

2011 U.S. Open Brass Band Championships

by Michael Boo

The 9th annual U.S. Open Brass Band Championships was held in St. Charles, Illinois on November 5, 2011 and brought together six heralded bands from six different states. Once again, BBC Radio 2's Frank Renton magnificently fulfilled his role as "The Voice of the U.S. Open," offering insightful observations about each of the musical programs, before and even during each presentation.

When the dust settled, Fountain City Brass Band won its fourth title and a surprising turn of events saw the Brass Band of Central Florida fall out of the top two positions for the first time in the history of the U.S. Open, with Dublin Silver Band placing 2nd.

For its Grand Championship win, Fountain City was awarded a trophy and \$1,000 from Besson, receiving an invitation to the 2012 Brass in Concert in the UK. The band also won \$250 from Brass Bands International by being declared as having the Outstanding Percussion at the U.S. Open, and Lee Harrelson won the Buffet Crampon \$250 prize for Best Featured Brass Solo.

Dublin Silver Band won a trophy for placing 2nd and also took home \$500 from Denis Wick. Dublin also won the Most Entertaining Band Award and \$250 from Yamaha and the Best Performance of a March Award and \$250 from Brass Bands International. The latter honor was awarded in honor of Roy Newsome, who passed away a few weeks earlier. Roy was well known and beloved in the British brass band movement and was one of the most successful directors of brass bands of the past century.

Dee McAfee, soprano cornet from the Brass Band of Central Florida, won a new cornet from Buffet Crampon for capturing the Best Cornet Award.

The Prairie Brass Band, hosts of the event, captured the remaining two awards. Director Dallas Niermeyer won \$250 from Smith-Watkins and the Best New Arrangement of Composition for Brass Band Award. The band's Buskers entry, Prairie Dogs, was presented the \$293 that was collected in the top hat that was passed around the auditorium throughout the day, selected as the winning Buskers entry by an anonymous judge sitting somewhere in the room.

The judges for the U.S. Open were Dale Lonis and Jay Kennedy. Dr. Lonis is Chief Executive Officer of the Elgin (Illinois) Symphony and previously was Dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Manitoba. He has appeared as guest conductor on stages around the world. Dr. Kennedy is Vice President for Academic Affairs/Vice Provost at the Berklee School of Music and is renown as a composer of commercial jingles and film scores. He has received numerous awards for producing recordings by several pop artists.

Fountain City Brass Band

1st place—238 points total (195 Music-1st/43 Entertainment-2nd)

“Piazzola F.C.” (“Piazzola Fountain City”) kicked off the band’s set with baritone and muted cornet, with the rest of the band standing, facing away from the audience. As the brass turned to face the front in “Libertango,” lots of different cross rhythms exploded across the various sections of the brass. There was much movement of bodies into different forms on the stage, climaxing with an angled jazz band-like set-up, with the brass turning to the audience and releasing an awesome barrage of full-bored power.

“Flight & Zeibebikos” was a new setting of two diverse works by Philip Wilby, edited by Lee Harrelson, who also performed the work in his Best Featured Brass Soloist role. Although “Flight” was originally written as a Tenor Horn solo, one would never know that listening to Harrelson milk the chorale for all it was worth. The astoundingly fast runs from the Greek dance “Zeibekikos” ended with two percussionists smashing plates into a garbage can, creating a genuine “Opa!” moment.

Next up was William Himes’ solemn and haunting setting of “Amazing Grace.” What was most intriguing about this work was how the band maintained the work’s restraint, keeping the lid on the cauldron that so easily could have boiled over.

Mark Taylor’s “Scream Machine” was arranged by Harrelson and retitled, “Brass Machine.” While it’s hard enough to keep one drum set from being one too many, (according to a joking aside from the stage by Renton), try imagining keeping two drum sets from getting in the way of the band and each other. And yet it was perfectly appropriate. The extended six-person award winning augmented percussion section laid down a solid beat for the entire cornet section, that section’s jazz inflections in a soli feature being most impressive.

Excerpts from Johan de Meij’s “Extreme Make-Over” commenced with the section where the cornets play bottles tuned with different amounts of water, while a marimbist navigates a thoroughly wicked mallet feature. The equally wicked tuba feature was nailed with the utmost of ease. Things kept getting more and more involved and convoluted until one had to wonder how the members of the band could ever end at the same time.

After the awards ceremony, director Joseph Parisi stated, “This band works really hard. There’s a family environment I can’t explain. It’s all about making music at the highest artistic level, not necessarily about winning. The fact that it turned out this way is a true testament to the hard work this band is accustomed to doing.”

Scott Watson, who plays BB-flat tuba, echoed Parisi’s comments: “We work so hard...you have to love the process. Some of the greatest fun we have is in

rehearsal.” E-flat tuba player Greg Battista added, “This whole week in preparation was a cupcake, and the win was a cherry on top.”

Band arranger and star soloist Lee Harrelson commented, “It’s just a privilege, an indescribable honor, (since we vote on the soloist), that the band would trust me enough to stand up there. I love those guys.”

Dublin Silver Band

2nd place—233 points total (187 Music-3rd/46 Entertainment-1st)

“A Hero’s Tale” continued the band’s quest to tell a story through the arc of its visual presentation. The production was interspersed by Frank Renton narrating snippets from Joseph Campbell’s book, “The Hero With a Thousand Faces.” Josh Jameson, a composition and trombone major at Ohio State University, arranged much of the production. He has a bright future ahead of himself in making contributions to the world of brass bands.

Jameson’s “Happy at Home” kicked off the costumed play, the members attired in medieval costuming. This work was based on the six-note theme of the Van der Roost piece that followed later in the show. Essentially, the hero reluctantly went off to war, leaving behind his true love to face uncertainty and potential death. The brazen extended fanfare of the traditional “Agincourt Song,” arranged by Howarth and Farr, brought the cornets and trombones to the front for a stirring and bellicose send-off to the battlefield.

“For the Love of a Princess” (from “Braveheart”), arranged by Duncan, captured the heartfelt love of the hero as he wondered if he would ever see his girlfriend again. But the sight of his lovely lass was eradicated as he went off to war amidst the bombast and enthusiasm of Van der Roost’s “Mercury,” which won the Best Performance of a March Award. Van der Roost’s “Albion” reveled in the horror of the brutality of war, its intentional ugliness and siege of percussive violence supporting the cries of the mid-voice horns that jumped out of the cataclysm in anguish and despair.

“Benedictus” from “The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace” by Jenkins, arranged by Small, presented a solemn yearning for an end to the armed aggression. But before peace could be achieved, a complete and resolute victory had to first be attained during Philip Sparke’s “The Battle of Rastarkaiv” from “The Saga of Haakon the Good.” There was no question as to the meaning of this piece; it had all the subtlety of a tank running over a bag of marshmallows.

Slowly, all the brass came to the front of the stage during Jameson’s “Home Again,” a song of hope that conveyed the overwhelming joy of surviving the carnage. The brass ended offstage, except for the percussion and a single cornet, offering a short reflection on the turmoil that preceded the ending and a hope for a peace from which the horror of war would be forever absent.

The band's Buskers offering was the 9-piece Dublin Cornet Band, performing "Brass Roots," a Gospel praise piece.

Tim Jameson, director of Dublin Silver Band, had this to say about the band's 2nd place finish: "It's exciting rubbing shoulders with some of the top bands in the country, if not the world. We're proud of what we've accomplished and excited about coming back and maybe improving. It's a rare thing to accomplish and I'm really proud of the people in the band. We have a group of 30 people who are completely on the same page, who buy in to what we're trying to accomplish. When we came together a year and-a-half ago to do this, we decided we wanted to tell a story and touch people on an emotional level. It's different than what a lot of groups set out to do. We're about wanting to make people feel."

Brass Band of Central Florida

3rd place—228 points total (190 Music-1st/38 Entertainment-3rd)

Make no mistake: Just because this band placed 3rd doesn't mean they won't be a serious threat at the upcoming Brass in Concert. A different judging panel with a different concept of what Entertainment is could have easily erased that 8-point Entertainment deficit to Dublin Silver Band (that put them down by 5 points to the 2nd place score).

Those attending Brass in Concert are bound to be entertained out of their knickers by this production. Expect heart rates to be raised by this atypical commercially polished production, and one might surmise it's possible fans in Britain already felt the presentation via the sound waves that bounced off the orbiting planets during the performance at the U.S. Open.

The band's Latin-themed production kicks off with director Chad Shoopman's arrangement of Piazzola's "Tres Minute: con in Realidad" ("Three Minutes in Reality"), a hot, hot, hot searing big band jazz piece that sounds more like the best of Stan Kenton or Maynard Ferguson than what we expect from Piazzola. A bevy of screaming trumpets drove up the temperature to boiling point. Wait a moment; unlike many other brass band contests, trumpets aren't allowed at the U.S. Open.

Seriously, one can easily not realize that the upper brass members are screeching on cornets, which aren't typically expected to reach into the stratosphere with the ease of trumpets. The work ended with a screeching Tenor Horn solo, just for good measure and to demonstrate that cornets aren't the only instrument that can offer surprise by reaching notes far above the musical staff.

Frank Perkins "Fandango," arranged by J.H. Howe, put a toreador spin on the popular Spanish dance. This was followed by Rick Mizell's arrangement of Piazzola's "Oblivion," featuring Tenor Horn and cornet solos. With the entire

brass section standing, the tender trombone trio and muted cornet solo was akin to having chocolate melt in one's mouth.

A drum set, congas, vibes and marimba intro kicks off Arturo Sandoval's "A Mis Abuelos" ("To my Grandparents"), arranged by Jim Derrick. This hot Latin samba witnessed director Shoopman taking two stratospheric screech solos...on cornet. He mentioned he had thought about playing the solos on trumpet at Brass in Concert, but was asked by some in Europe to demonstrate that the cornet can do whatever a trumpet can, even if it does take more effort. Cornet aficionados are going to be impressed as they experience multiple joy spasms.

"Danza del trigo" ("The Wheat Dance") from Aberto Ginestara's "Danzas del ballet Estancia", arranged by Shoopman, starts with an offstage solo and is set up in a continuous arc with marimba and vibes in front. This lovely work (which is far more difficult than it sounds on the surface) gives the lips of the performers (and the ears of the audience) a chance to rest prior to Ginestara's "Danza final: Malambo" from "Danzas: del ballet "Estancia." An instant standing ovation from the entire audience was awarded the band for their show, which was, as we say in America, a "barn burner." (I don't know if that term translates across the pond.)

Much of the presentation in the earlier part of the show utilized the brass in wide-open arcs, which allowed the band's power to be fully appreciated. There were a couple segments at the contest where the band moved to the traditional brass band set-up, and the difference in sound projection was noticeable. Shoopman says the band will be experimenting with opening up the rest of the production prior to Brass in Concert.

The band entered two Buskers ensembles; Hurricane Force, a brass barbershop quartet performing "Lida Rose" and "Goodnight, Ladies" from the movie, "The Music Man," and Hurricane Funk, performing a hard-driving rendition of the classic "The Trolley Song."

After the awards ceremony, director Chad Shoopman said, "Like any experience, good or bad, there are things to learned that can help things improve. The journey and growth is what ultimately matters. The bar is being raised and brass bands are clearly getting better all over the country. We're thrilled to be going to Brass in Concert, back to where brass banding was born. Any opportunity to hear brass bands in the cradle of the activity can only make us better. Our goal is to expose the British audience to music and performance elements they may have never seen or heard before."

Eastern Iowa Brass Band

4th place—211 points total (177 Music-5th/34 Entertainment-4th)

This band celebrated its 25th anniversary with a new conductor, UK born and raised Kate Wohlman. Performing selections from the movie, "Brassed Off," the

members wore coal miner helmets in homage to the movie (and particularly, a tribute to recently deceased Pete Postlethwaite, who played the part of the music director). This is the 15th anniversary of the release of the film, which was expected to just have a minor impact in Britain and instead became a global phenomenon.

Percy Grainger's "Irish Tune from County Derry" was performed on a darkened stage, akin to the environment of the assemblage that performed outside the hospital in the film for the terminally ill conductor. The band successfully stayed remarkably restrained until the final climax, when the cornets came in and made the hairs stand up on the backs of the audience's collective heads.

William Rimmer's "The Crest of Honour" was enthusiastically delivered from a standing position, performed from memory. This most classic of British brass band repertoire has been warmly embraced in America. Joaquin Rodrigo's "Conceirto de Aranjuez," originally written for classical guitar and performed by the female band member Gloria in the film, was arranged by Bolton in a mellow lilting jazz mood.

Director Wohlman arranged "Jerusalem" in a fashion that contemporized the classic British patriotic tune by updating it with the 1970s rock beat version delivered by the progressive rock band, Emerson, Lake & Palmer. Grant's arrangement of Rossini's "Overture to William Tell" was played in its entirety (as opposed to just the last 3 ½ minutes presented in the film), making good use of exposed solo flourishes and crescendo and diminuendi.

Eastern Iowa Brass Band offered two Buskers ensembles; Dr. Max and the Maize State Mambo Masters, 14 horns and drum set playing a fiery mambo (with director Kate Wohlman on Sousaphone) and an ensemble of five tubas performing the euphonious "Sweet and Low."

Music City Brass Band

5th place—209 points total (178 Music-4th/31 Entertainment-5th)

"The Spirit of America" was the title of this production, starting with the brass conveying the sound of church bells ringing during John Gibson's "Pegasus," arranged by Craig Strain. Strain's arrangement of William Schuman's setting of the Revolutionary War hymn "Chester" was a faithful reproduction of the American concert band classic.

Each selection was preceded by an historic quote by an American leader regarding the spirit of the music to follow. Dan Price's "An American Tale" celebrated the success of the Underground Railroad, a network of safe havens set up to assist those escaping the horrendous bondage of slavery prior to and during the American Civil War. The joy of freedom and the challenges to be

faced were heard in settings borrowed from “The Gospel Train is Coming” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.”

A large American flag was unveiled during Philip Graham’s “Seize the Day,” a medley of popular American patriotic tunes such as “Yankee Doodle” and “Dixieland.”

The two Buskers offerings from the band included Lunatics playing “Fly Me to the Moon” while dressed as astronauts, and a cornet and euphonium duet performing a triptych of a modern brass essay.

Prairie Brass Band

6th place—202 points total (172 Music-5^{6h}/30 Entertainment-6th)

“The Sounds of Brass” was the title of the host band’s show, kicking off with Richard Phillips’ “Joy, Peace, and Happiness.” A New Orleans-style parade-like praise chorus was enthused with unrestrained glory, most aptly conveying the optimism of the title of the work.

A short and happy “Sounds of Brass” of Kevin Ackford led into director Dallas Niermeyer’s arrangement of “Three Gershwin Preludes,” which was awarded the Best New Arrangement of Composition for Brass Band honor for the festival. Bands from Europe are encouraged to check out this new arrangement for a taste of some classic Americana.

Joe Cook’s “Keighley Moor” was an intriguing cross of blatant bombast and refined lightness that is difficult to balance in a traditional march. Paul Lovatt-Cooper’s “Where Eagles Sing” was sparkling with jubilation, its rapid moving brass lines percolating under some of the chorale-like segments. “Strathcarron: Sword Dance” from Philip Sparke’s “Hymn of the Highlands” incorporated a vocal solo and a Scottish dancer to augment the extended jig.

The band’s Cotton Club Quartet Buskers group performed “Duke Ellington Medley” and the Buskers-winning Prairie Dogs jazz combo offered Paul Simon’s “Late in the Evening,” combined with a little bit of Chick Corea’s “Spain.”

Here’s what Frank Renton thought about this year’s U.S. Open Brass Band Championships: “Bands are becoming more inventive. They’re not just going on stage and playing, they’re putting on a show. The American bands are playing better and becoming more inventive as to how they present themselves. The days of just sitting in two semi-circles are gone. The audience wants to see the players’ faces. Spreading out the players removes an enormous barrier of communication to the audience, so I’m very supportive of bands that try to do something atypically.

“This was a great result for Fountain City, who played wonderfully, with a tremendous variety in repertoire and a great soloist in Lee Harrelson. And wow, what a serious but big finale in “Extreme Make-Over.” Dublin achieved a great result. They created a continuity of story line allied to good music making that obviously struck a chord with the adjudicators.

“Brass Band of Central Florida did what they do best: They walked on, caught the audience by the throat and didn’t let go for half an hour. This is a program of great intensity and virtuosity that will surely impress the English audiences in two weeks time.

The bottom is coming up to meet the top. The top is not lessening to meet the bottom. People are working harder, being more innovative, thinking of new ways of presenting the brass band. This is good. You need to find new ways for a changing world.”

The next U.S. Open Brass Band Championships will be held in St. Charles, Illinois on November 3, 2012. If you’re within a few hours flight or ride from Chicago, you really should consider coming to this event and experiencing for yourself just how far the brass band activity has come in America. While it’s expected that you would be amazed, it’s assured you would be thoroughly entertained captivated by what you would experience.

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.”