison Birtwistle's use of a different stave for each player in the band, for example nine cornet parts, four bass parts and so on. Though pushing the current format to its

full potential, it still stays very much within the set boundaries. One large problem still exists for original composers. Often the only way to cover the costs of publication is to write for a contest where sales are guaranteed but formats are fixed, in the concert field to ensure sales most arrangements are even now still of lighter music with a more conservative outlook. Another route is via specific commissions, such as Edward Gregson's French Horn Concerto (for Ifor Jones) and Tuba Concerto (for John Williams), and Gilbert Vinter's The Trumpets (for solo bass voice, mixed voice choir and a band augmented with trumpets, two sopranos and 35 percussion players). Eric Ball said that he would like to use two soprano cornets and flugels. Other composers, such as Robert Simpson, have been happy to leave the band instrumentation alone.

The viewpoint of a composer on whether to be "within" is generally based on the route they have taken into brass band composition. Those brought up from within the movement often take the more conservative line. Robert Simpson, for example, comes from a traditional Salvation Army background, whereas Peter Maxwell Davies, composer of The Peat Cutters for the National Youth Band of Scotland requiring some 60 players and a choral part, Gilbert Vinter, a bassoon player and Gordon Jacob come from outside.

There is a more acceptable route to different tone colours. The appearance of the mute has been slow and not universally accepted. Eric Ball hardly ever used them. Initially there were only straight mutes for cornets and trombones that were often used for reason of volume reduction rather than tone colour, which is rather strange as fortissimo through a straight mute has a uniquely piercing and exciting quality. Now we often see writing for cup and harmon mutes. Also emerging is the use of mutes for other instruments, a muted flugel having a similar

sound to a muted tenor trombone in its higher register. Euphonium mutes first appeared in Henry Geehl's scoring of Elgar's Severn Suite, which was commissioned for the 1930 National Contest final. Their use was not deemed to be a success and it was a long time before they were to reappear. Even now the rarity of writing and expense of purchasing mutes for flugel, euphonium and basses means that many conductors ignore the "muted" instruction on scores, although tenor horn players can use tenor trombones' mutes, and baritone players can use bass trombones' mutes.

Before the mid 1960s there was a more practical problem to overcome regarding experimentation with other instruments: pitch. While all other musical ensembles tuned to an A above middle C pitched at 440Hz, brass bands tuned to 452.5Hz - so called "high pitch". Even the change to Universal Pitch was met with predictable stubbornness. The rule about pitching to the Crystal Palace organ was short-lived due to its obvious practical difficulty, the change being forced by the manufacturers and fixed at 1st April 1965.

## What is Available to the Modern Composer?

Using commissioned works, separate concert and contest bands, adopting universal pitch and more "professional" tutoring, so that the argument for one key system and one clef has been reduced, has made experimentation more possible. Assuming that any instrument to be tried is brass I have compiled this list of instruments detailing the pros and cons for each instrument in turn and suggesting their relevance to the brass band.

Alto trombone: I have put this first as I consider it to have a good case for trial. Either tenor trombone or tenor horn players could play it (it is pitched in E-flat), it would allow the creation of a trombone choir with full four-part harmony and would fill the gap between third cornet and first trombone. The use of a third tenor trombone, already common practice in Salvation Army bands, would have this advantage while also allowing such a player to double the first part on other music.

Contrabass trombone: Les Brockman of Ramsgate once told me he had the only example of this instrument in the UK. Whether or not he was right, this instrument, which is pitched in low B-flat, is a rarity. Unlike the alto trombone it has only been rarely used in orchestral writing (Wagner's Ring and Strauss's Elector). In practice the contrabass trombone is a difficult instrument to play and would only be of use in some well-defined scores, modern orchestras would be likely to use a tuba to play any parts. One use could be as an aid to the existing bass trombone player to help in some very low scores - such as Howard Snell's arrangement of Watch Your Step, where pedal B-flats, A's and even a G are required; these are tricky to play while avoiding harshness. Alternatively it can strengthen the B-flat bass line. The prize of "best bass player" in the 1861 Crystal Palace final was won by W. L. Marriner's band - the Band of the 35th York Rifle Volunteer Corps. The player was using a contrabass trombone.

Bass trombone: Some are sorry to see the disappearance of the "old G". The instrument is however worthy of mention as an example that evolution can and does occur.

Mellophone/Sousaphone: These add little that cannot be achieved by the tenor horn and Bass respectively, though in some scoring the forward facing bells could help with projection.

Trumpet in B-flat: In the hands of mediocre players there can be little or no difference between the sounds of the trumpet and cornet. However they undoubtedly have different sounds and technique when in the hands of better players and in a military band they have separate parts. Alternatively the players of a brass band could learn to be able to switch between trumpets and cornets from piece to piece, or even from passage to passage. This would not help the embouchure of some lesser players, but it can be pulled off as displayed by members of the James Shepherd Versatile Brass. The conductor is easily able to experiment with sounds in various passages, he or she must be careful however not to avoid losing sight of a composer's intentions. However, in summary, the trumpet's sound may be too different for it to be considered for anything other than some well-defined passages.

Trumpet in F/E-flat: The same arguments apply as for the B-flat trumpet mentioned above, though here the trumpet would back up the soprano.

Piccolo trumpet in B-flat: As the trumpet in F/E-flat, although like the contrabass trombone the piccolo trumpet could aid a soprano player with an extensive high passage, or could help lift the upper note barrier faced by composers and arrangers in specific passages.

French horns: Unlike the other instruments the french horn has two added technical difficulties. First the valves, usually rotary, are played by the left hand, and second as noted

before, the fingering of all notes is out by an octave. This second point is due to the unusually small bore and when coupled with the very largely flared bell one can see intonation and other problems. The french horn is the most difficult of all-brass instruments to play. In the 1970s the Watney Band, under the baton of Albert Meek, experimented with french horns (along with a string bass). I consider the experiment to be a failure, showing that the sound of the french horn does not blend with that of the brass band. Also I suspect it was done less for musical reasons and more because Mr. Meek came from a military background and could not convert. Ifor Jones used tenor cors as a replacement for tenor horns in the mid 1970's with Besses o' the Barn Band, even contesting with them. However he could not resolve their intonation problems and after he left they were dropped.

Bass trumpet: The bass trumpet in B-flat is similar in quality to a valve trombone. The bass trumpet in E-flat is rarely to be found in orchestral writing. The most noticeable example being Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, which includes a muted passage for trumpets in three octaves with the lowest part played on a muted E-flat bass trumpet. The part includes a low F natural implying the need for a fourth valve. I doubt this instrument would add anything to the brass band not already provided by the tenor trombone, though it would appear that Stravinsky thought otherwise.

I believe the best candidates for trial to be: an alto or third tenor trombone either played by an extra player, piccolo trumpet for use of the soprano cornet player, trumpets for use of cornet players. Less useful would be a contrabass trombone, french horn and E-flat or F trumpet.

Least useful would be the bass trumpet, mellophone, sousaphone and Wagner tuba family, which I have not discussed, their sound being a cross between a french horn and a saxhorn.

## The Case For and Against the Current Format

When I first started to look for material for this essay, I was quite clear in my mind that there is a requirement for a review of the current instrumentation. When the sole reason for maintaining a status quo is that it has tradition behind it, then the time has come for a review. However, I now find myself changing my mind. Composers such as Philip Wilby do not seem constrained, they find new colour by experimenting with the sounds available from three percussionists, or from new mutes, or mutes in unlikely uses, such as the use of a muted pedal F (concert pitch) in the bass trombone in his Variations on a theme of Paganini.

John McCabe's Cloudcatcher Fells of 1985 also shows us that with imagination there still remains a depth of colour to be explored. This piece depicts various places in the Lake District. Experimentation can be seen as soon as the score is opened with individual parts for all the players. Notice also the individual cornet parts from figure three onwards, and the use of muted Euphoniums and cup muted flugel to open. One also notices a more orchestral approach to the instrumentation. By this I mean that the old approach of important parts tending to be given to the soloists of the band with everyone else just accompanying has been set aside. Consider the cornet section, they are often treated more as equals: see the latter part of figure 18 and "Striding Edge". The percussion used by the standards of even the 1960s is varied, though by modern standards the breadth of instruments chosen is quite conservative.

Whether these or other changes are likely to appear is open to speculation but must remain unlikely. Grimethorpe Colliery Band's recently recorded Alex Owen's composition 'A

Night at the Opera' using the "original" of three flugels doubling the back row cornets is not a sign of a new trend. The market forces of the instrument makers and publishers, and the stifling pressures of the contest are as strong and relevant today as they were in the mid nineteenth century, and when coupled with the inertia against change that has built up over the last 150 years it is hard to see any hope. A movement without organic growth must stagnate and decline, although change for changes sake and gimmicks must be avoided. The difficulty in recruitment faced by most modern bands must have a reason.

Notes:

1) Many sources have different dates, particularly concerning the move to all-brass in the mid nineteenth century. As the argument covering these dates is irrelevant to the argument presented herein I have in each case chosen one of the dates arbitrarily, the trends will still be chronologically valid.

2) Where it is not specifically mentioned, I have used the British Brass Band usage of the saxhorn family: tenor instead of alto (which would surely be more sensible), and similarly baritone instead of tenor.

Discography:

The Watney Silver Band, Saga EROS 8129, 1974.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks for the time spent on the telephone with Peter Wilson of the British Bandsman and Violet Brand.

References:

[1] SCHOLES P (1970) The Oxford Companion to Music. 10th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-311306-6, page 127.

Bibliography:

BRAND G and V (1979) Brass Bands in the 20th Century. Letchworth: Egon Publishers Ltd. ISBN 0-905858-12-3.

GAMMOND P and HORRICKS R (1980) Music On Record: Brass Bands. Cambridge: Patrick Stephens Ltd. ISBN 0-85059-366-2.

HERBERT T, ed. (1991) Bands, The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Bury St. Edmunds: Open University Press, ISBN 0-335-09702-2.

McCABE J (1985) Cloudcatcher Fells. Sevenoaks: Novello, Catalogue Number 12 0608 07.

NEWSOME R (1992) Beyond the Bandstand. Chapel-en-le-Frith: Canon Publications. ISBN 0-947848-07-X.

TAYLOR A R (1979) Brass Bands. St. Albans: Granada. ISBN 0-246-11082-1.

Further Research:

Study of Peter Maxwell Davies's The Peat Cutters, Gilbert Vinter's The Trumpets, the music of Philip Wilby, Derek Bougeois Concerto for Band and any other relevant compositions.

Survey composers for their viewpoints.