

WIND MUSIC HISTORY IN MINNESOTA

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In July I spent a week in the town of Northfield, about 40 miles south of Minneapolis St. Paul (the 'Twin Cities'), attending the International Wind Music History Conference convened jointly by the IGEB (International Society for the Promotion and Research of Wind Music) and the Historic Brass Society. The conference had been



organised (excellently, it should be added, by local musician and academic Paul Niemisto) alongside a Vintage Band Festival taking place in the town, and the combination of the research presentations alongside some great concerts made for a fascinating and inspiring few days. It was remarkable to discover the extent to which the Northfield community had wholeheartedly embraced the wind music aficionados that descended on the small town in large numbers during the festival and conference. It was also encouraging to find not only that wind music research is very much alive and well all over the world, but that it is being undertaken with such diligence and skill. Technology can so often add little of any real substance in presentations, but here it played a vital role, allowing us to be transported back in time to see and hear musicians from the past who had been plucked from obscurity.

It was interesting to learn of the strong wind music tradition in Northfield itself in the opening sessions of the conference, the continuation of which in the present

was evidenced by the performances of many local groups in the festival. The theme of the conference was 'Away from Home: Wind Music as Cultural Identification', and many of the presentations addressed the impact of the various wind music traditions that had been imported into America, including from Britain. These included David Reynolds, who spoke about the Butte Montana Miners Band, formed by Cornish immigrants, and Keith Kinder, who examined the career of Healey Willan, a composer born in England in 1880 but who lived in Canada from 1913. This provided an interesting context for my own contribution, which offered some thoughts about the impact of jazz on European composers in the 1920s. My paper was sandwiched between Elisa Koehler's work on Salvatore Minchini and his 'Italian Band in America' and David Herbert's paper on brass bands in New Zealand – an indication of the geographic and musical diversity of the ongoing research in this field.

Some personal conference highlights included a presentation on 'Cultural Identification in Band Music by African American Composers', by Mike Moss, winner of the IGEB's Fritz Thelen Prize for an outstanding dissertation in the field. In addition to offering academic food for thought, Mike drew our attention to some excellent wind music by Adolphus Hailstork and William Grant Still. Anatoly Dudin and Zinaida Kartasheva from the Moscow State University of Culture and the Arts provided fascinating insights into the history of wind music and jazz in Russia. Helmut Brenner's paper on the roots of the modern concert marimba was captivating, and included some wonderful ancient illustrations.

During the conference lunch breaks and evenings nearly constant entertainment could be found on an outdoor stage in the town square and in many of the

restaurants and bars. Two of my particular favourites were the 26th North Carolina Regimental Band (pictured) and the 1st Wisconsin Brigade Band, reconstructions of bands from the Civil War era. On Saturday lunchtime these groups played a 'Battle of the Bands' either side of the river, eventually calling a truce and meeting to perform together on a bridge. As well as using period instruments, many of the 'over the shoulder' variety, these groups also dressed in authentic costumes, which were not entirely appropriate to temperatures of more than 100°F! The performances were themselves well researched, and often vividly presented with narration using original material from diaries and other sources.

The festival concluded with an unforgettable reconstruction of a 1916 Vaudeville Show by the North Star Cinema Orchestra directed by Northfield's own Ronald Rodman. In a final gesture to the conference theme 'Away from Home' the ensemble accompanied the silent Charlie Chaplin film 'The Immigrant'. Just as authentic were 'Maggie, the Dancin' Yorkie' and Lynn Deichert, who alternated trumpet choruses with tap dancing and threatened to steal the show.

The whole event was a reminder of the incredibly rich heritage of wind music. It is of course vital that we secure a future for the genre by continuing to commission new music, but equally important that we do not allow wind music history to become reduced to a few standard works. Informed performances of historic music can be tremendously exciting for musicians and audiences alike. They are also important in our continual quest to secure wider recognition for wind ensembles and their music as a serious art form.

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