

## Brass Band Is My Love—An Interview with Professor Sally Bodkin-Allen

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**Abstract:** Professor Sally Bodkin-Allen, a musician hailing from New Zealand, presents an introduction to Southland—a renowned hub for brass bands. Southland boasts a robust and proud heritage of brass bands; prior to 1900, the region was home to 45 such bands. Notably, the Invercargill Garrison Band, established in 1867, would recruit its members from these local provincial brass bands. Professor Bodkin-Allen holds the belief that music transcends all boundaries. She delves into the factors that influence young people’s decisions to either participate in or avoid brass band activities, and puts forward a set of solutions to address the barriers preventing youth from joining brass bands. A key point she emphasizes is that in New Zealand, learning any musical instrument—including those used in brass bands—is not a mandatory requirement.

**Keywords:** Sally Bodkin-Allen; Southland; brass band

**Li Wenli:** Hi, Sally! I know one area of your recent research is about youth in brass bands. In addition, your research site is mainly based on Southland (especially Invercargill). Actually, I am a fan of you because I also love music. Could you tell us about the history and current situation of the brass band in Southland?

**Sally Bodkin-Allen:** Firstly, I will introduce the special locations—Southland. Southland has a very strong and proud history of brass bands. Before 1900, there were 45 brass bands in Southland, and the Invercargill Garrison Band (which was established in 1867) would draw its players from these provincial bands. Southland’s connection with brass bands is also reflected in the many newspaper reports of the Garrison band’s activities from the late 19th century. An article from *The Southland Times* in 1894 states that “The band collectively and individually are great favourites with the townspeople of Invercargill... It is a band, in short, of which no musical community could be ashamed, and of which Southern New Zealand is justly proud”.

Locations such as Invercargill are important sites for the study of such music making, especially because they occupy a space that is not only on the geographical periphery of the nation (at the southern end of the South Island), but also with regard to the size of its population, which is just over 50,000 and the tenth largest urban centre in New Zealand.

While once there may have been 45 brass bands in Southland, over the years, they have gradually been diminishing. Kath Herman, active in the brass band scene in Invercargill as a player since the 1970s and later as a conductor, remembered bands in many of the small towns around the province, and said that the last to go was Gore’s brass band, which had only folded in the 2010s. The Invercargill Garrison Band, in particular, has held a strong position in the history of brass bands in New Zealand. It won the first intercity brass band contest, held in Christchurch in April 1880, and for many years a keen rivalry existed between it and the Oamaru Garrison Band, with both winning many national contests. “Contesting” is an important part of the brass band world; both national and provincial contests are taken very

seriously and seen as an event for both soloists and bands to strive towards and respect.

In the 1920s, there were four “Boys’ Bands” which trained players for the Invercargill Garrison Band. However, over the time, these were reduced to one Boys’ Band, which Kath joined as a teenager in the 1970s. She remembers another older woman being in the band prior to her, and another girl being there with her. For many years, they were the only females, but eventually, more girls started to join the band, and it must have been realized that the term “Boys’ Band” was no longer appropriate, which led to the current title of Auxiliary Band being used. Today, there are equal numbers of girls and boys who join the band.

My personal connection with brass bands in Southland begins with my children. While I grew up in Invercargill, I was a string player rather than a brass player. I had peers at school who were in the brass bands, but I must admit I was rather put off by their emptying of the spit valves of the instruments on the floor after orchestra practice! Now, 30 years later, my children are all either past, present or future members of the Southland brass band scene, and I have a very different perspective on brass bands.

Invercargill has two competing bands: the A Grade Band (Senior) and the C Grade Band, which serves as the training or junior ensemble (often called the Auxiliary Band). The combined membership spans from age 10 to the 80s. The last couple of years have been difficult due to COVID restrictions. It has been difficult to rehearse and also to perform and many events (such as ANZAC Day and The Proms) have been cancelled over the last couple of years. The bands have managed to do some performances, even if just small ones for family and friends. The bands compete at contests and ‘contesting’ is a big part of the brass band tradition. There are provincial contests (or regional contests). So both bands compete at the Otago Southland Brass Band contest, which is held in Dunedin, Mosgiel, Invercargill or Roxburgh each year. They play a hymn and a test piece. Members also perform solos and duets and ensembles. There is also a national contest held each year and usually the A grade band only goes to that (because of expense) but last year the C grade band also went because it was in Christchurch and next year it will be in Dunedin so they will also go.

**Li Wenli:** Music has no boundary. Do you agree with this opinion? But what are the local characteristics of Southland brass band?

**Sally Bodkin-Allen:** I agree that music has no boundary. Music as a kind of art expression of human emotion and life, with rational techniques expresses the people’s emotional appeal and good wishes, dedicating it by their own way, the shape of the full intention of art, or pleased or sad or warmly solemn or excitement or lingering. The man has thought all kinds of emotional state and painted an accurate image. In various forms and categories of music, whether it is western classical music, modern pop songs, traditional opera folk songs, rock or RAP, people can always find a few works that are in harmony with their current state of mind, resonate and enjoy. In this way, music is interconnected, as the famous conductor Seiji Ozawa has stressed many times: music is a language without borders. That’s one of the amazing and great things about music.

From the point of view of the audience, although because of the cultural differences, each region also has its own path and music development, leading to the fact that the music content and form of different countries is a big difference, but the music, as the only one of all forms of art, auditory art, its core part of the “sound” has the power beyond all, and it can

break through the limits of regional and national boundaries, and speak directly to the heart of every audience, even if the audience is not a professional, or even not a fanatic music lover, or not very familiar with the development of music in various countries and the emotional expression of the author. They can also get joy and satisfaction through the promotion of different melodies and the communication of music forms.

From the composer's point of view, although music has no national boundaries, it is a special language, but music is national and temporal. Different music inherits the characteristics and spirits of different nations and records the states and stories of different historical periods. It is narrated to every public with unique ways of expression through the long time and across the constraints of space. Every composer who holds the pen in his hand and the music in his heart is the narrator of this story. They either criticize or praise, and use their own expression to transform the world they see and the story they understand into notes that can cross borders and be conveyed to different parts of the world.

From the perspective of the players, although with national music and timeliness, it has been bearing too much emotion and bailment. The audience had many expectations and wishes for the composers. But we still crossed borders. All kinds of music from all over the world got people's worship and love with different races and different regions, in which players play a key role. As an important bridge between the composer and the audience, the performer communicates the emotional expression of the music to the composer and the audience, so that this abstract and practical, national and temporal auditory art can be appreciated by every public as unimpededly as possible.

With regards to the local characteristics of the brass band. I would say the inter-generational element is an important characteristic—having young people sitting next to someone in their 70s or 80s all playing music together—that isn't something that happens in most activities. Playing a brass instrument is something that many people keep doing throughout all their lives. Another characteristic is the role of family. It is common for the brass band community to have many members from the same family—for parents, children, nieces, nephews etc. All five of my children, for example, have played in the brass band (and some still do), and there are several families in Invercargill like this.

**Li Wenli:** What are the reasons for motivating the youth to attend the brass bands as well as the reasons for stopping the youth from joining the brass bands in Southland?

**Sally Bodkin-Allen:** Motivation—they enjoy the music that brass bands play, they like making friends and the social part of it. They really like going on band camps and taking part in the provincial and national contests, especially when they get to travel away from home and stay in different places. A lot of the teenagers end up getting selected for National Secondary Schools' Brass Band and spending a week with young people from all over New Zealand playing and performing, and that is an element which many aspire to and which they particularly love.

Family is a significant aspect of the brass band scene in Invercargill and indeed, the brass band world in general. Seventy-five of the group I spoke with have other family members involved in the bands as well. It is common for siblings in one family to play brass instruments, and my own children's engagement bears witness to that. Parents, cousins, uncles, and grandparents also featured amongst relatives who had a connection. Some of the

young members had started playing their instrument because they had an older sibling whom they looked up to who played it (along with the alluring nature of the sound it made!).

There are strong linkages between the brass bands and Out of School Music Classes (OSMC) in Invercargill. All but one of the focus group participants had started learning their instrument at OSMC. This programme is a government-funded musical education programme. In Invercargill, students up to Year 8 (approximately 12 years old) pay \$65 for a year of tuition, and students from years 9–13 (approximately 13–18 years old) pay \$150 per year. 20 lessons are held in groups at Southland Girls' High School on Saturday mornings, and the fee covers up to four hours of tuition per week.

There is also a small hire cost for instruments. The brass tutors at OSMC are all involved in the brass band as players and/or conductors and several students who go to OSMC also play in at least one of the brass bands. Connections such as this help to build communities of young brass players. Many of them started learning their instruments together at OSMC, some as young as seven or eight years old. At OSMC, after a year of instrumental tuition, they then move into groups such as the Brass Ensemble or the Concert Band. By the time they are asked to join the Auxiliary Band, they have already built up friendships and social connections with other young brass players. For some players, these extend into their school musical activities as well. James Hargest College, for example, has a number of musical groups (chamber music, concert band, jazz band) which contain young brass band members. Brass band players can also be found in the accompanying groups for the Verdon College and James Hargest College school productions each year, and several of the members of the Southland Youth Jazz Band are brass band members.

There are also many examples of community engagement, with both bands performing at regular community events annually. The Auxiliary Band, for example, plays as part of the Invercargill Santa Parade held in late November/early December each year. The Senior Band performs at the annual Southland Entertainment Awards (run by the Southland Musicians Club), the Last Night of the Proms, and the YMCA Carols in the Park concert held in the band rotunda at Queens Park. All of these events feature other musical groups in the community as well: school and community choirs, pipe bands, the Invercargill Sinfonia, the Invercargill Musical Theatre Company, and contemporary musicians.

The young brass players spoke of community and friendships within the brass band world. It was clear from the way they interacted that they were all comfortable in each other's presence, and there was much laughter and teasing throughout the focus group. They saw themselves belonging to a community of brass players both within the Southland community and within the wider community. "Band Camp", a weekend camp run by the Otago Southland Brass Band Association, which brought together young brass players from both provinces, was talked about as a highlight: Reasons for not joining—being a member of the band is a big commitment—you have to practice a lot and work hard. You need to attend a lot of rehearsals. Many young people struggle with that level of commitment and practice as much as they need to.

I think they think it is too hard or difficult to play the instrument, or they just don't know about the instruments that are in the brass band and so they are not aware of the opportunities it provides.

**Li Wenli:** Could you provide some suggestions to solve the problems for the youth who are inhibited from joining the brass band?

**Sally Bodkin-Allen:** Later in the year, we are planning to do a tour of local schools and play concerts and talk about the band and the different instruments that are in it. We hope this will help. Seeing their peers playing in the band might inspire others to join.

The reluctance of young people to join brass bands often stems from a combination of practical, social, and psychological barriers. Addressing these requires a multi-faceted approach that makes participation accessible, appealing, and sustainable.

Firstly, eliminating financial and logistical hurdles is fundamental. The high cost of instruments is a primary deterrent. Schools and community organizations should establish well-maintained instrument lending libraries, eliminating the need for personal purchase. Partnerships with music shops for rental subsidies, along with fundraising drives for scholarship funds, can cover lesson fees and method books for low-income families. Furthermore, logistical support is crucial. Providing reliable transportation to rehearsals (e.g., organizing carpools or using a school bus) and offering healthy snacks can remove simple yet significant obstacles for busy families.

Secondly, we must redesign the entry experience to be inclusive and unthreatening. The traditional model of audition-based placement can deter beginners. Creating “Beginner Band” or “Explorer Ensemble” groups specifically for those with zero experience fosters a safe learning environment. The initial focus should be on fun, fundamental sound production, and simple ensemble pieces rather than technical perfection. Implementing a peer-mentoring system, where experienced student musicians guide newcomers, builds community and provides immediate, friendly support. Additionally, hosting “Come and Blow” taster workshops allows curious youth to try instruments without any commitment, demystifying the process.

Thirdly, cultivating a positive and modern band culture is key to retention. Youth may perceive brass bands as outdated or uncool. Actively programming a diverse repertoire—including pop, film, and video game music alongside traditional pieces—makes the sound relevant. Leveraging technology, such as using recording software for practice or creating social media content of rehearsals, engages digitally-native generations. The social aspect is equally important; fostering a welcoming, non-competitive atmosphere where teamwork and personal progress are celebrated over individual prowess helps build a strong sense of belonging. Regular social events outside of music-making solidify these bonds.

Finally, institutional commitment and community integration ensure long-term viability. School administrators must be encouraged to schedule band rehearsals during school hours or as a credited elective to avoid conflicts with academics or other extracurriculars. Community bands should offer flexible attendance policies where possible. Furthermore, securing visible performance opportunities—at local festivals, sports events, or community celebrations—provides motivational goals and public recognition for the members’ hard work. This visibility also raises the band’s profile, attracting new members and building community support.

By systematically addressing cost, creating a low-pressure entry point, modernizing the band's culture, and embedding the ensemble within supportive institutional and community frameworks, we can effectively remove the inhibitions that prevent youth from experiencing

the unique joy, discipline, and camaraderie of playing in a brass band. The ultimate goal is to shift the perception from an exclusive, high-pressure activity to an accessible and rewarding part of youth development.

**Li Wenli:** Is it significant to encourage the youth to come to brass band? What are the benefits for the youth to join the brass band?

**Sally Bodkin-Allen:** There are lots of benefits of playing a musical instrument, which have been shown in research in this area. It increases memory capacity, teaches time management and organisational skills, helps with coordination, is good for maths, improves reading skills, teaches responsibility, improves concentration, creates a sense of achievement, and improves listening skills. You learn grit and perseverance, how to get on with others, wonderful things happening in our brains when we play an instrument. It provides a creative outlet and boosts creativity, and can relieve stress and promote good well-being. There are also benefits of social connections and a sense of belonging that come from being in a group like this.

Encouraging young people to join brass bands is not merely a niche extracurricular activity; it is a profoundly significant investment in their holistic development. In an era where youth face increasing social fragmentation, digital saturation, and academic pressure, brass bands offer a unique analog community that fosters a wide array of cognitive, social, emotional, and personal benefits.

From a cognitive and academic standpoint, participation in a brass band serves as a rigorous workout for the developing brain. Learning to read complex musical notation in two clefs (often for transposing instruments) enhances mathematical reasoning, pattern recognition, and symbolic literacy. The act of playing requires precise coordination between breath, embouchure, finger dexterity, and sight-reading, honing fine motor skills and neural plasticity. Studies consistently correlate music education with improved performance in STEM subjects, as it cultivates focus, discipline, and the ability to engage in systematic practice—skills directly transferable to academic pursuits. The conductor-led environment also sharpens auditory processing, as musicians must constantly listen to blend their sound with the ensemble, a demanding exercise in active listening and critical analysis.

The social and character-building benefits are equally powerful. A brass band is a microcosm of society that operates on interdependence and collective responsibility. There are no soloists in a chord; each member must contribute their part accurately and in balance for the music to succeed. This instills a profound sense of teamwork, accountability, and shared purpose. Young musicians learn punctuality, preparation, and resilience—understanding that individual practice is essential for the good of the group. They navigate a hierarchy of section leaders and conductors, developing respect for leadership and mentorship. This environment naturally builds a robust social network, forging deep friendships based on shared effort and artistic achievement, which is a potent antidote to loneliness and social anxiety.

Emotionally and psychologically, brass bands provide invaluable outlets. Music is a powerful vehicle for emotional expression and regulation. For the youth who may struggle to articulate complex feelings, playing music offers a non-verbal channel for processing emotions, from the triumph of a fanfare to the melancholy of a hymn. The experience of mastering a challenging passage or performing successfully before an audience

builds self-esteem, confidence, and a growth mindset. Performance anxiety is managed within a supportive group context, teaching vital coping mechanisms for stress. The sheer physical act of playing a wind instrument also promotes deep, controlled breathing, which can reduce anxiety and promote mindfulness.

Finally, participation connects youth to cultural heritage and community identity. Brass bands are historically rooted in community life, from local parades and ceremonies to national competitions. By joining, young people become active contributors to their community's cultural fabric, gaining a sense of belonging, pride, and continuity. They learn repertoire that spans centuries and styles, developing cultural literacy and an appreciation for both tradition and innovation. This connection provides a stable anchor and a positive identity beyond the classroom or digital world.

In conclusion, encouraging youth to join a brass band is significant because it cultivates capable, confident, and connected individuals. The benefits extend far beyond musical literacy, shaping cognitive abilities, social character, emotional resilience, and civic engagement. In a fragmented world, the brass band stands as a powerful testament to the beauty and strength of collective human endeavor, offering youth a transformative experience in harmony, discipline, and joy.

**Li Wenli:** Is brass band education compulsory or optional for the youth? Why?

**Sally Bodkin-Allen:** It is not compulsory to learn any instrument in New Zealand sadly. I would love to see an education system which supports music education to that level! However, our education system does not tend to value the arts in the same way that other areas such as maths and technology are valued.

Brass band education is predominantly an optional or elective component within the vast majority of global education systems, rather than a compulsory subject for all youth. The reasons for this status are rooted in educational philosophy, resource allocation, and the recognition of diverse student interests, though compelling arguments exist for its greater integration.

Core compulsory curricula are designed to ensure literacy, numeracy, scientific understanding, and civic knowledge—skills deemed fundamental for all citizens. Arts education, including instrumental music, is often categorized within a broader “aesthetic” or “enrichment” domain. While increasingly valued, it typically competes with other arts (visual arts, drama, choir) and physical education for a designated elective slot in a crowded school timetable. Mandating a specific ensemble like brass band for every student would be logistically and philosophically challenging within this framework.

Brass band education is resource-heavy. It requires a significant investment in instruments (which are expensive and require maintenance), specialized acoustically appropriate spaces, and highly trained instructors. For many school districts, particularly in underfunded areas, making this compulsory would be financially unsustainable. An optional model allows programs to be scaled based on available resources and demonstrated student interest.

Modern educational theory emphasizes student choice and the development of individual passions. Not every student is drawn to music, and within music, preferences vary widely (strings, guitar, vocal, digital music production). A compulsory brass band

requirement could foster resentment and disengagement among those with different inclinations, undermining the very benefits—like joy and motivation—that a successful program seeks to cultivate. An optional model respects diverse pathways for personal development.

While not compulsory, there is a strong rationale for ensuring it is a robustly supported and accessible optional offering. The benefits—cognitive development, teamwork, discipline, emotional expression—are universal, yet access is not. The optional status should not mean marginalization.

In some cultures with deep brass band traditions (e.g., parts of the UK, Japan, or specific communities in the US), participation may be a deeply ingrained, expected social or school activity. Certain specialized music magnet schools or conservatories also have it as a core requirement within their chosen program of study. However, these are exceptions within a broader optional framework.

Brass band education is primarily optional due to practical constraints and a philosophy of choice. However, its profound benefits justify its position not as a mere peripheral club, but as a vital and well-supported component of a holistic education system. The goal should be to create structures where every young person has the opportunity to choose it—through exposure, encouragement, and the removal of practical obstacles—thereby allowing them to voluntarily reap its unique rewards. The debate, therefore, is less about compulsory participation and more about ensuring equitable access and valuing the arts sufficiently to make such rich optional experiences available to all.

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