

'James Watson - a golden legacy'

I HAVE been fortunate to be composer-in-residence to the Black Dyke Band for the majority of the time that James Watson has been their director. During this period I have been able to observe at first-hand some remarkable initiatives and achievements of James Watson and the band, which I will refer to in this article.

To begin, however, I should like to place James's extraordinary talent in context: After studying at the Royal Academy of Music, he went straight to become principal trumpet of the Royal Philharmonic and was soon playing as part of the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. These formative years shaped his ideas and standards. It is no accident that as director of the Desford Colliery Band prior to his appointment to Black Dyke, James led the band through a 'golden era' in which they made legendary recordings and enjoyed significant competition victories. Success has continued to follow him around in the band movement and his record of achievement as band director in National or Open competitions is impressive.

The legacy that James has left to Black Dyke is clear; he changed their artistic direction early on and transformed the band from amateur to professional musicians, performing in recording sessions alongside musicians such as Elton John, Peter Gabriel and Tori Amos. The Band under James's direction followed in the footsteps of the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. I recall Black Dyke taking part in a high profile event for Sir Malcolm Arnold's 75th birthday a few years ago at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Many of the musical elite of this country attended and were transfixed that evening by the whole programme, from the opening tribute written by Philip Wilby, the band's associate composer, to the outstanding musical display given by the soloist, Robert Childs. In accordance with James's vision, this concert was a true 'ground breaker'. The event was sponsored by the Society for the Promotion of New Music (SPNM), and James showed that night that new music could be enjoyable as well as serious, proven by the delighted reception from the audience. The late Philip Jones attended the concert and was clearly proud of the achievements of his colleague and friend, James Watson.

There had been composers-in-residence to brass bands before, but it was James that established this as a trend. It was James that instigated Black Dyke Band as Band-in-Residence at the Royal Academy of Music - now many colleges have copied this example. It was James that pushed for Black Dyke to achieve charitable status, helping secure its future in what is becoming a precarious musical world.

In the past six years that I have attended Black Dyke concerts they have never failed to pack houses. James had a simple formula - 'posh first half, let your hair down in the second'. A simple idea, but it worked! James was always commissioning arrangements for these occasions, from the legendary Ted Heath Big Band sets to the skills of Jim Parker



Photo: Philip Chenoweth

James Watson (above) and Nigel Clarke (right).



and the Ground Force music. He has continually attracted high calibre musicians from his professional life to work with the band; the list of truly international artists is endless, from Evelyn Glennie, Allen Vizzuti, Douglas Yeo, Phil Smith and Lesley Garrett through to the extraordinary jazz musician James Morrison. Some of the most remarkable brass concerts were held at the Royal Academy of Music, enabling the band to join forces with tomorrow's generation of foremost musicians.

A few years ago I began to realise that there were elements in the brass band movement that had very different ideas and attitudes. I was handing out handbills for a Black Dyke concert that had been arranged at short notice, to members of the public as they were leaving the Nationals. Some of the brass band players were extremely rude about the idea of seeing Black Dyke in action. This reminded me of the mentality of the football terraces. In the same way as you either love or hate Alex Ferguson

LAST WEEK British Bandsman reported that James Watson had left Black Dyke Band after a period of eight and a half years as its musical director.

As speculation mounts this week about his successor to the baton of arguably the most famous band name world-wide, his colleague and friend, the composer Nigel Clarke, who has worked alongside him in his capacity as composer-in-residence at Black Dyke, offers his personal perspective on the legacy James Watson has left Dyke, and his wider contribution to cultivating the public's perception of brass bands musically.

and Manchester United, you either love or hate James Watson and the Black Dyke Band.

Many of James' achievements over the past eight and half years have positively influenced a whole generation of up and coming musicians, from the students at the Royal Academy of Music, the National Youth Brass Band of Wales and National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain through to those that attended the courses at Canford Summer School of Music. As James has always said "ten notes (with his trumpet) can demonstrate more than a thousand words".

Black Dyke were one of the first bands to have a web page and one of the first bands in recent times to have a composer-in-residence and associate composer. They were one of the first bands to be in residence at a summer school, the first to be aligned to a music college and the first to consistently work in the pop music world. Under James the band was the first British brass band to play in Carnegie Hall in New York. They performed on the Oscar nominated score to 'Babe 2' (Pig in the City) and were nominated by the industry for a Grammy award with their disc featuring Evelyn Glennie. They have broken all of the clichés that have given brass bands a second rate image in the music profession. With its recording of Henry V, the band even won an industry award for best orchestral CD.

James has taught me more than almost any other musician, and I will always be grateful to him for this. Like all great artists, James will have felt there was much still to do at the Black Dyke, but that will always be so with exceptional artists.

Nigel Clarke
Black Dyke Band Composer-in-Residence
1994 - 2000