

discipline, and for the best drum-major. To round things off, the best bands compete in the Shell Band of the Year entertainment competition, each presenting a half-hour programme of music and movement.

At the top level the bands were excellent, and played the contemporary repertoire with relish. There were also three of the top bands from Australia in attendance, and a fledgling band from Tonga, under the tutelage of Welshman Nigel Weeks and making great progress.

The high spot of the weekend, without a doubt, was the playing of trombonist David Bremner, who won the Champion of Champions solo award. He's as good a young trombonist as I've heard anywhere for years – and I mean anywhere.

It's not that far from New Zealand to Japan, where brass banding is taking a firm hold and improving all the time. Philip Sparke, Goff Richards, Roger Webster and Steven Mead are regular visitors, teaching, conducting and appearing as soloists. A couple of years ago the Breeze Brass Band, from Tokyo, were guests at the Royal Albert Hall, and surprised quite a few people.

Closer to home, and in Ireland the fledgling Youth Brass Band is proving a success and

'The rest of the world is snapping at our heels ...'

plans are afoot for a new Irish Open Brass Band Championship. The intention is to invite eight or nine of the best bands in Europe to compete in Dublin for several prizes, and to create a festival of the Best of Brass – eventually attracting the best bands from all over the world.

It's said that Britain taught the world to play cricket, soccer and rugby, and now the world beats us in all three.

Well, I guess that we also introduced brass banding to the world, and it has spread from these shores to become a truly international art form.

The others haven't yet begun to come here and beat us on a regular basis, and we're still sending our own stars all over the world to help bands to develop both style and repertoire. But when you hear bands like Battle Creek and Eikanger, and young players like David Bremner (born and brought up in New Zealand but studying now in San Francisco), you realise that the rest of the world is snapping at our heels, and that we've got to work just as hard as them at being good and innovative if we're not to be left behind.

● Frank Renton presents Radio 2's *Listen to the Band* and will be the compere of the Company's 500th-anniversary brass band concert at Birmingham Symphony Hall on 9 September next year – see page 9

A byre's DELIGHT

A quarter of a century ago, in the heart of Cheshire, 140 dairy cattle looked on as opera-goers made their way across fields to sit on straw bales in a silage pit and enjoy a show. Now things are a bit less rustic, but Clonter Opera retains its rural charm. Robert Beale, of *Classical Music* magazine, reports



Pauline Neild