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# What will impress Cheltenham Judges?

Section 1 judge – Alan Morrison



The UK's best bands are lining up this weekend for the four-section National Finals on a selection of challenging music. In collaboration with the Association of Brass Band Adjudicators, BBW brings the views of four judges in the 'box' at the Cheltenham Finals for Sections 1 – 4 bands – **Alan Morrison**, **Steve Sykes**, **David Childs** and **Dr. Robert Childs**. What will they be looking for? Here are their pointers for bands aiming high!

style introduction, almost like an overture to the first act. It is very rhythmical and quite square with strategically placed accents, awkward tied rhythms and detailed dynamics. It is an exercise of basic band playing of precision, control and discipline that needs careful organisation. It is easy for this to be played too heavily and with the first full-blooded *ff* full band sound not until figure 4, it needs careful management. A final timpani fanfare leads to the curtain opening.

The actual ballet starts unusually with a bass duet that sets the scene before a sinister character enters in the form of the solo euphonium, but lightness pervades in a neat and dainty cornet section that needs precision in the sparse scoring. It is often very fragmented, so a coherent line that links the phrasing and dynamics is essential to make sense of the music.

The main theme of the piece is heard for the first time in an elegant cornet solo

that has hints of humour with a euphonium counter melody, which eventually takes over the melody. Fragments here again need to link in line and tempo.

Of all people, the second baritone then 'introduces' the solo cornet section, as we hear a calm and controlled main theme in its entirety, before the mood changes through an impatient *accel* and *marcato* trombones make way for a more animated recap of the fragmented section, which almost immediately subsides and transforms to a *legato* and sustained soft close to *Act 1*.

A single euphonium note links to *Act 2*, where flugel takes centre stage in an expressively lyrical and tranquil version of the main theme, which can really pull at the heartstrings. Soprano then leads a quartet of soloists answered by a short cornet

solo. Figure 2 sees the full theme in all its glory at a slower pace, but with a request to keep flowing. This has several codettas in a staged gradual decrease of tempo that the composer marks in English from 'Slower, Even Slower' through to 'Slowest', to bring the act to a close in its deepest calm and control. A treacherous ending to an act of beauty that needs nerve, control and technique to pull off successfully. Horowitz tests the conductors here to find the lead lines with some very elaborate scoring.

A single trombone breaks the mood to introduce *Act 3*, with some slapstick to follow around the band and not a little humour. Euphonium tries to change the mood to a grotesque waltz, but basses quickly snuff this out, forcing an '*accel*' to an abrupt hesitation and stop. A new theme emerges in horns to lighten the mood, occasionally trying to break in to a waltz. Flugel is more straight-laced, yet more decorative, but can't stop the waltz taking hold until an explosion of trombones restores sanity. Eventually a glorious waltz finally takes hold to have the last say, before a syncopated transition section takes us to the start of the final gallop home.

Echoes of the initial bass duet start the run; then a recap of the introduction quickly changes to a chaotic few bars with high-wire cornet *arpeggios* before a driving cornet reminds us of the first theme of this act.

Horowitz cleverly reprises all of the themes we have heard in short bursts and motifs, as a virtuosic euphonium takes the stage and we head in to a coda section that is almost a recap of the introduction, but with much more pace and animation towards an exciting and driven ending that will, no doubt, induce rapturous applause and several curtain calls.

Think of what a ballet company needs to produce a successful show and you have the qualities required here to produce a good

## SECTION 1

**BALLET FOR BAND** by Joseph Horowitz

**Alan Morrison**

*Ballet for Band* was commissioned for the 1983 National Brass Band Championships, won by Cory Band under Major Arthur Kenney. In the front of the score, Joseph Horowitz writes: '*Ballet for Band* is literally the music for an imaginary ballet. The characters and plot were quite clear in my mind before composing it, but I prefer the audience to exercise its own imagination rather than be influenced by mine.'

As you would expect of a ballet, it is the subtleties of lightness and precision, rather than sheer brute force that will undoubtedly produce the more successful performances of this delightful work.

The work begins with a grand extended fanfaric

performance of this work. Subtlety, poise and emotion will all be required in spades, along with the basics of good band playing. The wide-ranging character of the music can be explored to the full. Humour, emotion, fear and love are all in there, and the successful performances will find them all.



Section 2 judge - Steve Sykes

PHOTO: COURTESY STEVE SYKES

## SECTION 2

### IMAGES FOR BRASS by Stephen Bulla

#### Steve Sykes

Cinematic in style, it will be a joy to play, prepare and listen to Stephen Bulla's *Images for Brass*. The work is presented in four contrasting movements and has more than enough musical obstacles to sort out the competing bands on the day.

**1. Prologue:** Marked '*Lento lamentoso*', the movement is underpinned with dramatic percussion figures that should employ a sure-footed, yet motivated feel. Even though the tempo is steady, do not allow the music to stagnate. The composer utilises colourful dynamic expansions throughout - but be careful not to overdo these.

Sectional balance is important, as is ensemble balance of course; from bar 3, try to ensure that the dynamics in each section entry is relevant to

the one before it. The '*sostenuto*' direction is important, but must not impede progress! Note the accents in baritones from b12 - the first of the piece. A well-measured (and not overblown) apex to the *crescendo* at b16 should be the highlight of the movement. Thematic material (*The Star-Spangled Banner*) should be to the fore

(ensure that the dotted quaver/semi-quaver is never presented in a 'triplety' compound fashion - a particular bugbear for adjudicators!). Muted instruments (especially cup mutes) need to be fine-tuned.

**2. Approach By Sea:** Again a true balance and secure intonation is required in each section. The constant undulating 6/8 figures in cornets must have a rhythmic feel in order to motivate the movement. Melodic horns/baritones will have to be very careful with intonation on their highest notes. The trombones harmonised *glissandi* will lead to problems and it will be interesting to see how players and directors handle this! Careful that euphoniums and basses are not late at the end of b55. Snare drum figures from b57 will require great rhythmic and dynamic control to be entirely convincing. The horn group entries from b81 will need careful

balance. The hemiola (of which there are many in this movement) will need careful and exact spacing, and the lower dynamics must not go uncared for in this exciting and, at times, rumbustious music - extract the effect of the quieter sounds. There is much sectional interplay - balance is so important. From b137 the rising slurred figures in the horn group, through to the cornet section, must connect well and balance dynamically. I believe the overall presentation of this purposeful music to be 'exciting', but not 'excited'.

**3. Chorale Prayer:** Marked '*Adagio*', the opening cup-muted cornet phrase represents one of the real challenges in the work. Fine tuning (and intonation) will pay dividends, as will security of airflow and well-graded dynamics. As the movement progresses, be careful not to 'over-phrase' as this will stifle the flow and line of the music. At b188, the cornet solo (*Melita*) is

marked '*espressivo*' - probably best to show this with tone quality, rather than any distorted *rubato*. From b194, the trombones need to play their unison melody, with secure intonation, and be free of any *glissandi* 'drift'. Keen attention to balance and intonation (the basics!) will present this music in its best light. This really is a lovely movement and is worthy of inclusion as a 'stand-alone' item in any band programme.

**4. Engagement:** This musical depiction of brutal conflict needs to be played in a vital and pulsating style, the energetic syncopations featuring contrasting acute and circumflex accents. Militaristic percussion is a feature throughout, but should not dominate the soundscape. Effective dynamic headroom is important, so don't allow the forte dynamic to be confused with the *fortissimo* sounds. At b233, organise an exact starting point where *crescendi* begin after the *forte* piano effects and, at b238, the unison *ff* triplet figures should have good rhythmic shape. Be careful not to get too excited and distort the sound; leave an impression of controlled aggression!

b253 - the finishing line is in sight - don't lose 'grip' or focus - keep intonation in check (especially on the semibreves and minims). Note that there are no accents written here; aim for a sonorous ensemble sound. Examine the intonation through the final two bars, and aim for a solid and exciting climax without being overblown.

I feel that *Images for Brass* is an ideal choice for bands competing at this level. I hope and I'm sure that they will enjoy the experience of the occasion. I'm certainly looking forward to hearing their efforts and wish them the very best of luck in their performances at Cheltenham.

## SECTION 3

### LAKE OF THE MOON by Kevin Houben

#### David Childs

First used as a test-piece in the third division of the Gouden Spiker Festival 2009, this work has since been used at the World Music Contest and the Australian Championships. As a trumpet graduate with a 'Masters' in conducting, composition and orchestration, Kevin Houben knows how to compose a good test-piece, and with *Lake of the Moon*, he has done just that.

At approximately 11 minutes, the work falls into four sections. The opening sets a dramatic scene



Section 3 judge - David Childs

providing an introduction to a lyrical oriental line first heard in the form of a flugel horn solo. However, this transparent introduction should not be underestimated. In addition to creating atmosphere and dynamic contrast, achieving the 'basics' of good ensemble, secure intonation and controlled balance (including well-graded crescendos) will help make an all-important positive first impression.

Solo, duet, trio and full section melodic lines should be played with expression, and should be heard at the forefront of the texture. Generally, the use of mutes throughout is to provide a different colour, rather than a lower dynamic - something worth considering when *mezzo forte* lines are cup-muted. Bar 78 -81 has potential for poor intonation and care should be taken with the *fortissimo* close to this section.

A new musical idea begins at bar 83. This threatening music needs to have energy, but should also have control. Rhythmically unison 'shot' notes passing through various time-changes obviously present their own challenge, so concentration is key here. Don't be the player to make that unwanted one note 'solo' contribution! Conductors should also take care to keep a consistent pulse when passing in and out of the compound time signatures, whilst creating clear stylistic contrast between the cantabile lines and energetic material. Bar 147 should step up in

tempo, providing a brief coda in anticipation of the next musical idea.

The *Adagio divoto* at bar 170 represents the core of the work in my view. At this point, the composer uses the Texcoco Lake (Lake of the Moon) as his inspiration, and here the solo euphonium should provide a magical moment of calmness before being joined by flugel horn. Quality sounds, sensitive accompaniment and heartfelt expression will all contribute to the success of this music, and indeed the performance. The composer gives subtle tempo directions, which should be observed, but don't fall into the trap of being overly indulgent in an attempt to be 'musical'. When marked *con moto* the music needs to flow, and whether exercising *rubato* or not, the ensemble needs to remain as one. Following a brief coda returning to music of an oriental nature, the finale begins marked '*Allegro Ritmico*.' At this point in the performance, adrenalin is likely to be running high. However, take care not to set off too fast! Precision in syncopated lines, accuracy through mixed time-changes and basic ensemble can all suffer if the tempo is excessive. Keep control with speed and dynamic. It would be easy to overblow at Bar 242 - 'Ablaze!! Like an Organ' - but if balance, sound quality and intonation suffer, the music will have been robbed of a glorious close.

Good luck to all the bands and conductors. Have fun, make music and try to secure the basics!

#### SECTION 4 MUSIC FROM KANTARA by Kenneth Downie Dr. Robert Childs

Kenneth Downie's *Music From Kantara* was written in 1994 and was first performed by Watership Brass. Since then, it has been used as a test-piece on many occasions, both at home and abroad, and a testament to its popularity is the frequency that it is performed in own-choice competitions too. The title comes from the name of the former home of the composer, near Winchester.

The work is in three individual movements and is musically self-explanatory. If conductors or instrumentalists have any doubt interpreting the music, just look carefully at the score - all the answers are there. Try and play the music as the composer imagined it!

Below are a few guidelines and check points that I noticed whilst preparing the score for adjudication.

**Movement I: *Spiritoso*:** There are lots of detailed dynamics and articulations to work on and although the opening few bars are marked '*Spiritoso*', the majority of the movement is in a light and playful style (*leggiero*). It would be all too easy to



Section 4 judge - Dr. Robert Childs

overblow and overdo the articulations, resulting in an unwanted aggressive style. There are three main contrasting tunes (bar 4, 25 and 65), which ask for stylistic integrity. Delicate and subtle percussion, including glockenspiel, triangle, tambourine and hi-hat cymbal, add colour to the texture; they all need careful balance, as does the difference between *forte* and *fortissimo* throughout.

#### Movement II: *Andantino con espress*

This movement gives the conductor and soloists scope to demonstrate mature musicality. The music never rises above *forte* and the first essentials (intonation, balance and ensemble) will, I'm sure, prove to be a challenge for many bands. Again subtle percussion is essential and the final chord should be together. I would urge conductors to check the composer's metronome mark because it's easy to let the music drag and become expressively over indulgent.

#### Movement III: *Presto*

Even though the movement is marked '*Presto*', the composer has given a metronome mark that is there to be observed. If conductors perform this too fast, it could dilute the *affretando* towards the end and cause ensemble issues at the even faster *Furioso* (bar 239). Just like the first movement, there is a lot of detail to achieve (accents, dynamics, etc.). Try to overcome these challenges without becoming aggressive or overblowing.

Finally, if you can overcome the technical challenges such as intonation, ensemble and balance, and then demonstrate a high degree of stylistic awareness and musicality, I'm sure you will be on the road to success. Good luck to all!