

MAX FARROW ON THE MUSIC IN THE FILM



When making a film about brass bands, a good soundtrack is naturally going to be essential and, thanks to writer and director Mark Herman's carefully considered choices, the music of *Brassed Off* is something special. With the talents of the Grimethorpe Colliery Band - upon which Grimley's troupe is modelled - and the acclaimed composer Trevor Jones (*The Last of the Mohicans*), a truly captivating collection of music was compiled for audiences to enjoy.

The first of these chosen melodies emerges in the opening moments of *Brassed Off*, with Robert Browne Hall's *Death and Glory* serving as a fitting accompaniment to our first glimpse of Grimley and its workers. It's a staunch and proud marching tune, and its tumbling solo cornet strengthens the sense of camaraderie and humour in the community. Yet *Death and Glory*'s harsher edge undercuts the fun, hinting at the hardship of their work and foreshadowing the trouble which will soon unfold.

Moreover, we don't have to wait long to learn about the colliery's impending closure, or

become acquainted with each denizen of Grimley and their respective financial troubles. As they set off for band practice, their journeys coincide with a rousing rendition of composer, Katie Moss's *The Floral Dance* in the major key, which is significant in itself. Moss wrote this jolly, famous English song in 1911 after being inspired by her first participation in the Cornish Furry Dance. As is also the case with the Furry Dance, *The Floral Dance*, which Sir Terry Wogan famously recorded in 1978, celebrates the passing of winter into spring. With this in mind, the use of *The Floral Dance* in *Brassed Off* reinforces this sense of a close-knit community and the massive transition that the village of Grimley is going through.

In this same scene, we are introduced to Tara Fitzgerald's Gloria, along with *Brassed Off*'s signature piece: Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*. Included as part of musical supervisor John Anderson's recommendations, *Aranjuez* is a sweeping and immediately engaging composition played in a minor key. Though it was originally arranged for classical guitars and orchestras, *Aranjuez* – or *Orange Juice* is defined here by the wistful, mellow tones of the sole

flugelhorn which, to quote Rodrigo himself, truly calls forth those “*melancholic emotions*”. Certainly, Aranjuez’s soaring melody plays as the colliery’s fate is decided in a troubled boardroom debate, and as Andy (Ewan McGregor) and Gloria’s love for one another is reawakened. It’s an especially poignant part of *Brassed Off*, and it’s no wonder that the popularity of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* has increased after its sublime use in this scene.

Soon enough we’re back with another well-worn brass band tune, only this time it is Robert Barratt and Edrich Siebert’s merry *March of the Cobblers*. It’s a particularly regimented piece that instantly conjures up the typical image of a well-organised brass band, so it’s somewhat ironic that the Grimley Colliery Band plays this tune when they are at their lowest and tipsiest ebb. A ‘load of cobblers’, indeed.

The next piece that we hear is *Cross of Honour* from the prestigious Lancastrian cornet player, conductor and composer William Rimmer. Rimmer is renowned for his brass band marches such as *Punchinello* and *Ravenswood*, which are similarly rigorous and stirring. Certainly, the fast tempo and taut composition of Rimmer’s piece only serve to accentuate the frayed nerves and the rampant suspicion that mark the colliery’s ballot, as well as the day-to-day tasks which immediately follow it.

We later see Andy, Phil (Stephen Tompkinson) and the rest of the group playing once again, though it is a more cohesive Colliery Band that plays for the crowds in Halifax. Their renewed focus is conveyed by their clear and unified performance, and Herman’s choice of the *Florentiner March* highlights Grimley’s dramatic

turnaround. Driven by the strength of the trumpets, it’s an airy and upbeat piece, which is unsurprising when we consider that it was written by Czech composer Julius Fučík. Indeed, Fučík’s name may not be readily familiar, but he is globally recognised to this day. Indeed, Fučík’s most famous piece is *Entrance of the Gladiators* (alternatively called *Thunder and Blazes*), which has become the default entrance theme for circus clowns everywhere. As with many of the other themes in this soundtrack it is a very lively composition, yet these types of bombastic tunes are not the only melodies in Herman’s arsenal.

For another of *Brassed Off*’s most affecting scenes, Mark Herman chose the beloved *Danny Boy*, which the band plays during their late-night congregation outside Danny’s (Pete Postlethwaite) hospital window. They perform a particularly soft and tear-jerking arrangement, and the warmth and passion of *Danny Boy*’s main melody and lyrics recall its origin in Irish communities. It therefore goes some way to reaffirm the close and cherished bonds between the villagers of Grimley, especially since it is one of Danny’s favourite pieces. But given that the song is frequently played at funerals, its usage in a scene where Danny Ormondroyd is at death’s door means that the whole scenario is even more heartbreaking. It’s not hard to see why this scene is a firm favourite for many of *Brassed Off*’s fans.

The audience is not left to dwell on such sadness for long, however; the work of John Marcangelo supplements the band’s journey to the Royal Albert Hall and the faster, sanguine tempo in his *Clog Dance* highlights the group’s renewed faith in themselves. It may have a more bombastic use of percussion, but the march’s

rollicking, single-minded focus recalls their success of the *Florentiner March* in Halifax.

In spite of such an impressively energetic composition, an all-time classic is reserved for Grimley’s triumph at the National Championship Finals. Famous for its use in *The Lone Ranger* and *A Clockwork Orange*, Gioachino Rossini’s *Overture From William Tell* is a tour de force of timpani and power. Purists may protest that *William Tell* would never be performed in a championship, but it’s perfect for a cinematic finale nonetheless. Played *accelerando*, the piece increases in its infectious excitement as the band giddily anticipates Phil reuniting with his family, Andy and Gloria’s reconciliation and, most importantly, their collective success.

The Grimley Colliery Band then sees the film out with a rendition of Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance*, as their bus passes by the illuminated Houses of Parliament. It’s the most patriotically British scene in the film, though there is a palpably ironic feel to it. The anthem we hear is an undeniably softer and somewhat muted arrangement of the proud tune which usually blares forth. Accompanying Danny’s fiery speech and that final sorrowful caption about the pit closures, the audience is not left with a wholeheartedly happy ending. Our heroes may have won the competition, but the colliery is lost and their finances are still on shaky ground; the paradox of them playing a piece that’s commonly known as *Land of Hope and Glory* is clear, especially when, to paraphrase Danny himself, “not one of them [have] an ounce of bloody hope left”.

Brassed Off also includes the famous tunes of *Jerusalem*, *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and



the *Colonel Bogey March*, which are briefly heard at various points in the film. Trevor Jones's original score is similarly utilised, and though Jones's compositions may be outweighed by the rearrangements of past marches and tunes, this does not lessen the importance of his work. Throughout the course of *Brassed Off*, Jones subtly uses string instruments to lightly colour the movie's quieter character moments with delicate care. His score also complements the rest of the soundtrack with its heavy use of the brass sections; in this way, Trevor Jones's pieces function as an essential connective tissue between the more brazen pieces of music, particularly the traditional marching tunes. Indeed, the entirety of *Brassed Off*'s soundtrack surpasses mere serviceability.

Soundtracks serve to heighten the sequences they accompany, and in this way *Brassed Off*'s score is fitting, pivotal and fascinating. From Rodrigo to Elgar, director Mark Herman has peppered the film with a series of sentimental favourites, and this is an assured and intentional move. Very near the film's conclusion, Gloria recalls that "Yorkshire men are famous for... not showing their feelings", and though the characters we follow are certainly hard-headed, we know that they care very deeply about the colliery, the band and each other. The happy and upbeat pieces which Danny and his troupe play may occasionally contrast with the visions of unemployment and depression that we witness, but they are all traditional compositions about community, security and morale. The

inhabitants of Grimley yearn for happier days, and these musical choices reflect this perfectly. In this sense, the score is the emotionally driven core of the film and is as much a character in *Brassed Off* as Danny, Harry (Jim Carter), Andy, and the rest of the miners themselves.

This inspired selection of classical and emotive original tracks has given the film its distinctive musical voice, allowing *Brassed Off* and its soundtrack to enjoy an enduring popularity, ever since its release over two decades ago.