

U.S Open Brass Band Championships By Michael Boo

The 12th Annual U.S. Open Brass Band Championships was held in the western Chicago suburb of St. Charles on November 9, 2014. For the seventh time (and fourth year in a row), the competition was won by Fountain City Brass Band of Kansas City, Missouri.

Due to a strategic partnership, Fountain City automatically received an invitation to perform at next year's Brass in Concert at The Sage Gateshead, the event located in the northeast of England that inspired the U.S. Open. In return, this year's winner of Brass in Concert will receive an automatic invitation to attend next year's U.S. Open.

Like Brass in Concert, the U.S. Open is an entertainment contest (the only one in the United States) as opposed to a traditional British-style test piece contest, where judges record errors and subtract points from the top down for each band. Rather, judges at this event "build up" the bands, assigning a score from the bottom up.

The "Most Entertaining" award, sponsored by Smith-Watkins, is presented to the band with the highest combined Entertainment scores from the two judges, giving all bands a chance to strive to be more than just technically proficient. (On the judges' sheets, each judge is left to determine the criteria for the Entertainment caption.) The award went to Dublin Silver Band.

Still, music is king, as the Music caption is worth a maximum of 100 points, compared to the Entertainment caption's maximum of 25 points.

The U.S. Open is now enjoys a Partnership Sponsorship with Yamaha Corporation of America's Band & Orchestral Division. Yamaha provided the Championship Trophy and a \$1,000 award to the winning band. In addition, Yamaha presented the Second Place Trophy and a \$500 award to Dublin Silver Band.

Brass Bands International sponsored the Third Place plaque, awarding that and \$250 to Central Ohio Brass Band. BBI also sponsored the Best Performance of a March award in memory of Roy Newsome, awarded to Central Ohio Brass Band for its performance of "Mephistopheles."

Solid Brass Music sponsored the award for Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band, which went to Dublin Silver Band for "Supreme Sacrifice." Brass Bands International further sponsored the Most Outstanding Percussion Section award, which went to Fountain City Brass Band.

Yamaha Corporation of America Band & Orchestral Division sponsored the award for Best Performance of a Brass Solo, awarded to Dr. Dan Deal of Madison Brass Band. Yamaha also provided noted euphonium virtuoso Adam Frey to judge the soloists. Frey is Adjunct Professor of Euphonium at Georgia State University, an affiliate artist at Emory University, and a world-traveling performer for Yamaha. He presented a free clinic the night before the contest that was also sponsored by Yamaha.

Buskers performances, short solo and/or ensemble offerings judged by an anonymous person somewhere in the audience, filled in the time between the performances of the bands. The winning buskers performance was presented with the money put in a hat that was passed around to audience members in the auditorium.

Since there was a tie for the winning Buskers honor, the top hat of cash went to both Dave and Buskers from Dublin Silver Band and Prairie Dogs from Prairie Brass Band. Dave and Buskers performed "Brooklyn," a brash and jaunty jazz work with a tinge of New Orleans soul. Prairie Dogs performed "Sweet Caroline" and "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You."

In addition, buskers from Fountain City Funk performed "Looking Up Her Address," a jazz-rock piece with some nimble harmony passages akin to a big band saxophone section. Another buskers from Dublin Silver Band played "4 Chords" by Axis of Awesome, a comedy rock band piece about 36 songs that can be played with just four chords. Bighead Bob and the Tag-Alongs, a tuba-euphonium quartet from Eastern Iowa Brass Band, performed the old Scottish melody "Loch Lomond" and "Two for the Price of One," based on nursery rhyme songs.

As always, a blind drawing was held to establish the position of performance of each of the brass bands, the drawing conducted prior to the event by someone not associated with any of the ensembles.

Several brass instrument manufactures set up their wares on tables in the concession area at the U.S. Open Marketplace, as did exhibitors selling mouthpieces, accessories, and music.

The emcee for the U.S. Open was Dallas Niermeyer, founder of the event and retired director of Prairie Brass. Niermeyer introduced each band and offered information about the music about to be performed, allowing the audience to better appreciate what they would be hearing.

Dr. Paul Bauer, recently retired band director from Northern Illinois University, and Dr. Eric Yates, Associate Professor of Trumpet at the University of Alabama School of Music, First Trumpet of Tuscaloosa Symphony and Alabama Brass Quintet, were the two judges tasked with giving scores to each band. The two

judges also provided each band with a recording of their comments on the band's performance.

Longtime tabulators Tom and Peggy Kosin were back in their perch alongside the judges, as was timing and penalties judge Joe Courtney. The entire event was audio and video recorded for posterity by Dan Landbo.

Fountain City Brass Band

Joseph Parisi, director

1st place-240 points total (196-Music/44-Entertainment)

"New World Sketches" was sort of a variety show, the uniting theme being Fountain City Brass Band. The presentation started with "Where Eagles Sing" by Paul Lovatt Cooper, inspired by the composer's visit to a show at Walt Disney World that concluded with a live eagle flying over the audience. The band was spread out across the entire width of stage, which was extra dangerous considering the exposed fanfare motifs of the piece. Downright daunting euphonium runs continuously permeated the underlying slow chorale, finishing with a finale as soaring as the eagle that inspired the piece.

Chris Larios both arranged and performed the extremely difficult classic cornet solo in "Cleopatra," composed by Eugene Demare (thought by many to be a pen name of the famed brass band leader and composer William Rimmer, who studied with Demare). Band member Lee Harrelson arranged "Birdland," Josef Zawinul's driving hit for the jazz-fusion band, Weather Report. The arrangement treated the jazz standard in an unusual manner, including in its instrumentation one flugelhorn, five tenor horns, three trombones, and five tubas.

Despite being performed on the stage, the intro of Gordon Langford's arrangement of Antonin Dvorak's "Largo" from "New World Symphony" sounded discernably in the distance, showcasing the band's ability to manipulate its own resonance. The band's set concluded with Philip Harper's "Finale" from "The Divine Right," one of those works that has more notes than a thesis for a doctoral candidate in nuclear quantum mechanics. Too grandiose to be merely considered grandiose, the piece most effectively threw down the gauntlet and dared the judges to present the band with its seventh U.S. Open Championships title.

Dublin Silver Brass Band

Tim Jameson, director

2nd place-234 points total (188-Music/46-Entertainment)

Typically adding a visual storyline to an audio story, Dublin Silver Band's "Letters from the Battlefield" included the narration of actual letters from battle weary

soldiers read in between each of the selections. The set was presented in a sequential timeline, starting with the American Revolution and working its way through major American Armed Forces conflicts since. The set started with Tim Jameson's arrangement of "Fanfare/American Salute," the band lined up front of the stage and delivering a flourish that was a level of brassiness not yet catalogued. After narration, the piece moved into Morton Gould's "American Salute."

Josh Jameson's arrangement of the hymn tune, "The Supreme Sacrifice," was based on "O Valiant Hearts," a hymn by Dr. Charles Harris composed to remember the sacrifices of the fallen soldiers of World War I. This arrangement was recipient of the award for Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band, delivered by a trombone quartet wearing doughboy helmets. The band then set up as a swing band for Tim Jameson's arrangement of jazz trumpeter Sy Oliver's "Well, Get It!," a World War II-era piece with sort of a "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" vibe. Featuring a cornet solo, the ensemble set up as a swing band, with the tenor horns and euphoniums set up like saxophones.

Josh Jameson's arrangement of Samuel Barber's 1943 "Commando March" was time traveled ten years forward to cover the era of the Korean War, followed by Tim Jameson's arrangement of Barber's "Adagio," a quite sensitive and pathos-filled tribute to those who perished in the Vietnam War. An American flag was ceremonially folded and presented to a serviceman's widow, with a POW-MIA flag off to the side. The exotic sounds of far away were heard in Steve Bulla's "Firestorm," representing the war in Afghanistan, leading into a musical terror of unspeakable violence. The production ended with "Resurrection," based on Josh Jameson's arrangement of Mahler's "Symphony No. 2: Resurrection." The piece featured General Douglas MacArthur's 1962 speech to the Cadets of West Point regarding duty, honor, and country, culminating with the flags of the various services added alongside the POW-MIA flag.

Central Ohio Brass Band

Jessica Sneeringer, director

3rd place-218 points total (179-Music/39-Entertainment)

Central Ohio Brass Band went into battle with an arsenal of great music unaccompanied by audio or visual enhancements. A tidal wave of sound wowed over the audience in the opening fanfare of William Roesch's arrangement of Johan de Meij's "Gandalf" from "Symphony No. 1, Lord of the Rings," the famed 1988 work for concert band. Throughout the piece, the band aptly demonstrated that it knew how to produce volume of the highest quality and decibel level. Next was Andrew W. Seymour's arrangement of Jeremy Soule's "Dragonborn" from the popular video game, "Elder Scrolls V, Skyrim," starting with the ominous chanting of an advancing army and ending softly with a bass drum heartbeat, not unlike a musical patrol.

ShIPLEY Douglas' "Mephistopheles" earned the band the Best Performance of a March award, the ensemble making full use of the work's unpredictable transformations of temperament. The production ended with Paul Lovatt-Cooper's "Enchanted Kingdom," full of intense sparkling and an outbreak of mallets and inner horn voices that were as beguiling as the title. And for those of you aware that the composer asked a certain poem be read before each performance, Dallas Niermeyer honored that request. "Imagine a place full of magic and light/With each starts an adventure/Illuminating sunrise with colors so bright/Sparkle in the kingdom's splendor./The whispering forest, the bustling town,/All bubbling with magical features,/The days are a celebration, the nights ecstatic/All enjoyed by fairytale creatures./So sit back and enjoy the musical fairytale/A place of adventure and fun/The mystery, the magic of a far away place."

Eastern Iowa Brass Band

Alexander Beamer, director

4th place-214 points total (177-Music/37-Entertainment)

Eastern Iowa Brass Band delivered a space theme without dipping into any audio space clichés, beginning with Jacob Vilhelm Larsen's "Ad Astra", Latin for "To the stars." Larsen is currently composer-in-residence with Norway's Stavanger Brass Band and upon hearing this offering, it's hoped more of his music finds its way to America. The band, noticeably improved over the year before, was more than up to delivering on the brash and heroic musical theatrics of the piece. The low brass runs sailing over the entire ensemble were especially impressive, as were the final chords that most impressively reverberated through the auditorium. The next piece was Johan de Meij's "UFO Concerto – Movement I, Andante—Con moto" featuring a euphonium solo and a delicacy of muted segments. That segued into Norman Richardson's arrangement of Gustav Holst's cataclysmic "Mars" from "The Planets."

Peter Meechan's "Fragile Oasis" began with the band once again exploiting a wide coloration of muted sounds, accompanied by an unexpected light jazz beat. The piece was written to honor the organization of the same name as the title, which has the following as its mission statement: "Guided by the unique orbital perspective of men and women who live and work in Space, our vision is for Fragile Oasis to be a vehicle that helps people and organizations collaborate and develop synergy toward overcoming the challenges facing humanity on Earth." In the middle of the piece, two cornets played into a gong at the front of the stage for an ethereal resonance effect, and two other cornets engaged in a fanfare jam from opposite sides of the stage. The ending of the piece was an intriguing mixture of brass fanfares and rock drum beats.

Prairie Brass Band

Mary Barnes-Gingrich, director

5th place-200 points total (167-Music/33-Entertainment)

Prairie Brass Band took the stage under the baton of its new director, Mary Barnes-Gingrich, who had been the band's solo tenor horn under the band's founder and director Dallas Niermeyer. The first piece was Niermeyer's arrangement of Ray Thomas and Ricky James' classic rock selection, "From Mighty Oaks." The title selection was an overture of themes from Moody Blues' first album, first released in 1975 and one of the rock band's most obscure albums. Next was Peter Graham's take on the "Tallis Canon" of 1567, titled, "Prelude on 'Tallis.'" Barnes-Gingrich coaxed from the band a wonderfully intense crescendo into the main statement.

Next was Niermeyer's tender setting of Claude-Michel Schönberg's "Bring Him Home" from "Les Mis," made even more tender by the use of muted cornets at the end. Niermeyer's blistering arrangement of Al Vizzutti's "Fire Dance" featured a soprano cornet solo. It was William Rimmer's classic march, "Ravenswood," that witnessed the band become truly immersed in its element as one of the top interpreters of marches. Outside of the band's typical fare was Niermeyer's arrangement of Ferde Grofe's "On the Trail" from "Grand Canyon Suite," containing moments of extreme transparency unlike anything done by the band in the past. The band's production ended reverentially with Adam Gohr's arrangement of Pavel Tchesnokov's 1912 choral work, "Salvation is Created."

Madison Brass Band

Craig Mason, director

6th place-198 points total (163-Music/35-Entertainment)

Madison Brass Band titled their show, "American Masters," beginning with Craig Mason's arrangement of Jack Stamp's "Fanfare for a New Era," written by Stamp for the U.S. Air Force Band. The band was spread across the entire width of the stage for this technically challenging work, adding significantly to the raw danger of keeping the passages aligned, which Mason pulled off with aplomb. Jacob Vilhelm Larsen arranged Charlie Chaplin's "Smile" as a trombone solo, originally composed by Chaplin for his 1936 silent film, "Modern Times." The solo started offstage in the audience in this most mellow of interpretations of the tune. Keith M. Wilkinson's enthusiastic arrangement of Henry Fillmore's "The Circus Bee" resulted in quite a peppy circus march, inspired by Fillmore's fascination with the traveling circus.

David R. Wearden arranged the Irish folk tune classic, "Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms," first printed in a 1775 songbook. Arranged as a euphonium solo, the finger-buster, apparently underwritten by the arpeggio lobby, featured some intentional going-off-key humor and won soloist Dr. Dan

Deal the award for Best Performance of a Brass Solo. The band's set ended with Philip Sparke's arrangement of George Gershwin's 1932 "Cuban Overture," the Caribbean-infused composition originally titled, "Rumba." Mason kept the subtropical heat in check, allowing the piece to move along at the leisurely pace of island living, as opposed to the fervor some directors are compelled to inject into it.

Check out the U.S. Open Brass Band Championship's website for further information about the 2015 event.

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."