

TO THE BRASS BAND

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IN the fall of 1935 I was asked by a New York publisher to write a piece for the modern symphonic band which could be brought out under the title of *Streamline*. This began an experience which has not yet ended, leading me into a field unlimited in musical potentialities, and almost completely ignored by contemporary composers.

Streamline was composed directly for the band, without musical compromise; I sat back to see what would happen. It was given its premiere in Chicago by the Northwestern University band under the directorship of Glenn Bainum. Unlike most pieces written for the symphonic orchestra, *Streamline* was performed more than once and is still being performed. It was received by an audience which, according to the director "shouted for a repetition of the work," and—in this respect, like pieces written directly for the symphonic orchestra—it was wholeheartedly condemned by the critics who listed its composer with the more cacophonous moderns and suggested that the sudden ending (*Streamline* is three minutes long) was due to his not having a ticket and therefore being thrown off the train. Nevertheless, *Streamline* is being given all over the Pacific coast and Middle West and has begun to make its way East. Let us therefore turn from this particular work and examine more closely the band situation in America.

There are a hundred thousand bands in the United States today. Almost every school and college has one. Some are on a mammoth scale; for instance at the University of Illinois there are four hundred players.* Their educational influence on the great masses of people, is tremendous—whether it be for better or for worse.

In the very small schools, pupils first study to play an instrument so they can play in the *band*; if the school is a little more

*Nor is America the only place where their presence is felt. According to Arthur Bliss writing in the *London Times* last spring, "there are evidently more bands to the square foot in the United Kingdom than anywhere else in the world."

ambitious, it may add an orchestra to the curriculum—but the band comes first. In the Far and Middle West the band is a much more lively and vital factor than in the East. Indeed in most Eastern metropolitan centres the orchestra is so conspicuous a phase of the musical activities of the school system that the casual observer overestimates its relative importance.

Can bands become “serious” musical organizations—as “serious” and important as the large orchestras? They can and, to some extent, have already become so. Last season the University of Illinois band played *Till Eulenspiel* (in transcription, of course). Better and better music is being played each year, and a number of these groups (even including a few high school bands) have developed phenomenal instrumental and ensemble technics. In fact the great strength of the band lies in the youth of its players; they can adapt themselves extremely quickly. For them composers need not hesitate to write in a new way, fearing performers who, at home only in conventional idioms, are apt to cry, “Well, I never had to do that before”—too often true in the orchestral field.

The increasing significance of the school band in the American scene today is attested by no less an authority than Dr. Edwin Frank Goldman. He believes their standard of performance is so high that they should be regarded as more important than the professional band. As to the relative merits of bands and orchestras, Dr. Goldman has this to say: “First class bands tune better than orchestras because the strings in the latter are often sharp and have an aversion to tuning down. Fast passages in the low register of the cellos and double-basses nearly always sound muddy and could be much improved by the addition of tubas.” He is convinced that given equally proficient performers, the same number of rehearsals, and an expert conductor, the brass band can play as artistically as the symphony orchestra.

I hear heckling from the supporters of the orchestra—when does anyone get these things from the *band*? Concerts without adequate preparation, conductors who don’t know their jobs—this is the true picture. Well—suppose it is the true picture. Composers surely need not be alarmed. It is the diet to which they have been accustomed by the finest orchestras in America!

The youth of the band performers however gives their playing an exuberance that goes a long way in overcoming technical difficulties.

The manufacture of band instruments has developed tremendously in the last few years. New systems of fingering have made execution increasingly easier and more efficient. These instruments are now more flexible than those of the orchestra. The brass section especially can manipulate any skip within its range at quick speed with perfect intonation.

Interesting changes in the makeup of the orchestra have resulted from the developments in the band field. Practically all the new instruments which the orchestra has taken on from time to time, have been of the wind family. As such they enjoyed a position of prominence in band instrumentation long before they were accepted by the orchestra.

Although there are one hundred thousand bands giving good performances in this country and as many more in various other parts of the world; although with equally proficient performers, the same number of rehearsals, and an expert conductor, the band can play as well as the orchestra; nevertheless, its capacities as an important ensemble have not been generally recognized.

Here then is the problem someone must eventually solve. The band as a musical organization reaches into every phase of our national life. I need not point out that bands are "in touch" with people much more than orchestras—there are more of them, they play for innumerable "occasions" on which it would be thought somehow improper to ask a symphony orchestra to play. But despite the size of this musical giant, it is forced to exist almost entirely on musical fare meant not for it but for the orchestra. With generally unfortunate musical results.

Composers are not writing for the one medium which should command the best talent available; as a result, the profession of composition suffers, and band-players, band-leaders, bands generally are starving for music written for the band, music exploiting its complete resources.

Composers do not realize that the orchestra was once in the position of the band today. The orchestra did not reveal its potentialities of tone and technic until increasing demands were im-

posed upon it by the Haydns, the Beethovens, the Wagners. Even the non-composer has failed to be attracted by the opportunity for research into the acoustical properties, the tonal effects, and the combinations possible in band music.

Although there are many urgent reasons why such purely acoustical research should be undertaken, this type of study is, after all, not the answer. The problem here is preponderantly a musical, not a scientific one.

What the band needs is simply music. Not transcriptions; not orchestral music patched up, but really band music. Consider the list of material available to such an organization as Goldman's (referred to because it is the leading professional group in the United States). There are two hundred and thirty eight overtures, one hundred and ten symphonic works, a hundred and three operatic excerpts, one hundred and twelve operatic fantasies, three hundred and eight unclassified concert numbers, seventy-three suites, thirty rhapsodies, ninety-six sacred and choral selections, ninety-five examples of ballet music, four hundred and nineteen military marches, seventy-six medleys, ninety-five waltzes, seventy-eight comic opera fantasies, gavottes, polkas, one hundred and eleven vocal solos with band accompaniment—*all transcriptions*, two-thirds of them arranged especially for the Goldman band and not available to other groups.

The band deserves and needs serious attention from composers. Their immediate task is to supply it with compositions of a monumental order. The nine Beethoven symphonies supplemented by a wealth of older and newer material, are the backbone of the orchestral repertoire. What the band in the United States needs is a central series of compositions to play this same role in its artistic growth.

There is a curious blind spot in the musical vision of New York and other metropolitan centers. A Metropolitan Opera, yes; a New York Philharmonic, yes; these things they can—and most certainly should—see and appreciate. But the more important field of the band is apparently beyond their periphery.

It is high time for someone to undertake this musical awakening. It is an important task, and one which should be done well.