'BANDING'

LONDONERS passing the Royal Albert Hall next Saturday are likely to have their ears assailed by great waves of sound, by a music easily holding its own with the roar of the city's traffic; and in every part of Britain the result of all this harmony will be anxiously awaited.

Inside the Albert Hall the last round of the National Brass Band Championship of Great Britain, organised by the *Daily Herald*, will be fought out by the remaining seventeen bands. It is a Championship that carries on the traditions of the great Crystal Palace Championship Festivals founded by John Henry Iles in 1900.

Almost instinctively one writes of a Brass Band Festival as if it were a sporting event. As a band secretary recently declared: "They train in the manner of professional footballers; they have their star players, their cheering supporters, and the competitive spirit is highly developed." Mr. Spike Hughes, who keeps a cool eye on most of our musical activities, has described the Brass Band Movement as "a working-class recreation which has the attraction of whippet racing, football pools or Bradford League Cricket."

And the following item comes not from the "Pink 'Un," but from a back issue of that sound and sober periodical, 'The British Bandsman': "It is said that in the colliery districts there is considerable betting on the Crystal Palace result, and that a good deal of money will change hands this week-end—especially in South Wales and Durham."

But sport or art—probably, with our genius for compromise, a mixture of both—the 3,000 brass bands in Britain, comprising some 60,000 players, provide a remarkable spectacle.

Making Their Own Music

Here is a people stubbornly insisting on making its own music, despite the temptation "to sit back and just listen" offered by the mass of music so conveniently 'on tap' in the modern world.

This week, as it booms away under the vast roof of the Albert Hall, the Brass Band Movement will celebrate its hundredth birthday. In an atmosphere of gaily-coloured uniforms, brass and silver of the instruments gleaming beneath the lights, and with an impressive audience of thousands, a century of steady progress in "banding"—as the practice of playing together in brass bands is called—will reach a fitting climax.

The first brass band contest was held at Burton Constable, near Hull, in 1845; sponsored by Sir Clifford Constable, who offered two prizes of £12 and £8 respectively, the number of players in each band was limited to twelve. Five bands entered for the contest; so that sixty men took part, as compared with the five thousand in this year's competition. Each band was allowed to select its own test piece, and an odd variety they proved to be, ranging from Mozart's Twelfth Mass to "Hail, Smiling Morn"; from Rossini's "Barber of Seville" to Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."

A special platform, draped with scarlet and decorated with silken banners, was erected in Sir Clifford's deer park, and visitors poured in from the surrounding countryside. The first band to appear was the Patrington Band, jauntily marching across the park to the strains of the "Fine Old English Gentleman." Immediately behind came its large crowd of followers. Then, as the musicians were offered refreshments, the strains of another band—the Holmes Tannery—could be heard in the distance, with accompanying cheers from *their* supporters. And so, as each band put in an appearance, shouts and counter-shouts increased in volume.

After a hard and gruelling contest, the judge, who was an organist from Hull, proclaimed from his tent that the Wold Brass Band had won the magnificent first prize: twenty shillings for each man. Thus began the Movement which has become the pride of British amateur music-making.

North And South

In 1853 the North of England, stronghold of brass bands, began those famous festivals—still being held—at Bellevue Manchester. The number of competing bands now totalled eight. Seven years later the South established its own contests at the Crystal Palace, and this time there were over one hundred and seventy bands in for a prize.

Bands were being formed all over the country and an interesting example of the enormous interest shown by working men is the St. Hilda's Band, which is the only professional brass band at present in existence. In 1869 a young South Shields musician was approached by a deputation of pit workers. Not one of them could either read a note of music or play an instrument. **Yet within five years they had made themselves into a band whose notable career started by inflicting defeat on crack bands with far more experience.**

There are many fascinating stories told of the early struggles and ultimate triumphs of brass bands. Some of them started with a few enthusiasts gathered together in a local inn. In the case of the now world-famous Besses O'The Barn Band, which is over one hundred years old, it is related that a highwayman generally supposed to be Dick Turpin was in the habit of stabling his horse ("Black Bess") in an old barn near the inn. From this the members of the band derived their name: "the Besses."

Much of the pioneer work during this period was done by an enthusiast named Enderby Jackson. To make it financially possible for bands to travel to contests in London, Manchester and elsewhere, he persuaded the directors of the railways to issue specially reduced fares. As a result, band players could be transported sixty miles at a maximum cost of half-a-crown return.

In the early days the most successful bands were those fortunate enough to arouse the interest of their employers in mill and pit. The rest had to look after themselves as best they could. The great problem was getting hold of instruments. A story is told of a bandsman who learnt to play on an instrument of which the parts were kept together with string and sticking plaster. And this is by no means an isolated instance!

Solid cash prizes were awarded only at the larger meetings. For the humbler bands, those who could not afford to leave their immediate district or to buy good instruments, trophies often took the shape of joints of meat. It was no uncommon sight to see the successful band come away with the carcase of a sheep or even a live animal.

The competitive spirit soon reached intense heights. The scenes of private betting and keen arguments rivalled those of a race meeting, and the competitions were not always carried out with gentlemanly behaviour. The losers tended to create a "rough house." In 1887 "disgraceful scenes" were reported in a provincial newspaper, objection having apparently been taken to the judge's remarks.

Verdict On The Judge

"As soon as one band had found they were unsuccessful," said 'The British Bandsman' severely, "the members thereof launched out with a torrent of epithets which I doubt if the lowest riff-raff of Billingsgate could equal." When the judge, a highly venerable Doctor of Music, got to the railway station he was attacked by angry bandsmen, and escaped physical injury only through a last-minute rescue by porters.

The "race-course" atmosphere that prevailed towards the end of the nineteenth century is nicely illustrated by an incident that took place during a contest in Yorkshire. The members of one band discovered—fortunately in reasonable time—that some members of a rival team (or maybe their supporters) had quietly interfered most ingeniously but effectively with the tuning slides of all their instruments.

With the twentieth century, however, this kind of thing no longer exists. Generally speaking, bandsmen of today are a happy combination of true musicians and sportsmen.

And there is no question about the fact that the standard of performance has never been higher. It is, indeed, amazing what these bandsmen, old and young alike can do. **The brass band has been the training ground for players in our leading symphony orchestras and dance bands. Some of our finest professional players began their careers as bandsmen.**

Another important point about the brass bands of today is the higher standard of music now featured in their repertoires. This has been largely due to John Henry Iles. He took charge of the Crystal Palace Festival—patronised by our King and by his father before him—for thirty-eight years, receiving the O.B.E. for his services, and he is one of the oldest members of the Court of the Worshipful Company of Musicians.

In 1913 he invited Percy Fletcher the composer to write the test piece, "Labour and Love." "I want," he said, "the band which wins the championship to be put to the test in an all-round capacity, and not to rely simply on three or four outstanding soloists."

Support From The Great

Since then, many of our best composers have accepted the invitation to write works for the Brass Band, including Sir Edward Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Sir Granville Bantock and John Ireland. Some of our most celebrated orchestral conductors have, of late years, shown willingness to help the movement. Sir Adrian Boult, Dr. Malcolm Sargent, the late Sir Henry Wood and Sir Hamilton Harty—they have all conducted massed brass bands at various times and expressed their admiration for the keenness and artistry of the players.

Brass band activities will increase and retain their honoured place in the amateur music-making of the country. "Banding" runs in families, and many schools are now forming brass bands. This curiously British form of musical activity—nothing quite like it can be found in any other part of the world—is part of the general music culture of the people, and has great social significance. Nothing can stop our brass bands from playing. When in the war years the call for man-power depleted the ranks, quite young boys and equally talented girls stepped in to fill the gaps left by departing players.

The City of Coventry Band gave up its rehearsal rooms only when they had been blitzed for the third time—and carried on in the front room of a house belonging to one of the bandsmen.

Such enthusiastic determination surely deserves the full support of our major composers. The brass band is capable of far more than has up to the moment been written for it. **The average programme it can offer—"Gems" from musical comedies, popular Overtures, arrangements of well-known Classics, virtuoso solos to show off this player or that—is pleasant enough. But the Movement waits for more composers who can really put it through its paces.**

RICHARD BRYCESON

A mighty note to celebrate the hundredth birthday of the Brass Band Movement.

The younger generation are more than ready to carry on a form of music-making that is the pride of the British working man.