

Norfolk no longer in brass band backwoods

Brass band music is so firmly associated in the public mind with the cultural traditions of industrial England, especially Yorkshire and Lancashire, that the steady growth of its popularity here in East Anglia may come as a surprise.

Two East Anglian brass bands, Ipswich and Cambridge, are in the leading category, the National, along with such legendary names as Black Dyke and Brighouse and Rastrick, while Reepham, Norwich Brewery and Haverhill are rated in the second of the grading systems.

"Norfolk was once a brass band backwoods, but we are doing a lot to change this," explained Annette Coe, a tenor horn with the Reepham Band, who follows the growth of the music in this part of the world with keen pleasure.

STANDARD

"The standard of playing has increased in recent years, largely because of musical encouragement in the schools. It's noticeable that more and more junior sections are being formed among the bands."

Music is now so popular in the schools, that there are insufficient openings for pupils when they leave and try to find a place within an orchestra. Consequently some ex-pupils join a local brass band; a trumpet player for example, taking up the cornet.

Years ago most music for brass consisted of rearrangements, but now there are many works specially written for brass, much of it of a complex and demanding nature. The result, said Miss Coe, is that brass music has become harder to play.

"It requires dedication, which, when forthcoming, is not always maintained." Perhaps 10 to 20 per cent of junior bandsmen — who are aged from around five to 16 or 18 — go on to join the senior band. Senior bands have no age limit, and might include a prodigy of six.

The economics of brass band music are such that members' subscriptions and fund-raising

musician's life.

It costs something around £20,000 to set up a band with good quality instruments — a tuba might cost around £2000 and a cornet £500 — and additional money must be found for uniforms.

The result is a more or less continuous round of fund-raising events, jumble sales, tea and coffee mornings, augmenting subscriptions which might average 60p a week. As Annette Coe points out, brass band playing is for the enthusiast.

Many of the East Anglian bands were formed with the encouragement and financial support of the local non-con-

formist chapel, a temperance society, or even a squire, anxious to acquire some prestige over a neighbour.

Aylsham, for example, began as a Methodist Sunday School project in the late 'twenties, while Reepham was formed around the same time as a temperance band.

SURPRISING

The association with abstinence is surprising perhaps in view of the frequent proximity of a bandstand to the beer tent, and the almost rugby-like regard for post-performance refreshment.

Brass bands, like old soldiers, never die, though the occa-

sional fading is often followed by a recovery. The Reepham Band, for instance, collapsed in the mid-sixties, but started again in 1972.

During the last war many were disbanded, only to revive in the late 'forties and 'fifties, when brass band music, assisted perhaps by the stimulus of radio broadcasts, underwent a period of growth.

The popularity of television, and the pop music revolution in the 'sixties dealt a blow, but more recently brass bands have made a remarkable recovery. "The future," said Annette Coe, "looks very encouraging."



Wartime, and the Reepham Band assumes a notably youthful appearance. The lone girl, Pam Swayze, retired from the band only last year. On her right is the conductor Tommy Ruffles.

BELOW — Reepham Band today.

