

The limits of cultural diversity in arts policy: the example of the forgotten brass bands

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Abstract

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In their publications and policies, decision-makers tend to forget some parts of our white working-class heritage, as exemplified by the challenges faced by the brass band movement. The brass band movement must increasingly rely on commercial sponsors because public sector funding does not seem available as brass bands are not the fashionable darlings of arts policy.

This paper critically examines the example of brass bands as an illustration of contested/dissonant heritage. The analysis is based on both primary research (with brass band musicians) and secondary research (on a range of documents such as policies and applications which seem to always exclude cultural forms like brass bands). Issues of communication, education and representations are explored and both sides are constructively criticised, both policy-makers and brass bands representatives.

Ultimately, this paper addresses one of the 'black holes' of arts policy: the difficult situation of some movements that are outside the usual frames of reference of cultural diversity.

Key words: cultural diversity, brass bands, preoccupation, arts policy

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Introduction

In their publications and policies, decision-makers tend to forget some parts of our white working-class heritage, as exemplified by the challenges faced by the brass band movement. The British Brass Bands Federation must increasingly rely on commercial sponsors because public sector funding does not seem to be available as brass bands are not the fashionable 'darlings' of arts policy.

This paper critically examines the example of the brass band as an illustration of contested/dissonant heritage. The analysis will be based on both primary

research (with brass band musicians) and secondary research (on a range of documents such as policies and applications which seem always to exclude cultural forms like brass bands). Issues of communication, education and representations will be explored and both sides will be constructively criticised, both policy-makers and brass band representatives.

Ultimately, this paper addresses one of the 'black holes' of arts policy: the difficult situation of some movements that are outside the usual frames of reference of cultural diversity.

Contextualisation

Brass bands have a role in the social history of music and English culture. In 1895 there was estimated to be forty thousand bands in England that had all developed from working class groups. The brass band movement created what was probably the first mass engagement of working class people in instrumental art music: this relationship between (working) class and (brass band) music has not though been extensively researched, with a few exceptions such as Trevor Herbert's 2000 book *The British Brass Band: A Musical and Social History*. In his analysis, he notes the fact that in the late 19th century brass bands were highly considered, even by the middle classes, as they represented a force for the moral elevation of working classesⁱ. At the time, brass bands were not only appreciated but also funded and sponsored; industrial owners took on these values and used brass bands as a means to meet their needs. In their 1979 wider study of brass bands, Violet and Bryan Brand suggest such support from industrial owners may have been given with 'some relief that their workers were indulging in the innocuous activity of "banding" rather than disruptive politics.'ⁱⁱ

However, following the Second World War, in 1946 full television broadcasting by the BBC resumed and mass communication starting driving the creation of the national communityⁱⁱⁱ. Working class people were being shown, in the wake of the war years, new ways of spending their leisure time and new musical styles to choose. This new technology changed the context of brass bands in Britain and the movement struggled as it moved steadily away from the new mass leisure generation being born. J H. Elliott claimed in 1936 that:

'... the old conception of the brass band as a mirror through which the classics could be displayed to thousands who could never see the actuality is no longer valid.'^{iv}

New cultural styles were being expressed and to huge mass audiences, displacing the old positive representation of brass bands and creating a new, now national, image. This was done through a press that was ignorant of the movement it was representing. Dave Russell writes that the press were:

'...ignorant of the specialist nature of the music, reporters inevitably sought for 'human interest'. In general, treatment of bands was light hearted. 'Characters' and atmosphere dominated.'^v

Cultural policy issues of the Victorian era created the support network for brass bands in those all-important early stages of the movement. Cultural policy citing culture and art as a development tool for society, along with new industrial technologies, paved the way for leisure and recreation growth in this time. As technological developments took shape new ideas and values were emerging leaving brass bands to stand on their own two feet. The movement began to be more introverted, seeking funds through individual private sponsorship and losing its national position.

This is where the movement is left today with much progression within itself but with no recognition outside its parameters. There are 550 registered contesting bands in Britain with 17,000 active brass musicians (this number does not take into account youth bands, concert bands or non-contesting bands for which there is no precise data available). These individual organisations strive for artistic development and are at the heart of many communities' yearly calendar of events.

This head down mentality from the movement has contributed in creating a void between it and the decision makers in the arts. Changing policy values and aims seem to exclude any of the movement's previous heritage value and continuing values resulting in the forgotten brass bands.

Conceptual underpinning

The concept of cultural diversity is useful to understand the current situation of brass bands with regard to public funding (especially the problems that brass bands unavoidably encounter when applying for funding from Arts Councils). Cultural diversity is both a political theory and a social practice; as a social practice, it refers to the cultural mix of the contemporary British social fabric, hence the use of the word 'multiculturalism' as a synonym. As a political theory, it refers to the celebration and explicit support of cultural differences, especially with regard to migrant cultures with a rather left-wing agenda. It is beyond our scope here to scrutinise and compare definitions of 'cultural diversity'.

Methodology

Primary research for this paper includes interviews with brass bands musicians and coordinators (for 'the brass bands side') as well with Arts Councils officials (such as James Burkmar, Head of Performing Arts for the Arts Council England, East Midlands (for 'the funding agencies' side).
- Secondary research for this paper includes academic reading about arts policy as well as engagement with Arts Council policies and similar documents.

Discussion

Arts production and arts consumption take place in complex nexus, involving many players (for example mediating distribution and reception of the arts)

within a context increasingly dominated by a political agenda. In the UK there is now a huge emphasis on cultural diversity. Wider political occurrences have seen a preoccupation emerging. The Home Secretary Charles Clarke's 2005 'Race Strategy' illustrates how diversity is at the centre of government values. The 'Race Strategy' is a government plan to increase race equality and build a 'strong and cohesive society'. The Home Secretary said that "he wanted to foster 'a sense of common belonging and shared identity' so that no person of a community in the UK felt left behind"^{vi}. This is an all round government-led value and therefore related organisations such as the Arts Councils have their policies directly affected to help implement this and any strategy like it. A consequence is the fact that some arts forms are regarded more favourably than others, and some will be more likely to receive political support and subsequently financial support. The strategy wants no person or community to be left behind but through such national actions this may back fire, creating a new divide of organisations and communities which are not diverse enough.

The Arts Council website states that

'Race, ethnicity and faith will remain major preoccupations in this country and the arts are fundamental to such debates. The arts help us to develop a sense of our identity and ourselves as individuals, as members of our communities and as a nation.'^{vii}

This is a sound statement which many agree on, however, should this process of art and identity be forced through by policy? Smith says that

'The central difficulty in any project to construct a global identity and hence a global culture, is that collective identity, like imagery and culture, is always historically specific because it is based on shared memories and a sense of continuity between generations.'^{viii}

This would suggest that identity develops through time and is ever changing. There should be no need for pushing its progression - it should instead have support to evolve over time. Shifts in policy can be damaging for some art forms such as brass bands, and it is important to nurture not propel such delicate products.

When interviewed James Burkmar, Head of Performing Arts for the Arts Council England, East Midlands recognised that

'Brass bands often want things that have unquestionable value for them, their musicians and the community – it's just that those things are not always easily linked to our five main investment objectives – the ambitions... we fund work that meets our ambitions... we have decided... that diversity is a key objective for us.'^{ix}

There is clearly a discrepancy between the historico-cultural identity of brass bands, with their working class Anglo-English heritage, and one of the five objectives ('ambitions') of the Arts Council. These five objectives are: supporting the artist, enabling organisations to thrive, not just survive,

championing cultural diversity, offering opportunities for young people, and encouraging growth.

A brass band would easily be able to tick at least four of these boxes leaving diversity as a grey area. Diversity can be simply defined as the situation 'when many different types of things or people are included in something' (Definition from the Cambridge English Dictionary). Brass bands do offer *some* diversity: they can play Berlioz to Robbie Williams. They take part in contests, concerts, carol services, remembrance parades and much more. They bring together a range of people from different backgrounds and areas of the community. As noted by Frank Renton: '*...the bands of today represent a broad spectrum of society. Gone are the days where only working class members of society take part.*'^x All walks from the community sit side by side working together to achieve the same goals. To purely define diversity as race, ethnicity and faith, is not as relevant in some communities in some parts of the UK.

The Arts Council offers a broadened view when defining diversity on their website.

'By 'diversity', we mean that we will respond to issues around race, ethnicity, faith, disability, sexuality, class and economic disadvantage – any social or institutional barriers that prevent people from participating in and enjoying the arts.'^{xi}

It seems that the later part of this definition after 'Race, ethnicity, faith...' may not be as appealing when 'championing diversity' as Brass bands are responding to many of these issues naturally and always have.

In a research report for Grants for the Arts published in 2005, the number and percentages and success rate of applications and grants from the Arts Council website shows how only 37% of brass bands were successful when applying for Grants For the Arts. This is rather revealing when one sees how 69% of World music applicants were successful.^{xii} With regard to the application process, it must be stressed that most brass bands are amateur. As organisations, they may not have the knowledge and skills to fill in the application forms successfully. The Arts Council does offer training for mainstream organisations through its 'Maximise' programme which equips organisations with the skills and confidence to present black minority ethnic events. This support is excellent with seminars and one to one coaching. There does not seem to be any support allocated to organisations with different ambitions. Brass bands and similar organisations have solid ideas and the ability to meet policy objectives, yet they may not know how best to present and angle their application.

Desford Colliery Band was awarded a National Lottery Investment Award of £4,000 from the Lottery Investment scheme for '*...helping Desford Colliery Band plan for the future.*'^{xiii} The band has in total been awarded £46,000 overall from this lottery scheme. This is an investment scheme and so once an organisation has been invested in with an initial grant the Lottery will invest in their future. The Desford Band is a shining example of a well presented

application and sustained relationship with the Lottery. This is however one of thousands of bands in Britain and an originally successful band. If the benefit of this one band has been invested in why are we not seeing schemes and initiatives such as the Maximise programme being developed for bands to benefit more of the movement and reap what bands have to offer? This would help the movement itself to plan for its own future.

There is a need to see the integration of new cultural art alongside the provision of traditional already established forms. There is no denying that the movement does not help itself; however. Whilst seeking private sponsorship deals does enable bands to support themselves, one can notice an increasing gap between cultural organisations such as the Arts Council and brass bands, as well as some tensions and resentment amongst many brass band players. Communication is a problem; the movement's national body, the British Federation of Brass Bands (BFBB), does little to support the bands it is supposed to represent. The BFBB would appear to be the heading organisation for the movement providing a national voice. However this concept is not felt throughout the movement. There are discrepancies about how significant the role of the BFBB is on a national and local level and if membership is of any value. The mission statement of the BFBB is:

‘[...] to maintain, improve, represent and promote the practice and performance of brass band music in the UK. The BFBB is constantly working on behalf of member bands to meet these objectives.’^{xiv}

The first discrepancy is that for many bands and their members there does not appear to be adequate representation of the BFBB itself at events. The national competitions which unite bands across the whole of Britain are owned by Kapitol Promotions and their presence is huge. There certainly is little representation of the BFBB at such events, and as the National's are 'the' date in the brass band calendar, the BFBB profile is suffering.

Hutchinson and Feist^{xv} in their 'PSI Survey of Amateur Arts and Crafts in the U.K.' back this theory. They state that:

‘The Federation of Brass Bands does not organise a national competition...nor is it responsible for registration of bands...consequently, as an ‘umbrella’ organisation it exerts relatively little power.’

This is felt throughout the movement and any work being done by the BFBB is not recognised due to its lack of overall control. There are separate Regional Associations which deal with promoting contests and concerts in their areas. Mike Knapton, secretary of the Wessex Brass Band Association^{xvi} said:

‘As an association we send a representative to the Federation but to date we find that the support of the Federation is non-existent and their organisation leaves a great deal to be desired [...].’

If communication between associations within the movement is this poor there appears to be little hope for communication with the Arts Council. Support by the BFBB should be given on behalf of the Arts Council to help with the demand for grants and to promote the role bands play within the arts and community. The movement has progressed within itself; the wider arts world needs to be educated about this and its contributions to policy objectives. It is a worry that with such heavy subsidy for protecting and nurturing diversity, one may see a flip side in future, with policy discriminating against our traditional heritage within cultural activities.

Issues of globalisation today have an effect on all areas of culture and are usually sited in areas of mass culture consumerism. Within that context, the future of brass bands is uncertain. Writing about cultural homogenization, John Tomlinson notes that '*the homogenisation thesis presents globalization as synchronisation to the demands of a standardized consumer culture, making everywhere seem more or less the same.*'^{xvii} This may seem extreme in our context of the arts, but issues of standardisation and uniformity are pressing when so much emphasis is placed on diversity through policy objectives inside the arts and the government as a whole.

Satellite and cable capabilities have allowed us to access News 24 with world news. This coupled with the internet has made the world an even smaller place with people chatting across the world in seconds about the same breaking news story they have watched. This sees people sharing the same moments, events and values but at a vast geographical distance. Developments such as this have caused theorists to talk about a global village of which everyone in the world is seen as a part and in harmony with. It can be said that this is all contributing to issues and ideas of cultural diversity today within our true local communities and the nation. Marshall McLuhan says that:

'The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology...'^{xviii}

The 'wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness' he speaks of can fit easily into Charles Clarke's Race strategy where he uses a sense of belonging and shared identity to describe his ideals. There are many similarities when analysing the relationship of global village theory to cultural diversity policy in the arts. Benjamin Syrnes talks about the idealist Global Village:

'Is there not a possibility that if we place too much importance in achieving an idealistic unified global village, we perhaps risk losing a sense of our physical humanity and our identity and thus forget why we are communicating at all.'^{xix}

It is questionable whether arts policy makers are placing too much importance on achieving an idealistic diverse culture and thereby losing a sense of identity and forgetting why art is produced at all.

Venues are being pressurised to change artistic direction and decision making to meet policy requirements for fear of losing favour with funding bodies.

Creative freedom is being lost and natural progression is at risk of becoming a quick fix today damaging tomorrow's cultural makeup. We may be gaining a new national cultural identity but it may not be as recognisable for all, especially for brass bands. Smith's earlier comments that '...collective identity...is based on shared memories and a sense of continuity between generations' can be re-interpreted in this context. This drive across policy is taking away any embedded context and development, rushing in an identity that does not yet exist.

Traditional English forms still play a critical part in the heritage of the UK national identity. Brass bands flourished in the Industrial Revolution, survived two world wars and a shift in policy values along with Thatcherism in the 80s with the closing of mines and the industrial heart of many industrial towns in Britain. Brass bands are still playing an integral role in hundreds if not thousands of communities in Britain and they will survive through this policy preoccupation. The worry is that the cultural identity created by such policy will not recognise the contribution made socially and musically by this movement. The Arts Councils want art forms to 'thrive not just survive' but if policy increases its emphasis on diversity without provision for all art forms, bands may paradoxically be forced to just survive. If bands are out of fashion with sponsors who take on the wider values and objectives of national identity, the movement as a whole will struggle to survive. The victims will be the forgotten brass bands.

Conclusion

Brass bands are being forgotten because we are now too preoccupied (even obsessed) with diversity. This is not helped however by the brass band movement's own lack of communication and awareness of such issues. Policy makers need to acknowledge and make provision for areas of the arts like brass bands which may suffer as a result of present key policy values. This new national identity within the arts needs to be nurtured through the current arts culture and not bulldozed through leaving some art forms forgotten on the outskirts. There is a need to think ahead and look at the bigger picture. Brass bands will need to have a role in this process if they are to be recognised within this new identity. The BFBB needs to communicate with both funding bodies and brass bands themselves to ensure the best chance of positioning bands within this mix of diversity. The movement needs to accept its own responsibility in ensuring this preoccupation does not affect its future.

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Appendix 1: Interview conducted via email with James Burkmar, head of performing arts for the Arts Council England, East Midlands, February 18th 2005

1. *Brass Bands have a reputation for working class tradition how much do you feel this is, if at all, influencing funding decisions within the Arts Council?*

Not at all we make decision on whether someone is taking our ambitions forward – this applies to all forms of music and all art forms. Brass bands often want things that have unquestionable value for them, their musicians and the community – it's just that those things are not always easily linked to our 5 main investment objectives – the ambitions.

2. *There seems to be a lot of provision within policy to develop the cultural diversity of the arts by supporting new arts from ethnic minorities. This of course is excellent but in the process it has been said that this initiative has cast shadows on traditional British art forms such as brass bands and folk arts as they are not fitting this remit. How do you feel about this view?*

Our funding track record does not support this view. I would suggest you complete some desk research from Ace website into the overall spend in this

area – diversity – I am quite comfortable that this will show that we still have a long way to go when considering we are aiming to work against a tide of history here. In the EM we set targets for our open funds (grants for the arts) which we met under diversity – we are now making longer term plans to do this with our RFO's/clients. The overwhelming emphasis of our portfolio of clients around the country involves us funding “white-led” organisations. This obviously extends to disability also. The other point is that we fund work that meets our ambitions – we are more an investment organisation and less a grant giving one – we have decided following consultation with the arts constituency and the arts world that diversity is a key objective for us.

- 3. You offer funding for organisations such as brass bands under your Grants for the arts scheme. What actions are put into place to ensure such organisations know of the scheme and what help is there for amateur set ups with the application process?*

We have a huge rolling programme of roadshow's to which organisations and individuals are invited to – that includes the voluntary sector of which Brass Bands are an important part. Grants for the arts is very oversubscribed – we cannot possibly meet the demand

- 4. The brass band movement has developed its own support network of sponsorship deals to support its progress. Do you think by creating its own environment in this way the movement has separated itself from organisations such as yourselves remit?*

We want people to be able to stand on their own 2 feet and to enable themselves to do this. A subsidised culture is essentially short term and as such we are working in different ways to support arts organisations to move to more sustainable business practice through measures such as; the creation of resources and toolkits, the recruitment of people with business expertise, funding organisations that can help the arts develop good business practice.

There is a point here – what you suggest may have occurred but I would go back to what I said about being an investment organisation – if organisations do not depend on us for funds as much then when they come to grants for the arts we can see our funds go into that organisation in a more targeted fashion helping us more precisely achieve our objectives.

- 5. For people outside the movement there is little understanding of the developments artistically and structurally of the movement since its roots. Do you feel this could be a problem when funding is being allocated and would more understanding on both sides ensure recognition for artistic achievements being attained through the Arts Councils Support?*

Possibly – I think that what would be sensible is for Brass bands to settle differences and present a unified message on different topics - work through their various bodies – local associations, national federation, even competition

committees and work with ACE through those channels. Other than that it is about creating 2 way communications – we need to listen and the sector needs to coherently raise its voice.

I also feel the brass bands sector overstates this at times – I know that Desford band are capable of excellent quite cutting edge work. They can undertake education work to a degree and will happily collaborate with contemporary music, the Tiddeswell band in Derby can deliver excellent education projects and the Ransome band has demonstrated real ambition in their thinking generally. This should illustrate that as with all forms of music you tend to get to know those organisations that can deliver funding/investment objectives.

6. Can you see top flight brass bands becoming recognised professionals in the future?

They are in some circles now – I feel that through looking to develop progressive programmes of work, to collaborate in an interesting fashion, to continue to make real impact on their communities they will do so. Professionals come in many forms -musicians, leaders, promoters, educators, composers and songwriters.

The sector could take the view that it should raise a single coherent voice around issues as the best and most productive way of being heard. Make a point to someone that can do something about it.

Appendix 2: Interview conducted via email with Frank Rentonconductor, adjudicator and BBC Radio 2 presenter, March 9th 2005

1. Why do you think airtime to Brass Bands has been so reduced over the years?

As many people as you speak to have their own answers to this question but I guess it is really a result in the changes in popular musical culture. Twenty or thirty years ago there were still a lot of people around with fond memories of the war years so marches and the sort of music played by bands in the 30s-60s were still popular. That population has to a great extent reduced so the repertoire has changed with that reduction. With the advent of cheap personal Hi Fi more people are listening to an increasingly diverse repertoire of music and performance styles, so a band culture that is an amateur art form and to some extent stuck in the past is going to reduce in popularity. The reduction in airtime only reflects that. The last factor is one of quality. Much of what people hear on hi-fi, radio and Tv is of exceedingly high production quality and very diverse. The brass band repertoire remains to a great extent quite narrow, perhaps governed by its unchanged instrumentation, and bands can no longer supply sufficient high quality and broadly popular product to fill the amount of airtime that they did in the past.

2. *Do you feel that the working class roots of brass bands are stopping progress musically?*

No, the bands of today represent a very broad spectrum of society. I work with one band in Scotland where amongst them there are three Phds in the band, two millionaires and virtually everyone has a degree in something. Sadly the leadership in the shape of National executives are still stuck in the past attempting to maintain the status quo. But in purely musical terms the brass band has become a very broad church.

3. *Do you feel the lack of coverage could change in the future?*

Several Bands are working hard at presenting a better quality product to the listener and doing quite well at it. The Fodens Band has done a series of concerts in conjunction with The Opera Babes. It's worth noting that all the repertoire performed was arrangements of music written for the opera house, one of it was original band music. Radio 2 whilst it only carries one programme is now courtesy of the Internet reaching vast numbers of people all over the world, and the incidence of first time listeners in this country who then stay with the programme is quite high. But and it's a big but, the Brass band remains an amateur pursuit and we live in an age where many people are now involved following their own pursuits, and when they want entertaining they turn to professional output rather than that of other amateurs.(I think that's clear)

4. *Some feel new music be the way forward for the movement's progress. How do feel about this?*

It depends on what you see as the way forward. Should you mean that the brass band will become a tiny minority pursuit with only those in the know being listeners then yes new music can be the answer, but for the brass band to prosper in real terms it perhaps needs to be better geared to the entertainment industry, and that means presenting arrangements of popular music written for other genres. One problem in the recent past is that much new music has actually been written by composers within the brass band 'musical ghetto'. In other words composers who are virtually unknown and unplayed outside the band world, like Sparke, Graham, Gregson, Ellerby, Downie etc. The band world perhaps needs to commission work from the mainstream composers of the day, Sawyer, Glass, Gorb, Macmillan etc to gain some kind of credence in the outside world. The problem is when they commission works from the likes of McCabe, Bingham the band world(particularly conductors who should know better) bleat about the inaccessibility of the music.

5. *On very few occasions, brass bands make it onto the small and big screen, for example the film *Brassed Off!* or the soundtrack to *Ground**

force. Do you feel the movement is helping or hindering itself through such representations?

Brassed Off gave a very political and jaundiced view of the brass band that created a certain amount of popularity, large amounts of money for Grimethorpe but that set the brass band movement back light years in the perception of the general public. Ground force is a great advert for bands, as is anything that just shows the brass band as being a wonderful way of many thousands of willing amateurs of all levels of performance and all levels of society(whatever that is) making music together.

Notes

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