

The Brass Band of Battle Creek

Steven Haynes



Henry Ford, Madonna and Stevie Wonder all originate from the Great Lake State of Michigan. In the heart of this picturesque state is the City of Battle Creek, famous in its own right as the home of Kellogg's Cereal and, more recently, The Brass Band of Battle Creek.

The Brass Band of Battle Creek is an 'All-Star Band' comprising 31 members of the brass and percussion world's elite, attracting great musicians from around the United States and Europe to perform two annual concerts in Battle Creek, along with numerous other engagements throughout the US and abroad. Although rooted in the British brass band tradition, the BBBC also incorporates American elements such as jazz improvisation, pop and swing, resulting in a heterogeneous style that makes the BBBC somewhat different from other brass bands.

The members of BBBC form a collection of individuals unique not only as a brass band, but as an ensemble outright, producing an unmatched range of tonal colour and proving that there are no stylistic hurdles for a group of this calibre. Each member is hand picked, the pinnacle of their particular field and also effortlessly versatile in the crossover between jazz and classical styles. This is vital considering the challenging amalgamation of repertoire which the band undertakes and proving the group to be a truly unrivalled ensemble.

The band was formed in 1989 as an amateur group by brothers Jim and Bill Gray, both amateur brass players and podiatrists in the local area. Jim told me about the changes which produced the



Scott Hartman.

band we see today: "Only our first concert was as an amateur band," he said. "We asked several pros to play in the second concert but we almost had to cancel having not received any funding," he admitted. "Fortunately though, a friend just happened to mention the 'Expert In Residence' programme at the Kellogg Foundation. We immediately arranged a meeting with Dr. Lorraine Matusak who gave us the grant we needed. We have been supported by the Kellogg Foundation ever since. In fact, the BBBC was chosen as one of their top grantees in the last 25 years."



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Certainly fortuitous, but most definitely money well spent! I was privileged to be invited to see the band back in August 2005 and, right from the first rehearsal, I was absolutely astonished at the quality of the group. At the helm of this musical flagship is its Principal Conductor, Mark Gould. Mr Gould is one of the greatest and best known trumpeters of his generation. Appointed Principal Trumpet of the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1974, he retired in 2003 and since 1982 has been a member of the brass faculty at the Julliard School of Music. The band's Executive Director (and also Assistant Principal Euphonium player) Matt Tropman, is himself former solo euphonium with the President's Own US Marine Band. Irrefutably, every position in the BBBC is host to copious amounts of talent; trumpeters Rich Kelly (Boston Brass) and Chris Jaudes (who is a leading figure on the Broadway musical scene and has performed with the likes of Sammy Davis, Ray Charles and Celine Dion) to name but two. Across the band sits Scott Hartman, who is regarded as one of the world's finest chamber music trombonists. Mr Hartman, a former member of Empire Brass, told me what makes the BBBC so special: "There is absolutely nothing like this ensemble in the world of music. I'm surrounded by people who are the acknowledged 'ultimate' in their field. Whatever a brass instrument is capable of, you'll hear it here!"

These sentiments were echoed by fellow BBBC trombonist, Wycliffe Gordon: "I have performed with some of the greatest jazz ensembles of all time, including the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and the Wynton Marsalis Septet, and I count the Brass Band of Battle Creek right up there with the best of them," he says. "When I heard the BBBC play for the first time back in 2001, I was blown away. I couldn't believe the sound, the musicality. I always look forward to my tours with the group."

On flugal horn is the inspirational trumpet virtuoso, Jens Lindemann, whose playing exudes a breath-taking charm and charisma. Mr Lindemann is a former member of Canadian Brass (along with trumpeter, Ryan Anthony, another member of BBBC!) and he certainly enjoys his time with

the band. "The BBBC is one of the most extraordinary groups I have ever played with," he claims. "Combining the talents of some of the most amazing players from the United States and the United Kingdom has created a sound which is unlike any other ensemble in the world," he continues. "A true musical hybrid which reflects the rich tradition of brass playing both on this continent as well as in Europe."

BBBC has an equally impressive British contingent. Mark Frost on bass trombone has performed with some of the finest ensembles on both sides of the Atlantic including The Hallé Orchestra, The Pete Long Big Band, Grimethorpe Colliery Brass Band and Boston Brass. On tenor horn, Jim Fletcher, also a member of



Mark Frost.

Grimthorpe Colliery Band, regularly works with one of the UK's foremost folk musicians, Kate Rusby. The band's Principal Euphonium is the world renowned soloist Steven Mead and on soprano cornet is the legendary Peter Roberts. Martin Armstrong continues the impressive tenor horn syndicate, which in the past has included Sheona White, Lesley Howie and Billy Rushworth. Roger Webster has also appeared with the band.

It is clearly a goal of the band to maintain a strong connection with the heritage associated with this type of ensemble. I asked Jim Gray to embellish on this statement: "One way we maintain tradition is by using the standard instrumentation," Jim told me. "We tried to use different instruments but it seems that 150 years of history have proven the British correct! There is nothing like the sound of a British brass band and its versatility; when the membership is used correctly, it's unmatched."

"With all this talent around it would be a waste for the local youngsters not to benefit," he continued. "When the band is in town some of the members host workshops in one of the local high schools. All of the band's members are more than happy to do this," he added. "We have visited all of the schools in the county and have done quite a bit of teaching throughout Michigan."



Chris Jaudes.

I queried Jim about the balance which the band achieves between entertainment and education in its concert programming. "We learned a new word from Rodney Whitaker, former bassist with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra," he smiled. "Rodney taught us about 'edutainment', which basically tells me that we should give the audience a good dose of what they want to hear, then stretch both them and the band with a piece which the band loves to play. Some composers have been able to write pieces that are both entertaining and fun for the band. The group loves to play *Harmony Music* and

Year of the Dragon, and both have proved very popular with our audiences."

I was excited to be amongst the thousands of audience members who came to hear the band's open air concert, hosted by the Kellogg Foundation, in August 2005. The football fields of Battle Creek were transformed into a vast arena, complete with stage, lights and sound engineering as well as refreshment stands and background music, much akin to the BBC 'Prom in the Park' in London. A most wonderful evening's entertainment was provided by the band and their co-performer, the beautiful Miss Latoya London, a recent contender in Simon Cowell's *American Idol* show.

BBBC performed a programme which the crowd really enjoyed including a new commission entitled *Songs of the Decades*, Stravinsky's *Firebird* and the exhilarating *1812 Overture*, bringing the concert to a climax with a spectacular firework display.

The high quality line-up produced a superb performance, from Mr Lindemann's sweet rendition of *Over the Rainbow* to some insurmountable jazz solos from Messrs. Jaudes and Gordon (Wycliffe Gordon's trombone was literally singing, crying, laughing and speaking to the mesmerised audience!).

I took the opportunity to purchase the band's two live CDs (BBBC Live 1 and 2), both of which are a showcase of incredible brass expertise. The band currently has six CDs; other titles including *Sing, Sing, Sing!*, *Brassmatazz* and *Britain & Brass*.

The following day the band displayed its commitment to Battle Creek by performing a memorial concert for a member of the local community, showing that it has not lost sight of the spirited beginnings of the brass band solidarity. Indeed, an observation I made whilst amongst the group is the plethora of jovial atmosphere and team spirit the members have toward one another. The band is well looked after, but each member's dedication to social activities and friendship building is testament to the personalities which the band contains. The US contingent were happy



Demondrae Thurman.

for the UK members to join in on a game of (American) football and the British returned the compliment by cheekily managing to persuade the local barmaid that the beer 'Bass' was pronounced like the instrument!

In spring 2005 the BBBC performed to almost 10,000 people in a series of concerts at several prestigious venues throughout Florida. The band was delighted to see at least a third of the audience on their feet by the interval! Furthermore, at the end of the concert they cheered along as Wycliffe Gordon and Chris Jaudes blazed away on *Sing, Sing, Sing!*

With the band's phenomenal successes to date, I asked Jim what the band has in store for the future. "We would love to commission some more new works," he revealed. "So far, the largest original piece the band has commissioned is Wycliffe Gordon's *I Saw The Light*, a tribute to Michigan's most famous citizen, Muhammed Ali. The 45 minute multi movement work was shown state wide on our Public Television. We hope to tour Florida again in 2007," he continued, "and we also have plans to possibly tour the east and west coasts of America and maybe Japan."

"We are now starting to look at even more ways to make the group original. For example, we are soon set to feature the singer Morris Robinson as guest soloist with the band. Morris is one of the most interesting and sought after basses of his generation and is a member of The New York Metropolitan Opera."

Witnessing the band in action was one of the most compelling musical experiences I have ever had. The BBBC's meteoric rise to its current altitudinous state seems set to continue with no sign of a retardation in pace. With both the vision of its management team and the fortitude of its musical elite, the band is destined for high order successes. Maybe now that the BBBC has set a precedent by venturing down this avenue there is scope for other ensembles of this type? I certainly hope so!