

# BRASS BAND NEWS

## ... and so to Symphony Hall

**Liveryman Bram Gay writes:**

The 145th British Open Brass Band Championship, postponed from its sacrosanct September Saturday because of national mourning, was at last held on 17th January. It speaks volumes for the loyalty of the great bands to the event that, despite the difficulties of the winter season and the problem of again raising to the necessary pitch a work previously polished to almost impossible heights, nearly all the original entry attended.

That loyalty was further tested by the removal of the event from Manchester to Birmingham's Symphony Hall. For so long a vital feature of Belle Vue Gardens where it was founded (and discovered by Pastmaster John Henry Iles), subsequently removed to the unloved Free Trade Hall and last year to the new Bridgewater, the 'Open' has now surely found the perfect setting. The environs of Symphony Hall provide a splendid venue for the traditional social gathering; its facilities for the trade are superb, and the hall's ability to cope with the procession of bands, even providing a pre-performance warm-up room, are unparalleled. Most importantly the hall's famous acoustic enabled players to play, audience to listen and judges to judge at a level never before experienced by any of them.

Each year Mrs Mortimer, the organiser, faces the central problem of repertoire. The Open requires music,

new or old, which tests its wonderful bands to breaking point while entertaining an audience largely made up of folk who are band fans first and musicians second. Having no funds for the purpose she chose this year one of many BBC commissions. First played by the Black Dyke Band on Whit-Monday at the Bridgewater last year, *Whitsun Wakes* by Michael Ball, an impression of the Mancunian Spring Holiday of the composer's youth, filled the bill. Strong but listenable music, it pleased players and audience while its immense technical demands provided an ideal base for comparison between performances.

What performances they were! Here was passage-work to terrify the best of symphonic brassmen, knocked out time after time with deceptive ease by amateur players from all over the land; and - technique apart - the musicianship displayed by players and conductors was impressive. In the mind of the listener the question constantly recurs: what must these wonderful people do to convince mainstream musicians of their value? Sir Adrian Boult once described them as *the strongest proof positive of the innate musicality of the British*, and so indeed they are; but though they stand ready to play a repertoire of their own music from Holst and Elgar to Henze and Birtwistle, musicians simply will not take them seriously. They are amateurs; they took their rise from the mill and

the coal-mine so they cannot play music *for musicians*, nor for intelligent listeners. Even the BBC, which for so long understood their achievement and their value, has now decided that brass band is 'light music' (however that may be defined) and has removed it from Radio Three to play jolly tunes on the broadcasting equivalent of the pier-end, Radio Two. There is, it seems, a flat-cap ghetto for the brass band. Sadly, neither Elgar, Birtwistle, nor Michael Ball (who will not mind my observing that he sits somewhere between the two) will find a home there. Their splendid brass band works must wait, with those of Vaughan Williams, Ireland, Bliss, Howells, Rubbra, Robert Simpson, Malcolm Arnold and others, until some revolution, cultural or social, may promote them to the concert hall where they belong.

### RESULT:

Yorkshire Building Society conducted by David King won with 199 points, Williams Fairey conducted by James Gourly were runners up with 198 points, and CWS (Glasgow) conducted by Howard Snell (a Company Silver Medallist) came third with 197 points. As part of the award proceedings Immediate Pastmaster Burnett-Brown presented the Iles and Mortimer Medals to James Williams and Gordon Evans MBE, respectively.

## A New Award - The Diploma of Honour

The Company has recently created a new annual award to recognise the 'unsung heroes' of the Brass Band Movement - those who have given their time over the years teaching and helping young brass musicians. Sponsored by the British Bandsman, whose editor is Liveryman Peter Wilson, nominations were processed by the British Federation of Brass Bands. They put forward nine names to the Company's Brass Band Committee which selected five. Agreement was then obtained from the relevant Regional Area Contest organisers for the Diplomas to be publicly presented.

The first to be honoured are:

**Gordon Hartley-Bennett** founded Perscoran Brass in 1983, a Youth Band based in the Pershore area. Under his leadership, it has developed its own junior section. He also founded the annual Pershore Midsummer Brass Festival. He is known particularly for his encouragement of young players. As Head of Brass for the Local Authority, he trained the County Band.

**Dennis Chalk BEM** is Musical Director and founder of the Wilton District Youth Band. He started with 6 young players in his sitting room 32 years ago. The Band are currently Wessex champions (section 3) and Marlborough Entertainments Champions. He is President of the Wessex Youth Band Course and Trustee of the Wessex Band Association.

**Everett Merton** began teaching young players two nights a week whilst with the Stithians Band in the late 1960's. In 1984, working five nights a week, he helped to rescue the ailing Constantine Silver Band (which he had first joined in 1945). In 1992 he returned to the Stithians Band and resumed teaching the Youth Band. With his young players he has won many prizes at local contests and festivals supplying transport and even paying the entry fees out of his own pocket. He is an active member of the Cornwall Brass Band Association.

**George White** has dedicated much of his life to the Bristol East Band as did his father and grandfather who formed it

over 100 years ago. Now, over 75, he has moved on to the very young Doddington Parish Band where he continues his aim of teaching children from the age of 6 years upwards. He has spent many hours every week teaching children who wish to play in the bands with which he is connected free of charge - a dedication to music for over 50 years.

**Desmond Boddice** has also been teaching youngsters for over 50 years. Among his pupils were his son Nigel, one of our Silver Medallists (vis Preserve Harmony Issue 13) and James Arnold a finalist Young Musician of the Year. He has played with Church Gresley Band for sixty two years, conducting for thirty. He still teaches young people at his home, all for no reward, ably supported by his late wife who supplied the sweets, crisps and pop!

So well received has been the Company's initiative, that without any further announcements, nominations are already being submitted for the next awards!