

The Band is Doing the Best it Can

The Eastern Iowa Brass Band recently held its Summer Showcase Concert, and I was asked to be the substitute announcer. Here is a sampling from my program notes:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to EIBB's Summer Showcase Concert.

Our goal tonight is for each of you to leave here feeling that our band has exceeded your expectations. One way to do this is to play a flawless concert, which we all know is not going to happen. Therefore, I am here to reduce your expectations.

Not to make excuses, but I'm sure it's apparent that all of our members were born in the last century, some of them closer to the century before that. It's no secret that in the 1900's there were poor concepts of pitch, tempo and ensemble playing, much of which is evident with these old-timers.

Not to mention that eyesight dims, hearing fails and knuckles calcify. The notes on the pages are really small and go by really fast; you know, it's a wonder they can play at all. Please keep these things in mind as the band performs its first piece, *Walking With Heroes*.

I'll apologize in advance for this next piece, *Live and Let Die*, which was composed by Sir Paul McCartney. McCartney is generally acknowledged to be a second-tier composer with very few memorable tunes and little commercial success.

Dennis - our cornet soloist on this piece - doesn't like to talk about it but he was traumatized at an early age by a trumpet-playing circus clown and has only recently overcome his phobia to be able to play for you tonight. Please allow for this as we play *Live and Let Die* by what's-his-name.

Our next piece is a compilation of tunes by the 1970's pop group ABBA, a quartet of Swedish musicians not to be confused with the Norwegian Hootenanny Jug

Band. These tunes have been transcribed from their native Swedish bi-tonal form into western voicing where the pitch A resonates at 440 Megahertz per second instead of the Swedish standard 227.3. The predictable result was a Frankenstein's monster of an arrangement that we'll do our best with – *ABBA Goes Brass*.

Our next tune features Todd, one of our euphoniumists. Now, Todd is not actually our best player in the euphonium section, but he feels that it's finally his turn to play a solo and has been bugging the living daylights out of our director. In the "exceeding your expectations" department, you can be grateful that this solo is not being played by Bob the Second Tenor Horn player, who has been only slightly less whiny than Todd. Please tolerate Todd's best effort on the traditional American folk song *Shenandoah*.

Coming up next is one of John Phillip Sousa's marches; *The Thunderer*. Sousa is famous for cranking out hundreds of similar marches that all sound alike and nobody can remember the names of. Not everyone knows that in 1879 he was forced to marry a tenor horn player in a shotgun wedding, so every piece he wrote since then contains at least 128 measures of afterbeats which feature the deservedly overlooked tenor horn section. I actually played tenor myself for a couple of years, which was the result of my losing a substantial bet with our previous director. Please keep all these things in mind as we play John Philip Sousa's *The Thunderer*.

We will now feature Paul, a guest artist that we were very fortunate to acquire for tonight's performance. He is in the midst of a triumphant regional one-man tour, having recently performed in Lone Tree, Wilton, and at the Grundy Center Fire Station. If you haven't seen it yet, Paul's act is a unique one involving his cornet, a bicycle tire pump and a very nervous pet iguana named Larry.

We're grateful to him for juggling his busy schedule to accommodate us, despite recently contracting a serious lung disease from the mold in his cornet that he never cleans. Paul will now wheeze through our next tune, *Georgia on My Mind*.

I've been looking forward to our next piece, *Africa*, which was originally a #1 hit by the rock band Toto in 1983. It has some very odd syncopations, and every now and then you may think that a band member has made a mistake and is playing random notes during what should be a rest. The truth is that we felt there were entirely too many rests in this tune, and we encouraged our members to write in notes that they felt were appropriate.

In fact, we encourage all of our band members to express their individuality and alter their parts on the fly if they feel moved to do so. The result is that you, the listening audience, are hearing way more notes and way fewer rests than the composer intended. This is the musical equivalent of supersizing your fries, which is our gift to you tonight. Please enjoy *Africa*.

The less-musically-sophisticated among you may be wondering why not all of our members seem playing together, especially on downbeats. The answer is that our director has transcribed each of tonight's pieces separately for each player. It's no accident that we have 32 members – it's the exact number called for if you offset every part by exactly $1/32$ of a beat.

That's right, the untrained ear perceives this to be sloppy playing when in fact it's exactly the way the music is written. The result is a very flowing, continuous sound instead of the jarring effect that results from everyone coming in at the same time. See if you can detect this very difficult technical effect in our next piece, *Macarthur Park*.

We finally arrive at the end tonight's program. Tchaikovsky's bombastic *1812 Overture* commemorates a significant squabble in 1812, and I can vouch for that. I was in room 1810, and the noise kept me up all night.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons is not expecting to be asked again to be EIBB's substitute announcer.