

U.S Open Brass Band Championships By Michael Boo

At a glance:

- 1st place – Dublin Silver Band
240 points total (192-Music/48-Entertainment)
- 2nd place – Fountain City Brass Band
235 points total (192-Music/43-Entertainment)
- 3rd place – Eastern Iowa Brass Band
224 points total (184-Music/40-Entertainment)
- 4th place – Prairie Brass Band
219 points total (179-Music/40-Entertainment)
- 5th place – Madison Brass Band
210 points total (175-Music/35-Entertainment)

- Most Entertaining – Dublin Silver Band
- Best Performance of a March – Eastern Iowa Brass Band
- Best New Arrangement or Composition – Madison Brass Band
- Best Performance of a Percussion Section – Madison Brass Band
- Best Featured Soloist – Prairie Brass Band

The 13th Annual U.S. Open Brass Band Championships was held in the western Chicago suburb of St. Charles on November 7, 2015, and for only the second time since 2007, a band other than Fountain City Brass Band won the event. Dublin Silver Band, after placing 2nd in 2011 and 2014, captured its first U.S. Open championship.

Due to a strategic partnership between the U.S. Open and England's Brass in Concert, Dublin Silver Band automatically received an invitation to perform at next year's brass band championship at The Sage Gateshead, the northeast England entertainment event that inspired the creation of 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.

The U.S. Open is the only entertainment contest for brass bands in the United States, where judges "build up" the bands from the bottom up. In traditional British-style test piece contests, judges record each band's errors and subtract points from the top down. Unlike test piece contests, where brass bands all have to play the same test piece, bands at an entertainment contest can play whatever they want.

The "Most Entertaining Band of the Day" award is presented to the band with the highest combined Entertainment scores from each of the judges. Judges are charged with the responsibility to determine how to reward their entertainment points. The award went to Dublin Silver Band for the fifth time over the past six years.

However, music technique and performance remains of utmost importance, as each judge has 100 points to work with in the Music caption, but only 25 points to work with in the Entertainment caption. Dublin Silver Band and Fountain City Brass Band tied for the top Music score.

Yamaha Corporation of America's Band & Orchestral Division once again sponsored the first and second place championship trophies. Yamaha provided the Championship Trophy and a \$1,000 award to Dublin Silver Brass Band, and the Second Place Trophy and a \$500 award to Fountain City Brass Band.

Brass Bands International awarded the third place plaque and an award of \$250 to Eastern Iowa Brass Band. BBI also sponsored the Best Performance of a March award in memory of Roy Newsome, also awarded to Eastern Iowa for its performance of "The Wizard."

Solid Brass Music sponsored the award for Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band, which went to Madison Brass Band for "Kom Susser Swing." Brass Bands International also sponsored the Most Outstanding Percussion Section award, which also went to Madison Brass Band.

Yamaha Corporation of America Band & Orchestral Division sponsored the award for Best Featured Soloist, awarded to Tom Henehan of Prairie Brass Band.

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 five bands. The winning buskers performance, The Fermatas from Eastern Iowa Brass Band, was presented with the money that audience members put in a hat in the auditorium. The Fermatas consisted of four cornets and three euphoniums, including a jiving Sousaphone that vigorously laid down the beat.

Bones Deep, another buskers ensemble from Eastern Iowa Brass Band, included seven trombones, most of whom perform on other instruments in the band. Their funky blues was equally well received by the audience. Blood, Sweat and Beers from Madison Brass Band performed a mixed brass treatment of "Spinning Wheel." Prairie Brass Band offered two buskers ensembles, Prairie Chicks playing "Carioca" and Prairie Dogs playing "In the Stone." Two ensembles also came out of the Dublin Silver Band, Dubliner Kornett Band playing the German waltz, "Muchen Steht," and 5 Guys from Dublin performing "5 for 5 in 5," a series of pieces (such as "Mission Impossible" and "Mars" from "The Planets,") all in 5/4 meter.

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. Due to the drawing, Fountain City Brass Band was the first to perform in the morning, followed by Madison Brass Band and Prairie Brass Band. The afternoon continued with performances by Eastern Iowa Brass Band and concluded with Dublin Silver Band.

Dr. Glen Flanigan was one of the two judges. Flanigan is Director of Bands and Coordinator of Instrumental Studies at Kentucky's Asbury University. Upon the conclusion of the contest, he stated, "This is my first experience with an entertainment concept. I found the entire day very enjoyable and was quite impressed with all the bands. The quality of the performances made judging decisions a challenge. The attention to detail and overall musicianship was exemplary."

Adam Frey was the other judge. He is Adjunct Professor of Euphonium at Georgia State University, an affiliate artist at Emory University, and travels extensively as a Yamaha performer. After the contest, he opined, "What an amazing improvement across the board from last year. There was a great sense of performance and charisma, as well as extremely ambitious programming that made it a wonderful concert experience, but also made the U.S. Open exceptionally difficult to judge. It was one of my most enjoyable days of music in a long time. Thank you to all the bands."

Dallas Niermeyer, founder of the event and retired director of Prairie Brass, emceed the proceedings. Niermeyer introduced each band and provided information about much of the music to be performed.

Dublin Silver Band, Tim Jameson, director, presented "Love You Forever," somewhat of a musical variety show based on the many facets and emotions of love. The production started with "Love You Forever," a series of tunes arranged by J.T. Jameson that started with members in small combos around the auditorium, all performers coalescing at the front of the stage. Randy Newman's "You've Got a Friend in Me" was next, arranged by Tim Jameson and featuring David Mazon on cornet. Written for the 1995 animated film, "Toy Story," it was the feel-good piece of this year's U.S. Open. During the piece, director Jameson asked the members of the audience to stand and greet one another.

Sometimes love isn't all it's meant to be, which was definitely felt in Tim Jameson's arrangement of Vaclav Nelybel's ultra-intensive and dissonant "Symphonic Movement." It disturbingly brought forth the emotion of the shattering of love when it is ripped away, casting a blood-curdling pall over the audience. Just in time to stop the audience from throwing themselves off the roof of the auditorium, B. Mayer's arrangement of "Adagio" from Khachaturian's "Spartacus" provided a luscious reflection of the purest love, and a chance for George Zonders to melt hearts with his flugelhorn.

William Rimmer's "Honour the Brave" addressed the love of country and patriotism, the narrative introduction focusing on duty, calling, and responsibility towards the greater good for all. Paul Lovatt-Cooper's "Where Eagles Sing" was utilized to focus on the positive attributes of love as stated in 1 Corinthians. The band then went off-stage to play a short tag of Dolly Parton's 1974 hit, "I'll Always Love You," perhaps best known for Whitney Houston's rendition for the 1992 film, "The Bodyguard."

Fountain City Brass Band, Joseph Parisi, director, presented a show titled, "The Journey," starting with "Inception (Time & An Ideal of Hope)" from Peter Graham's "The Triumph of Time." An off-stage muted cornet carillon slowly built up to a dynamic apex that announced the band had every attention of earning its fifth U.S. Open title in a row. The opening production also included a number of Hans Zimmer works, "The Dream is Collapsing" from the movie, "Inception," "Rise" from "The Dark Knight," "An Idea of Hope" and "Look to the Stars" from "Superman Returns," and "What Are You Going to Do When You Are Not Saving the World?" from "Man of Steel." All those arrangements were by Lee Harrelson.

The band stood in two extremely close traditional Whit Friday arcs for George Allen's "Knight Templar," reflecting on the band's 2007 appearance at the 2007 Whit Friday Brass Band Contest in England. Next was Pat Metheny's "The Heat of the Day," off Metheny's "Imaginary Day" album of 1977 and arranged by Jacob Vilhelm Larsen. The complex hand clapping was cool, but it was the band's ability to fuse a woodwind sound from the original synthesizer parts. The attention to the muted segments helped convey the original's sense of Iranian folk music. Composer Peter Meehan described "Starlight" as a 1990s rock ballad. Rescored from a trumpet solo, it offered solo opportunities for Helen Harrelson on baritone and Jennifer Oliverio on flugelhorn.

Following was excerpts from "The Triumph of Time" by Peter Graham, composed for the Black Dyke Band. Fountain City is an expert at creating a bubbling cauldron of sounds just under the surface of the music, adding to the tension that keeps their performances continuously moving forward. A spectacularly challenging walking bass figure jockeyed for supremacy with a cross-stitch of melodic fragments. The band is now going to prepare for a December appearance at the prestigious Midwest Clinic that annually attracts over 15,000 band and orchestra directors to Chicago. Amazingly, they will be performing an entirely new program.

Eastern Iowa Brass Band, Alexander Beamer, director, told the story of a harlequin who is captured and thrown into a dungeon, where he plots his escape. The first piece was Philip Sparke's "Harlequin," featuring a blazing euphonium solo by Ben Reid dressed in harlequin garb. George Allen's "The Wizard" won the band the Best Performance of a March award. This famed march by Britain's great "March King of the North East," whose life spanned both sides of the turn of

the 20th Century, was turned into a story of the harlequin meeting Merlin the Magician.

A selection from Randy Edelman's score to the 1996 film, "Dragonheart," was arranged by Frank Bernaerts to tell the story of the harlequin staying overnight on the way to meet Arthur, who was to become King of England. The rest of the show, and indeed, the bulk of the show, was devoted to Peter Meechan's "The Legend of King Arthur," completing the harlequin's journey. The audience witnessed many of the stories of King Arthur, including his fabled pulling of the sword out of the massive stone. Appropriately, considering that stone, sections of this part of the journey were infused with rock sensibilities.

Prairie Brass Band, Mary Barnes-Gingrich, director, presented an upbeat show titled, "Carnival," starting with Dvorak's 1891 "Carnival Overture," arranged by Geoffrey Brand. Following was Samuel Hazo's "Ride," arranged by Jonathan Bates. The bombastic musical images of a thrilling ride in a car were ported over to reference carnival rides.

Luis Bonfá's "Manha de Carnaval" ("The Morning of the Carnaval"), originally from the 1959 Brazilian film, "Black Orpheus," was set in Rio's famed Carnival and provided flugelhorn soloist Tom Henehan with the vehicle that won him the Best Featured Soloist award. The piece also featured a bossa nova for three flugelhorns. Harry L. Alford, writer of 34,000 arrangements and numerous compositions, provided "Purple Carnival," a spirited march from 1933. The show ended with Maynard Ferguson's "M. F. Carnival" from the Ferguson band's 1978 album, "Carnival," featuring a juggling clown and other clown antics.

Madison Brass Band, Craig Mason, director, performed a show titled, "Mostly Famous Johns and One Rick." It commenced with "Liberty Fanfare" by John Williams, arranged by Steve Sykes, originally written for the 1986 centennial of the Statue of Liberty. Next was an Alan Fernie arrangement of John Lennon's "Ticket to Ride," off The Beatles' 1965 album, "Help!" With the band set up as a stage band, train sounds wafted through the arrangement with all aboard for a rollicking good time.

"Komm Susser Swing" was arranged Craig Mason from J.S. Bach's 1736 "Come Sweet Death," and was awarded the Best New Arrangement or Composition for Brass Band award. Starting in a Bach-like chorale, it quickly turned into a 5/4 swing that featured solos by Jim Jackson, Tom Henniger, and Don Deal. Craig "Jonathon" Mason wrote "Isthmus March" for the tenth anniversary of band. (We see what you did there, "Jonathon.") In a continuously shifting variety of meters, the march honored the quirkiness of the band's hometown of Madison, Wisconsin, which sits on an isthmus. The band's presentation ended with "City of Tears" by Rick Kirby, commissioned by the band this year as a tribute to the citizens of a variety of cities that have experienced great tragedy. After a brief

solemn intro, the work turned vivacious, choosing to remember the fallen for their strength.

Check out the U.S. Open Brass Band Championship's website for further information about the 2016 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."