Brass Bands - A Brief Overview

by
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Brass bands, in the British tradition, are a unique cultural phenomenon that has become increasingly popular throughout the world, particularly in the last few decades. Their roots date back to 19th century Britain and are intertwined with the growth of industry, religion, and the changing culture of the British people at this time. Many bands were formed to represent particular businesses or religious movements, like the Colliery or Temperance bands, and were sometimes subsidised quite significantly by these organisations. These bands often bore the name of their benefactor, which in some cases has outlasted their sponsor! Famous examples of this are perhaps *The Black Dyke Band,* or, *Grimethorpe Colliery Band* who continue to link to this heritage long after their founding industries have ceased to exist. Some bands even used to provide permanent accommodation for its principal band members which was one of the perks of joining both industry and band. There is lots of interesting literature that further details the history of brass bands so we won't go into that here, however, it is important to understand elements of this history in order to be an effective director if you should find yourself leading one of these ensembles.

Instrumentation

For a player in a brass band, preparing a piece of music for a competition/contest (sometimes called a test piece) is a large part of what brass band do. Many bands in Britain exist or were set up initially to fulfil this function; and whilst bands, of course, enjoy busy schedules of concerts, the platform of a contest has undoubtedly been the primary factor in standardising the instrumentation of this ensemble. This standardisation has come about due to strict rules about the number of players and what instruments can or can't be played at a contest. These rules are generally consistent, although some variations occur, which has meant that the brass band and the repertoire it plays typically requires the following instruments/players:

- 1x Eb Soprano Cornet
- 9x Bb Cornets (arranged into 4x Solo Cornets, 1x Repiano Cornet, 2x Second Cornets and 2x Third Cornets)
- 1x Flugel Horn (in Bb treble clef)
- 3x Tenor Horns (arranged into solo, first, and second horn) –in Eb treble clef)
- 2x Baritone Horn (in Bb treble clef)
- 2x Euphonium (in Bb treble clef)
- 2x Tenor Trombones (in Bb treble clef)
- 1x Bass Trombone (in C bass clef)
- 2x Eb Bass (tuba)
- 2x Bb Bass (tuba)
- Percussion (can between 1 and 5 players depending on the repertoire requirements of the music)

It is important to note that in a modern brass band, all instruments (with the exception of Bass Trombone and Percussion) are written in either Bb or Eb treble clef (bass trombone is pitched in Bb, but scored in C bass clef). Other conventions have existed in the past which have involved instruments in G and even F but that would be considered extremely rare in today's brass band world. Another point of consideration for the conductor is how they address players in rehearsal. The principal players are often called "solo" players, and sometimes the next player along is called the "first" player. For example, the Tenor Horn section comprises of 3 players who are called (in order of hierarchy) Solo Horn, 1st Horn, and 2nd Horn. This may seem a little confusing at first, particularly if you are coming from a different musical tradition. However, most modern scores have these nuances labelled correctly should you wish to refer to it and the players are often happy to correct you if you get it wrong (which happens to me frequently when I refer to the Basses as Tubas)!

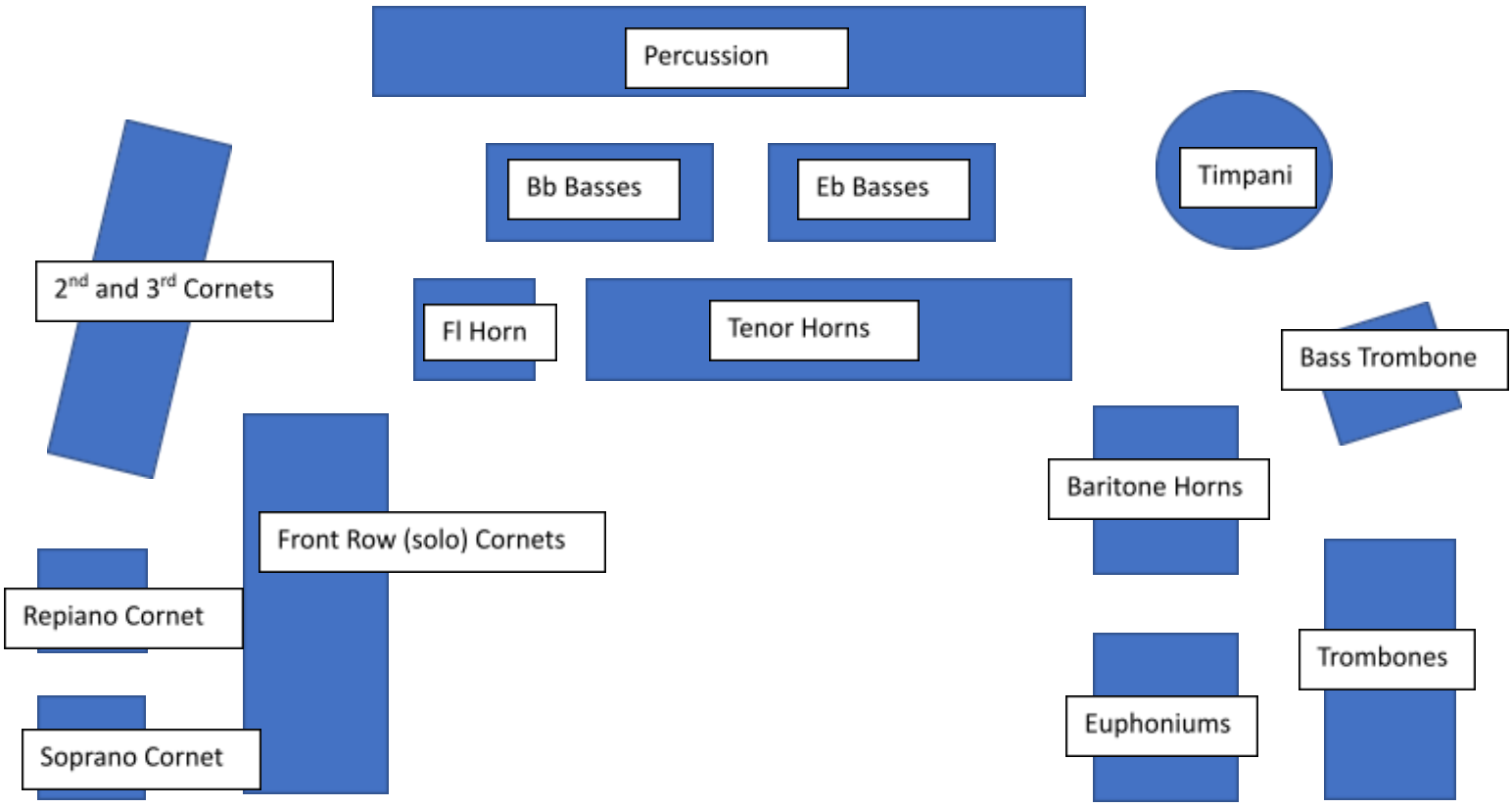
Much of the brass band repertoire includes parts for conventional orchestral percussion as well as the more exotic. Unlike in a professional orchestra where players will sometimes have a contract to play certain specific instruments, most brass band percussionists (being primarily there for enjoyment) are happy to swap around and play different instruments. However, it is always best to delegate those decisions to the section leader or band manager as politics in brass bands can be notoriously tricky to navigate.

Whilst the above is a general overview, it needs to be said that it is likely that you may find variations on this. It is not unusual in Europe for a brass band to accommodate an additional front row cornet player or bass player for performances. It is also important to remember that these organisations (although the standard can often be on a par with professional ensembles) are ostensibly amateur. That may mean some bands might field significantly more (or fewer) players than the repertoire requires. In those instances, it is the conductor's job to ensure the music is sufficiently well balanced and prepared using the instruments available.

Layout

Over the years there has been a number of layouts used for the brass band. Sometimes musical works may even specify the seating to create a certain effect. However, there are two variations of seating that are now used most commonly and which we shall cover here. In general, the cornets will always be to the left of the conductor, trombones to the far right, with percussion at the back behind the basses. *(n.b. sometimes at a competition the rules might state a particular layout should be used).*

Seating Formation 1 (next page):

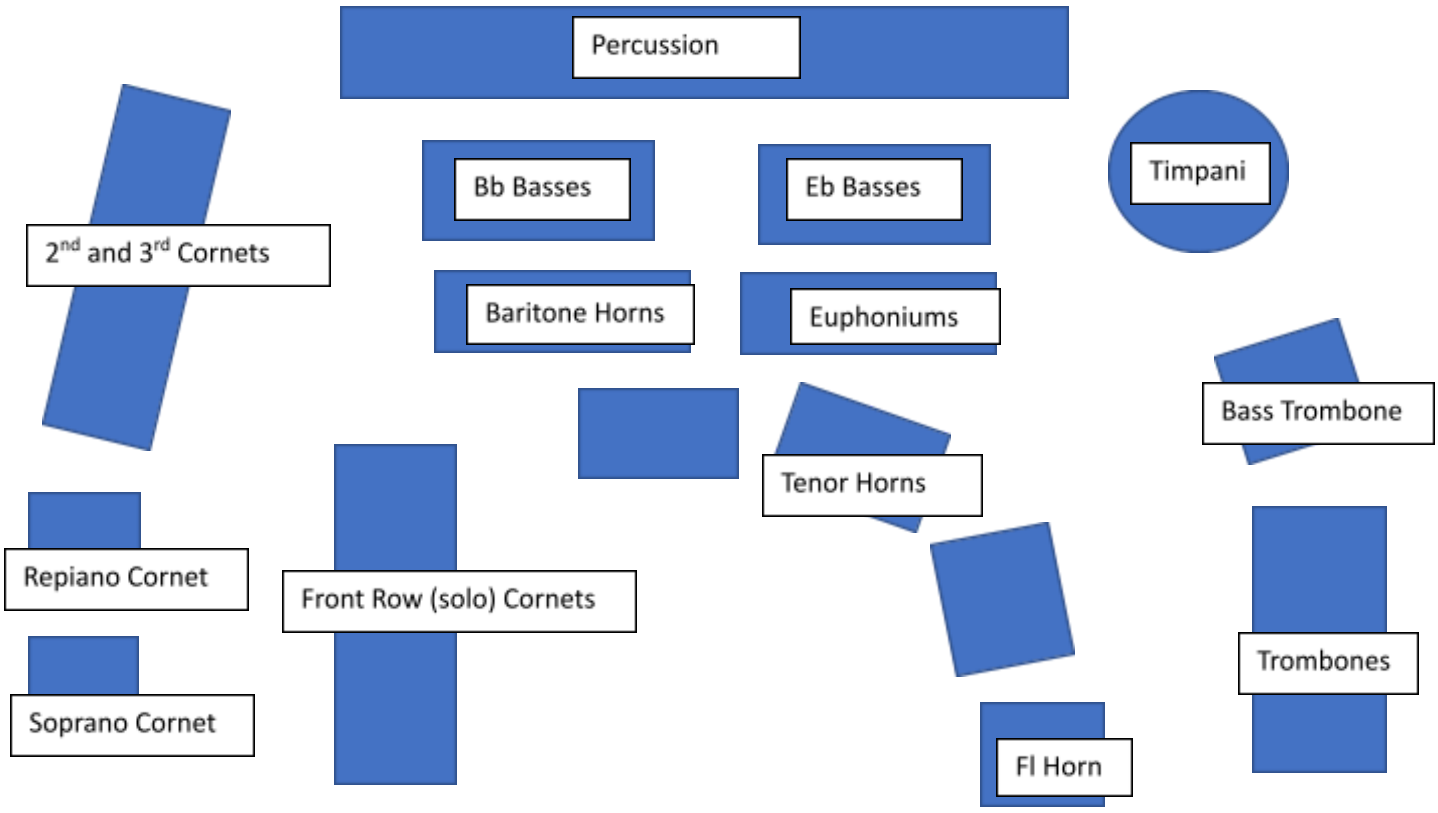


This is certainly the most common layout for any modern brass band. Four front row cornets to the conductors left, with the other cornets behind, and baritone horns with euphoniums to the conductors right. The formation here is (roughly speaking) in pitch order, with highest instruments to the conductor's left and lowest on their right (bass instruments at the back). The timpani is usually in the top-right position, this is so that the player can see, hear, and breathe with the bass trombone and Eb bass players whose parts generally complement one another.

Exceptions

The flugelhorn acts as a link between the cornet sound and the mellower upward facing bell instruments. That is why most of the time the player will be situated in between the front row and tenor horn sections. Sometimes the flugelhorn can be positioned between the tenor horns and baritone horns (the opposite of what is shown here). This can be different between bands and can be a player's personal choice as much as a musical one. Discussing your preferences with the player is always the best approach if you feel a different seating may suit your artistic vision. In certain repertoire, mainly from the Salvation Army tradition, it is not unusual to find the flugelhorn player seated to the left of the repiano cornet player. In that music both players tend to share a part and it has been scored with this in mind. Additionally, the solo horn player is usually seated to the conductors left but that is not always the case. Sometimes a band might seat the horns in reverse formation. If you are unsure it is always good to check before you begin.

Seating Formation 2:



This seating formation is less common than it was, even 10 years ago. However, many bands still use this as their usual layout. The main differences here are that the flugelhorn and tenor horns form a semicircle in front of the front row cornets. As such, care must be taken to ensure the fourth player on the front row can see the conductor and that their sound is not masked by the horn section. Another consideration for the conductor is that this may alter the sound of the baritone horn and euphonium sections. Theoretically, it is easier for this section's sound to blend with that of the basses if they have similar parts. If you don't want this then this might be a consideration. Of course, seating an ensemble differently will have an impact on the sound and its presentation to the audience. Perhaps the best way to understand and compare this is to visit a contest as a spectator. You will find as many as 20 different bands playing the same piece and sat in one of these formations (and sometimes variations there-of). See if you can tell the difference!

What Is a Test Piece?

Taking part in competitions is an important part of what brass bands do, most brass bands across the world will normally take part in at least one annual competition a year. Some of the major competition or "contesting" bands may take part in 6 or more per year (this is in addition to a busy performance schedule). In general, the competition (or contest) will

require the performance of a set work, colloquially known as the test-piece. This will often be an original work and sometimes be commissioned for that specific event. Each band then takes it in turns to perform the set test-piece and are judged to determine who should win the prize money, which in some cases can be thousands of EUR or GBP! Some contests may permit the bands to choose their own test-piece or, in the case of the European Brass Band Championships, require both a set test-piece and an own choice test-piece.

Each band may have a different way of working with these pieces. Some, particularly community focussed bands, may prefer to work on them slowly over a number of weeks or months. Bands that manage a busy schedule may only have a single week to prepare what can be a challenging work. It is typical for brass bands to rehearse between 2 and 4 hours per week, so the conductor must be mindful of what is required for both contest and concert when designing their schedule.

Competition Grading Standard

Competing brass bands are normally organised into league tables -called sections. These sections roughly reflect the general ability level of the band with points being awarded at national competitions. These points can mean bands move up or down the leader board and can be either promoted or relegated to a different section (similar to sports and in particular football). For that reason, the grading system is not short of controversy. Here is a guide below as to the general standard of each section for bands in the UK. Often repertoire is also graded in this way and is not dissimilar to the wind band music grades 1-6 system:

Championship Section: These bands perform to an outstanding and professional standard. It is not uncommon for some players in these bands to work with major professional orchestras.

First Section: Bands in this section demonstrate an excellent standard of technical ability and musicianship. Often musicians in these bands have undertaken significant musical training either at university or music college.

Second Section: Members of second section bands are often keen hobbyists and can perform complex music, however, it may take more rehearsal time to become performance ready with challenging repertoire.

Third and Fourth Section: Bands in these sections are the grass-roots of the brass band movement. They are often formed of keen and committed players who enjoy the additional social elements of band membership. These bands are also excellent for encouraging and providing opportunities for new generations of talented players.

Of course, in different parts of the world, the grading tables may differ in number and standard depending on how many bands actually exist in that particular country, with the terminology differing slightly. For all intents and purposes though, they are essentially the same thing. It is also perfectly possible to be a member of a non-contesting band, a band that simply exists to perform like any other ensemble. Some of these bands sometimes have religious affiliations like the Salvation Army which is detailed in the next section.

Salvation Army Bands

The Salvation Army Bands are broadly similar, but some key differences exist that a conductor may need to be aware of (including their history). In (very) short, we can pinpoint the beginning of brass bands within the salvationist movement to Salisbury, England, 1878 when a local preacher, Charles Fry and his family brought brass instruments to help with open-air meetings. They quickly grew in popularity and by 1883 there were 400 British Salvation Army bands. Much of the repertoire they play has sacred subject matter although nowadays it isn't strictly limited to this. Salvationist composers such as Eric Ball would even write test-pieces using hymnal themes. Understanding the roots of the music can help a conductor make interpretive decisions; salvationist hymns can often be more upbeat than their catholic counterparts for example.

There are also subtle differences in instrumentation. The repertoire these bands play is often scored for a traditional Salvation Army band which has fewer cornets and an additional trombone. The cornet parts in this instance being scored for: Eb soprano, solo cornets (x3), 1st cornet, and 2nd cornet.

All brass bands, from the humble community band to the professional quality top flight contesting band, can be a rewarding experience for any conductor. In leading such an ensemble, you will be engaging with a rich and long cultural heritage as well as having the opportunity to practice your rehearsal and baton techniques with music that can range from contemporary music to "platitunes" and pop.