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action from huntsville

EXPLORING THE PREPARATION OF CONTEST MUSIC

matt billock looks at
innovative new ways of
analyzing practice routines

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A MESSAGE from our president



I am delighted to see another issue of the Bridge released, with this one being a special contest recap. After two missed Championships, it was nice to have the event again sharing music and friendship. Huntsville was a wonderful place to have our Championships and we look forward to the next two years there. We are in the process of elections for new board members that start July 1st, and look forward to some new minds to help further the brass band cause in North America. There will be some announcements soon about adjustments and improvements to the Championships, as well as some news about regional partnerships that are in development.

With one year left in my term as President, I am so very grateful for the help and support of so many brass band enthusiasts. It has not been easy, but a lot of groundwork is being laid down for the future. I am still excited to work with the dedicated board members that volunteer a lot of time and expertise to create a platform that bands can be proud of. We look forward to a new board year with exciting things on the horizon.

Tony Granados, President



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EXPLORING THE PREPARATION OF NABBA CONTEST MUSIC

Part 1

by Matt Billock



When not making beautiful music with ensembles that continually challenge me to learn and grow, I find time to fit in a day job. That day job as a staff software engineer is also challenging and rewarding, but does not carry the same emotional attachment and interest of a *fortissimo* chord at the end of a test piece. If my computer is that loud, I'm probably running too many virtual machines and not nearly as happy about the experience.

However, that day job has its own interesting portions that can be applied to music, and one of those is a heavy focus on metrics and measurement. The analysis tools available to software engineers have gone far beyond Texas Instruments and their line of graphing calculators. Using this background, I've developed a means of tracking my practice sessions that lets me easily understand the progress I've been making on a piece, while also highlighting for me the portions of each piece on which I have not yet focused. As a result of this, I've ended up keeping detailed records on how long it took me to master specific measures of music. The thought

occurred to me - why not combine my tech skills with my practice record and see what I find?

So as an excuse to avoid practicing the actual horn, I took my practice tracking data, dumped it into a PostgreSQL database and a visualization tool, and looked around to see what I could find. Below, I'll walk through the process I used, how I tracked the data, how I performed the analytics, and finally what conclusions I was able to draw about my own practice discipline (or lack thereof).

About this data

Right now I'm honored to serve as first tenor horn with the Chicago Brass Band. I learn more with each rehearsal I attend, and my section mates and I all work together to create beautiful sounds. The data we will be looking at below represent my effort to build up our contest music, from 'sight-reading a piece I've never heard before' through to 'man, the stage shook with that last note.'

The Chicago Brass Band competes in the Championship Section at NABBA. The set test piece for 2022 was *And From The Darkness...* by Paul Lovatt-Cooper. It was a commission by NABBA for the contest, so no recordings of this piece existed until the contest took place. The story the piece tells of the composer's stroke and subsequent recovery carries a hopeful energy throughout, and the ending never failed to bring goosebumps.

Our choice piece was *Where Angels Fly* by Kevin Houben, a fantastic work that was the test piece for the European Championships in 2017. It's dedicated to the memory of Jesse Lefebvre, a son of a close friend of the composer's. Jesse passed away suddenly while the composer was working on the piece, originally intended as a

lullaby. I wasn't able to find too much else about the piece, but it's a moving work with a lot of emotion built in.

These pieces, for those of you who don't know, are beastly, and take many hours to prepare for the entire band.

One of the issues I have always had in contest season is a lack of sense of progress. I may work the sextuplets in *Paganini Variations* for an hour a day, but how do I tell I am getting better when it still feels like I am stumbling? That lack of feedback can lead to despair, so I wanted to use a system that doesn't let me hide from my progress, keeping the progress I've made at the forefront of my mind, and giving me that dopamine hit needed to keep coming back to the horn and working things out. So let's dive a little into how I approach my practice.

Practice Methodology

My practice methodology relies on a brute-force approach to mastering difficult music. It's also pretty heavyweight, so I don't use it for everything - only pieces that have some level of complexity. This can be any kind of complexity, but generally the things I am most concerned about are related to technique while playing fast notes at high tempi. Soft and pretty definitely needs its own practice focus, and I do that throughout the season, but ultimately the end results there are too wishy-washy to give me a clear 'this is completed' signal - at least not to the degree that I can do so for technical passages.

To start with, I look through the piece of music I am working on, and identify 'problem passages'. In this sense, 'problem passage' means 'anything I can't play perfectly after a couple reads'. I create a google sheet to track these details, with each of these problem passages getting its own row in the spreadsheet. Each row has a starting measure, an ending measure, a target tempo, and then a number of gradations from 50% of tempo to 100% of tempo. I create these in the header row, but leave the data cells themselves empty. These empty cells are then used to track my progress.

From here, it's all straightforward. Pick an empty cell on the list, set your metronome to the specified percentage of target tempo, and then play the music. If I can play the measure selection at the tempo indicated by the cell three times in a row without a mistake, I put the current date in the cell and move on to another. If I make a mistake while working on completing a cell, I start over entirely

- three perfect runs, in a row, or no completion. Once this grid has been filled out, or I hit a certain milestone, I'll often roll a refresher sheet as well, to reinforce the data as I lead up to the concert/contest. This is often a mirror of the first list of trouble spots, just with fewer tempo gradations and likely a reduced list of measures that need work, as improvements in technique and facility with the music make some challenging sections much more manageable as time goes on.

Notes on Preparing for NABBA 2022

The Chicago Brass Band received the music for the contest in November of 2021, and while we did not begin rehearsing the music in earnest until January, there were a number of times I would look through the competition pieces at the end of my practice session and run segments. However, the true work began after the completion of our Christmas concert in December. With nothing but the contest looming, I spent the weeks before the new year getting everything configured and running music when I could.

This was when my first delay hit. I contracted COVID shortly after a holiday get-together with the family, and did not practice for two weeks while I waited for the virus to clear. As a result, I also missed our season-kickoff retreat, one of the highlights of the year for me. But things happen, and once the tests came back negative I dove in with vigor. The Chicago Brass Band was searching for an interim conductor for the NABBA season in the fall, which had given me the opportunity to get a head start on some of the tougher passages, but the fields lay barren before me as I embarked on my quest to fill the sheet.

One thing that truly helped the band prepare is that we participated in the Gateway British Brass Band Festival in St. Louis, MO about five weeks before NABBA. This not only gave the band a solid focus that put us in a good spot for competition preparation, but gave me a clear target to hit - v1 of the chart had to be finished for St. Louis, and I'd use the time between St. Louis and NABBA to refine and reinforce the music through my secondary sheet.

Analyzing The Data

The spreadsheet ended up being a great motivational tool for me, watching the field of blank cells disappear each day. But drawing conclusions from it would require a bit more work than



just putting dates down in a cell. To properly analyze the data, I built a database backend application using Python. I then used an analysis tool called Tableau to graph the data in various interesting ways, drawing what conclusions I could.

If you're interested, the components of the application are as follows. I've included the tech choices I made for my own application, but you can substitute whatever you are comfortable with:

- A database to store the practice information. I used a PostgreSQL database to store the cell data, but this could be as simple as a text file with a regular format.
- A way to populate the database. I wrote a Python application built on top of Django to bring in the data, but this is more heavyweight than most will need.
- A way to display the results of the import. I wrote a ReactJS-based front end, as I am building an application on top of this

- information.
- A place to host the running application. I used Heroku to manage deployment and hosting.
- A place to host the code. I used Github to host the project, feel free to dive into the code!
- A place to store your practice data. I made use of Google Drive to host the data sheets
- A tool to graph the data. I used the free trial of Tableau, but if you format your data correctly you could get by with Microsoft Excel here.

Let me know if you'd like to learn more about the tools and methodology behind this project!

Part 2 of this feature will appear in the next issue of Brass Band Bridge. Special thanks to Jennifer Billock, Aaron Campbell, and Kiley Billock for reviewing advance copies of this article.

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HUNTSVILLE WELCOMES NABBA AFTER HIATUS

CHAMPIONSHIP SECTION

SET TEST: ...AND FROM THE DARKNESS PAUL LOVATT-COOPER

Test Piece Judges: Paul Lovatt-Cooper, John Phillips & Dr Jack Stamp

Own Choice Judges: John Phillips, Allan Ramsay & Dr Jack Stamp

The Championship section of NABBA 2022 was an exhilarating return to North American Brass Band contesting. Three years since the last contest, there were many new faces among the bands taking the stage, but the same standard of excellence in performance. **Fountain City**, under the direction of Prof. David King, once again took the prize, but with the quality of music making through the two nights, it was no guaranteed result.

Friday night saw the bands competing on Paul Lovatt-Cooper's new work, *And From the Darkness*, a piece that depicts Paul's own journey of suffering and recovering from a stroke. **Colorado** was the first to tackle this difficult piece, and with a strong performance set the tone for the rest of the evening. **Chicago's** performance immediately following embodied a slightly more subtle and nuanced interpretation, displaying the exciting aspect of hearing interpretations of a brand new work. **Georgia Bass Band**, a newcomer to the Championship Section, fumbled a little bit in their performance of the set work. They played as though they belonged in Championship, certainly, but it will be exciting to watch the band develop in the coming years.

The second half of Friday night's contest saw three heavy favorites taking the stage. **JMU**, directed by Kevin Stees, gave possibly the most expressive and dynamic performance of the night, if perhaps not the most polished, proving why this ever-changing band of college students is always in the conversation. **Atlantic**, conducted by Sal Scarpa, delivered its trademark performance as well, providing a very polished and controlled performance,

though it may have been missing a bit of the fire seen in the other performances of the evening. **Fountain City**, last draw of the evening, performed a scintillating and transparent reading of the score, and left everyone on a good note to close out the night.

Saturday night saw the Championship Section bands return to give their own-choice performances. This is always an exciting way to close out the contest weekend, as all the bands get to showcase a bit more of their own personality. The energy in the room was buzzing from the start, as the audience waited in eager anticipation to hear the bands after such a long hiatus.

JMU was first draw, performing *Destination Moon* (Paul Raphael), and it set the bar incredibly high for the evening with what would be possibly the strongest own-choice performance of the entire night. The off-stage cornet conclusion left the audience more still and silent in rapt attention than anything else over the course of the weekend. **Fountain City** followed, performing *Fraternity* (Thierry Deleruyelle), which has quickly become a classic in the repertoire. Some minor intonation issues were uncharacteristic blemishes on an otherwise sterling performance, but were enough to keep the contest close.

Georgia gave a strong performance of *Extreme Make-over* (Johan de Meij) that put to rest any concerns over their place in Championship Section after Friday night. **Atlantic** selected perhaps the most traditional piece of the evening, performing *Heroes* (Bruce Broughton), which was perfectly suited to the



Championship Section winners Fountain City Brass Band

precision and control maestro Scarpa always commands from the band. **Chicago** opted for a newer work, *Where Angels Fly* (Kevin Houben), and under the direction of Mark Taylor, provided a dynamic and engaging performance. The last draw of the night, **Colorado**, had a few minor struggles through *The Torchbearer* (Peter Graham), but still closed out the contest with a great finish.

After two nights of performances, there was certainly no doubt that the standard of banding has not slipped in the last few years. It will be fascinating to watch where these bands develop in the coming years, and to see just how high the bar can be raised.

Joel Collier

FIRST SECTION

SET TEST: FACETS OF THE HEART TOM DAVOREN

Judges: John Phillips, Allan Ramsay

Drawing the short straw in the early kick-off to the First Section was the **Dublin Silver Band** under the direction of Tim Jameson. The low end of the band and strong tutti sections came alive in the test piece, Tom Davoren's *Facets of the Heart*. Amy Schumaker Bliss also made a wonderful first section debut with stand out solos throughout. Where the band really made its mark was in its ability to play the sensitive moments of the test piece while maintaining characteristic sounds throughout. Dublin's choice piece, *A King's Lie* (Stan Nieuwenhuis) gave the band an opportunity to further show off those dynamic capabilities with phenomenal transitions between all volumes of performance.

The Bulldogs of the **UGA British Brass Band** drew the second slot, and to no-one's surprise Philip Smith demonstrated his abilities in getting the characteristic sounds of the brass band out of these wonderful students. Blend, balance, and transparency were strong throughout the entire performance, but especially notable in the more sensitive portions of the test piece. The unusual, but not entirely unheard of, choice to include three separate pieces as opposed to one more substantial test piece may have made the band a bit more difficult to judge in comparison. The second of the three selections, *Psalm or praise* was the highlight of the entire performance in this writer's view, with the piece's substantial

chorale-like build that showed off the band's impressive ability.

Stephen Squires and **The Illinois Brass Band** went with the bold choice of Martin Ellerby's *Elgar Variations*, commissioned as the set test piece for the European Brass Band Championships in 2007. The fullness of ensemble was the impressive highlight in the overall performance. However, the group struggled with the ending of the choice piece, and with that and a few too many chips in the various solos, the band's scores may have taken a hit. That said, this was by no means a weak performance and had much to enjoy about it.

If Illinois were ambitious in their choice of *Elgar Variations*, then **Arkansas Musicworks Brass**, conducted by Lt. Brandon R. Hults, could be put in the same bracket with their selection of Philip Wilby's *Paganini Variations*, although not so much regarding the difficulty of the piece, but rather its notoriety general. Though the performance of the choice piece got off to a slow start, the technical abilities of the band and featured soloists quickly calmed any doubt in their ability to pull off the Wilby. Arkansas's ability to pass material throughout the various sections was impressive in both pieces, but special mention should be made of the group's trombone and bass sections. This band had one of the beefiest

low ends heard in the entire competition and was a true delight to listen to.

Prof. David Childs and **Dallas Brass Band**, making its first ever appearance at the Championships, won over the crowd instantly with a huge opening to the test piece. From that downbeat to the last note of its own choice piece, *A King's Lie*, the band showed off its impressive sonority and stylistic superiority. Throughout the entire performance Dallas were able to milk every artistic marking for everything it had. For anyone who believes that the homogeneity of instrumentation is a problem with the brass band, this performance put paid to that argument. The attention to detail, balance, transparency, and the ability of the soloists propelled Dallas Brass Band as a stand out favorite in the morning.

Kenneth Kroesche and the **Oakland University Brass Band** had the tough task of following Dallas Brass Band. These students demonstrated an extremely strong ensemble sound and overall found the test piece to be well suited to the strengths of the band. The selection of Philip Sparke's *Tallis Variations* proved a good choice, with group delivering a convincing musical narrative. Attention to detail was apparent in the technical passages and the band's ability to phrase large sections seamlessly was impressive.



Dallas Brass Band wins the First Section on its first attempt

After quite a lengthy delay, Christopher Ward and the **Five Lakes Silver Band** took to the stage as the last band of the day in the First Section. Audience members who toughed it out through the wait were treated to one of the finest choice piece performances of the contest, a new work from the pen of Kevin Norbury entitled ‘*Odyssey*’ *Variations*, which was based on a theme from the composer’s earlier work *Odyssey*. The piece is sure to become a staple of the brass band repertoire and will be ideal as both a concert work and contest piece. The band had one of the more

exciting performances in the morning and were able to fill the hall in the grandiose sections of the two pieces. However, their ability to play quiet, and especially articulate, was also quite impressive. The Norbury is not an easy piece to pull off, especially for soloists, but Five Lakes Silver’s corner chairs really took up the task and showed off what they could do.

Aaron Campbell

.....

SECOND SECTION

SET TEST: HOPE DOROTHY GATES

Judges: Paul Lovatt-Cooper, Jessica Sneeringer & Dr T. André Feagin

.....

The Second Section this year had a great showing with six bands including two newly formed bands competing at their first NABBA Championships. The test piece, Dorothy Gates’s *Hope* tackled the difficult programmatic material of children who have died in war. It uses quotes from three hymns, *A Little Star Peeps O’er the Hill*, *Jesus Loves the Little Children*, and *In Christ There is No East or West* to represent her hope for the future found through her Salvationist faith.

Tampa Brass Band drew first and played remarkably well despite just about everything seemingly trying to keep them home from their first appearance at NABBA. With their conductor and a cornet player out due to Covid and last-minute subs on Bb bass and baritone to compensate for a player whose appendix burst just before the competition, the band was patched up to say the least. The real star of this performance was conducting graduate assistant Zach Wadsworth, who stepped up to the plate to conduct the group with very little prep time. While a few blips crept through in more exposed passages in the test piece, the full band had some moments of true ensemble unity in their choice piece, *Lions of Legends*.

Second was another band new to the NABBA Championships, **San Francisco Brass Band** led by Dr. Craig McKenzie. Notably, the ensemble the first brass band from California to attend the championships. They performed their choice piece, *Brass Triumphant* by Gareth Wood which showed off the dynamic capabilities of this new ensemble. During the test piece, the band struggled at times with the grand, sweeping gestures that move through the instrument groups that are typical of brass band writing, but they demonstrated an impressive developed sound that is a credit to the work ethic of this new group.

St. Louis Brass Band, conducted by Dr. John Bell took to the stage next. They played the opening to *Hope* with great sensitivity and phrasing and seemed to slide through the technical passages with ease. Their choice piece, *Rhapsody on ‘St. Francis’* by Andrew Wainwright, built to an exciting climax, aided in part by their strong trombone section of four and impressive bass section. When this band turned up the volume, it was truly impressive, and despite occasional moments of insecurity from an ensemble point of view, their performance was exciting and musical.

The host band, **Brass Band of Huntsville**, conducted by Dr. W. David Spencer, played next. While the soloists in the test piece *Hope* played beautifully, some of the accompaniment parts seemed to come unglued at times. For their choice piece, the band performed the NABBA première of *The Von Braun Suite* by Stephen Bulla. Written to commemorate the Apollo moon landing and Huntsville’s unique role in it, the piece sounds like a film score and the band really captured the style beautifully. The lush, full chords and exciting percussion were particularly well played.

The second placed band, **Cincinnati Brass Band** under the baton of Dr. Benjamin A Chamberlain, elected to play two choice pieces, *Shine as the Light* by Peter Graham and *Amazing Grace* arranged by William Himes. During the set test, the band played well within sections and as individual soloists but occasionally had issues with linking up across the ensemble. The stars of this band’s performance were their choice pieces. In *Shine as the Light*, they

played the technical opening with precision and managed to pull the dance-like style out of the mixed meter section. *Amazing Grace* was beautifully and sensitively played and the audience waited several seconds after the performance before applauding, a sign that they appreciated the performance.

The winning band, **Motor City Brass Band** conducted by Gordon Ward, went last. This band was the most successful at representing the programmatic gestures in the test piece, such as the rockets raining down through chromatic runs in *Hope*. The solo passages in the test piece seemed at times a bit safe and could have used a bit more emotion. Motor City was the second band of the day to play Thierry Deleruyelle’s *Lions of Legends*. The group did a great job of creating drama with their fiery full chords and balanced soft sections. Overall, the band put on a very exciting performance.

Amy Schumaker Bliss



Motor City take the honors in the SecondSection



Triangle victorious in the Third Section

THIRD SECTION

SET TEST: EPAINOS JOEL COLLIER

Judges: Paul Lovatt-Cooper, Jessica Sneeringer & Dr T. André Feagin

Victory in the Third Section was claimed decisively by Tony Granados and the **Triangle Brass Band** for second time in the last three North American Brass Band Association Championships. The set test piece *Epainos*, by Dr. Joel Collier, proved a difficult challenge that many of the bands eagerly took on. However, it was Triangle's performance of their own choice piece, **The Raid** (Oliver Waespi) that made them stand out.

Generally, the section seemed to suffer from somewhat from an identity crisis, with an extremely wide spread of difficulty seen in the selections of own choice works. Being the first competition in this section for some years, as well as a newer work as the test piece, programming for the competition must have been difficult.

Pieces like *Lions of Legend*, which was popular as well with Second Section bands this year, put up against other bands that selected multiple pieces, or arrangements, widened the scope of what works we were seeing for own choice in this section.

The scores in the middle of the pack were quite tight, and it looks like competition in the section is going to become interesting in the future. With multiple university ensembles, Fountain City Youth, and a few new ensembles to the competition taking part, it will be interesting to watch the development of the Third Section over the coming years.

Aaron Campbell

THE RESULTS

Championship Section

- Fountain City Brass Band – 95.167
- James Madison University Brass Band – 93.950
- Atlantic Brass Band – 92.717
- Georgia Brass Band – 90.917
- Chicago Brass Band – 89.733
- Colorado Brass – 86.767

First Section

- Dallas Brass Band – 96.800
- Five Lakes Silver Band – 93.067
- Oakland University Brass Band – 91.583
- UGA British Brass Band – 90.767
- Dublin Silver Band – 88.333
- Arkansas Musicworks Brass Band – 87.233
- Illinois Brass Band – 84.633

Second Section

- Motor City Brass Band – 91.467
- Cincinnati Brass Band – 89.267
- Brass Band of Huntsville – 87.167
- St. Louis Brass Band – 85.500
- San Francisco Brass Band – 83.133
- Tampa Brass Band – 78.433

Third Section

- Triangle Brass Band – 94.917
- Fountain City Youth Brass Academy – 88.900
- Natural State Brass Band – 84.833
- Jacksonville State University Brass Band – 84.583
- Old Crown Brass Band – 84.200
- ECU Brass Band – 76.283
- Dublin Metro Brass – 75.400

Open Section

- Motor City Academy Brass Band – 78.500

Youth Championship

- Watson Brass Band – 91.400

Youth First Section

- Triangle Youth Brass Band – 82.400

Youth Open Section

- Triangle Youth Academy Brass Band – 74.833

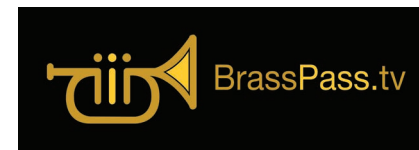




OWN-CHOICE WORKS

- | | |
|--|--|
| A King's Lie
Stan Nieuwenhuis | Jubilee Prelude
Philip Sparke |
| Amazing Grace
William Himes | Lake of the Moon
Kevin Houben |
| A Psalm of Praise
James Curnow | Lions of Legends
Thierry Deleruyelle |
| Benediction
Dick Krommenhoek arr. Dorothy Gates | Lord Tullamore
Carl Wittrock |
| Brass Triumphant
Gareth Wood | 'Odyssey' Variations
Kevin Norbury |
| Dark Side of the Moon
Paul Lovatt-Cooper | Paganini Variations
Philip Wilby |
| Death or Glory
R.B. Hall | Praise
Wilfred Heaton |
| Destination Moon
Paul Raphael | Rhapsody on 'St. Francis'
Andrew Wainwright |
| Elgar Variations
Martin Ellerby | Shine as the Light
Peter Graham |
| Extreme Make-Over
Johan de Meij | Sinfonietta No. 3
Etienne Crausaz |
| Fire in the Blood
Paul Lovatt-Cooper | Tallis Variations
Philip Sparke |
| Four Renaissance Dances - Mvmts. 1,2 & 4
Alan Fernie | The Raid
Oliver Waespi |
| Fraternity
Thierry Deleruyelle | The Torchbearer
Peter Graham |
| Gabriel's Oboe
Ennio Morricone arr. Dorothy Gates | The Von Braun Suite
Stephen Bulla |
| Halcyon
James Naigus | Variations on 'Laudate Dominum'
Edward Gregson |
| Heroes
Bruce Broughton | Where Angels Fly
Kevin Houben |
| Journal of Phineas Fogg
Peter Graham | |

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