

BRITISH is best ... er, isn't it?

Brass banding, "made in Britain", has become an international art form, says Liveryman Frank Renton

In 1953 I was 14, a member of the cornet section of the world-famous Black Dyke Mills Band and convinced that excellence in the brass band world stopped at a line drawn a mile or so south of Queensbury, in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

That all changed when my father took me to a concert at Huddersfield Town Hall featuring the National Brass Band of New Zealand conducted by K G L Smith ... who were simply stunning, and totally committed to high-quality music making.

In the late 1980s I was the principal conductor of Grimethorpe Colliery Band, and came into contact with bands from Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Denmark ... but still, in that West Yorkshire way, clung to the belief that we were somehow better than they were.

That all changed in 1993, when the band from Willebroek in Belgium beat Grimethorpe at the European Championships.

Later that year I was invited to visit the US to work with the Brass Band of Battle Creek, in Michigan. It's a group of professional, semi-professional and outright amateurs, assembled two or three times a year by Jim and Bill Grey, and on a good day they can play the pants off just about anybody I've ever worked with.

A year later I was one of the adjudicators at the North American Brass Band Championships with James Curnow and Bram Gregson. It was obvious then that the purely amateur bands were not far behind the average British band, and closing fast.

In Norway brass banding is increasing in popularity, largely through the outstanding performances of the Eikanger-Bjorsvik, Manger Musiklaag and Stavanger bands. But there are some 10 or more bands at the top level, all producing good work. And important additions to the brass-band repertoire have come from composers Torstein Argaard Neilson and Jan Magne Forde and arrangers Tom Brevik and Ray Farr (the latter now resident in Norway).

Eikanger toured the UK last year, and anyone who heard them live or on *Listen to the Band* will know that this band is as good as anything around. The soloists, led by principal cornetist Jane Westervik, are all out of the top drawer.

In Switzerland they take their brass banding as seriously as everything else ... which means that, among other things, everyone



Eikanger-Bjorsvik – "one of Norway's outstanding brass bands"

Philip Chisholm

turns up on time for rehearsal! I've worked with two or three bands, and adjudicated at all the important competitions. The standard of music making is high, and there're home-grown conductors who are going to take things forward impressively.

In France, the Netherlands and Belgium the longer tradition is with the wind orchestra – and there are some magnificent ensembles in all three countries. They have been commissioning and playing contemporary works for

more than 100 years, and, as I write, I'm listening to the latest recording by the Royal Dutch Wind Orchestra of Thorn – a quite magnificent ensemble, formed in 1812.

For all that, there are now hundreds of brass bands too, and at the highest level they are as good as anywhere else and have never disgraced themselves at the European Championships.

Things are not quite so advanced in France but Jacques Gaudet, of Courtois Musical Instruments, has established the French Open Championships in Amboise, and local talent is reponing to high-quality visitors.

A couple of months ago I was in Auckland as chief music adjudicator for the New Zealand Brass Band Championships. I'd followed the careers of most of the star players and conductors because many of us were together in Singapore 26 years ago – they as members of the New Zealand Army Band, and I as bandmaster of The Gordon Highlanders. We became great friends, and made a lot of music together.

New Zealand's annual championships are something to savour: four days of frenzied activity, with competitions for junior, adult and elder-statesmen soloists on every instrument, and for quartets and ensembles of every size. There's also band competition at three levels of achievement; and a street parade with awards for music, precision and ▶



Frank Renton presents the Company's cup to Chris Wormold, head of music at Smithills School, Bolton, at the end of this year's BBC Radio Youth Brass Band of the Year competition