

The Sociology of Brass bands.

An Amateur Music Between Cultural Domination and Autonomy

Vincent Dubois, Jean-Mathieu Méon and Emmanuel Pierru

Introduction

Brass bands have most of the features of “low culture”: many of their musicians have a working-class background, the orchestras are a part of community life and they are expected to fulfil social functions rather than to play music for music’s sake. Thus, they are left out the highbrow and legitimate musical spheres and regarded as having little cultural value. Brass bands are also most often considered as obsolete, doomed to disappear because of the old age of their musicians and the lack of interest of the youth.

This image is only partly true. There are today more than 2.600 orchestras and more than 100.000 musicians in France, where this study was conducted. Many of them are young, even if many bands do have recruitment problems. Brass band music has its own rules and values, which cannot be reduced to this lack of cultural prestige.

This raises two main questions: how does a relegated cultural practice organise itself? and how can a cultural practice endure when its social foundations are being challenged? By addressing these two questions, this book gives a balanced and nuanced sociological view of this musical world today. More generally, we provide an original analysis of current forms of traditional “low” culture and of the ongoing transformations of working-class lifestyles.

Between domination and autonomy

The sociological debate on cultural domination and its possible biases underlines the necessity not to reduce the analysis of a relegated practice to its dominated status. Accordingly, we approach the brass bands in the light of the domination they face, while questioning the social conditions of this domination and its effects. Our study shows how brass bands are situated simultaneously in four universes in which they are diversely exposed to cultural domination: the hierarchical musical field, the specific sub-field of brass bands, the local musical networks, and their direct local environment. Analysing these four worlds, we show how cultural legitimacy varies and how its judgements can be effective or inoperative.

How a cultural form lives on

Brass bands are a historically bounded practice, *i.e.* dependent of specific historical configurations. As such, they provide a good vantage point from which to study how a popular cultural form lives on or declines. Since the 1970s the traditional and autonomous existence of brass bands has been challenged by major social transformations (of rural life, of popular sociability, of the access to general and musical education, *etc.*). Yet, we can speak of a transformation, rather than only of a decline of the brass bands, opening themselves to values and practices from more legitimate fields: brass bands are now at a crossroads, facing a choice between disappearing and losing their specificities.

Part I. On the fringes of the musical field

This part provides a sociological and historical overview of brass bands. Using Bourdieu's theory of fields and symbolic hierarchy, we analyse the position of this music in the musical field together with the position of musicians in the social space (chapter 1). Then, we offer a view from inside this specific universe, defined as a sub-field with its own hierarchies, oppositions and rules (chapter 2).

Chapter 1. "Lowbrow music"?

Brass bands occupy a devalued position in the musical field, and can accordingly be regarded as an "illegitimate" genre. This is partly related to the social statuses of the musicians, although there is no mechanic "homology" between social background and symbolic value.

1. Cultural relegation

1.1. An original illegitimacy?

The perception of brass band music as lowbrow music is rooted in this music's inferior position since its original development in the mid 19th century. The social functions it is supposed to fulfil towards the lower classes, its eagerness to "vulgarise", its *instrumentarium* (a small symphonic orchestra in which the strings have been removed), as well as most of the repertoire (simplified transcriptions) show how this music has been defined, in reference to the model of serious music, as a lower form of music.

1.2. The devaluation of a marginalised music

This inferior position leads to the exclusion both of the institutional and of the commercial circuits organising musical life and providing prestige (*i.e.* legitimacy).

1.3. The interiorisation of illegitimacy

The brass bands musicians themselves are aware of the bad reputation of the music they play and have to deal with its "inferior" status.

2. Brass bands' musicians

According to Bourdieu, there is a correspondence (homology) between the symbolic status of a cultural good and the position in the social space of the groups producing and consuming this good. In this perspective, an illegitimate music is expected to belong to the lower classes. This is only partly true in the case of brass bands. The "working class" image of this music does not reflect the actual social characteristics of the musicians, even though they partly share a working class lifestyle. In order to have a complete and nuanced view of this socio-musical universe, we also discuss Bourdieu's concept of homology.

2.1. Mixed social backgrounds

Here we describe the main social characteristics of the musicians in terms of age, gender, residence, social background, occupation and training. We particularly underline their strong ties with rural areas and the high number of slightly upwardly mobile social trajectories (*i.e.* lower middle-class musicians from working-class ascendance).

2.2. Working-class lifestyles and tastes

Here we analyse their cultural practices and tastes and show how they are oriented by working-class and rural social backgrounds.

2.3. Diverse musicians, diverse relationships to musical practice

Using the statistical method of multiple correspondence analysis, we connect all these variables in order to establish the principles of differentiation defining the main poles and typical profiles among the musicians. It shows that generation is a key factor distinguishing these profiles and related attitudes towards brass band music. The four main poles are : 1) skilled young musicians (often women) with little involvement in the life of brass bands *per se* ; 2) older musicians, less skilled but more involved in musical activities ; 3) middle-aged musicians involved both in the musical and the social activities of their bands ; 4) older self-taught musicians mostly interested in the sociability aspect of the bands.

Chapter 2. The brass band world

From three complementary points of view, this chapter analyses the internal structure of the brass bands world, considered as a specific universe of social relationships, practices and symbols.

1. The social space of the orchestras

First we establish the space of brass bands orchestras defined as an organised system of positions and relationships. Here, we rely on the same statistical method used in chapter 1 (part 2.3) for the musicians.

1.1. Principles of opposition

Thanks to this method, we have singled out the main factors for the differentiation of the orchestras (*i.e.* according to which criteria the orchestras are distinguished from one another).

1.1.1. The weakness of stylistic factors

An interesting result is that contrary to the other musical and artistic spheres in which genres and trends are predominant (in serious music as in popular music, as the multiple different kinds of rock show) style is not a factor of differentiation among brass bands orchestras. They do not specialise in a specific genre and have an eclectic repertoire that includes “a little bit of everything”, as the musicians say.

1.1.2. Sociability vs. aesthetics

More than a stylistic criterion, the orientation and goals of the musical practice are a relevant differentiation factor. The multi-correspondence analysis establishes a first axis opposing the orchestras mainly oriented towards the sociable dimensions of music to those who define their activity in more aesthetic terms.

1.1.3. The structuring role of music schools

The second axis established by the multi-correspondence analysis hinges on the degree of institutionalisation of the orchestras. This institutionalisation is defined by their internal structures and above all by their relationships with public institutions (mainly local

authorities). The existence of ties with a music school (sometimes included in the organisation of the orchestras) appears here as a key factor.

1. 2. The four poles of the brass band world

The combination of these two axes evidences four poles. The first one (less institutionalised, more oriented towards sociability) includes orchestras that tend to be older and smaller. At the second pole (more institutionalised, more oriented towards sociability), the orchestras have many more musicians, including younger ones studying at the music school linked to the orchestra. The biggest orchestras, oriented towards musical content and quality, form the third pole, the last one (less institutionalised) being made up of semi-professional orchestras most often playing “folk” or “traditional” music.

2. The double structure of a musical space

Having provided a social cartography of these orchestras, we go on to investigate two other combined structures of the brass band worlds.

2.1. An institutional structure

The first is an institutional one. Like sport teams, brass bands are organised in international, national, regional and local federations. These infrastructures contribute to unifying the brass bands in forming a specific universe.

2.2. A local network structure

The second structure is based on interpersonal relationships at the local level. Certain musicians form local networks that appear to be an important factor in the organisation of musical life.

3. A unified world: common references, shared experiences and modes of consecration

Our exploration of the internal structure of the brass band world ends with the formulation of a third hypothesis considering this world as a musical sub-field (*i.e.* a part of the musical field with specific references, rules and values).

3.1. The constitution and circulation of musical references

Here we show how music publishers, institutions, specific publications and specialised composers “set the tone” of brass band music, defining models and patterns of practice supposed to be followed by the musicians.

3.2. Contests: a specific mode of consecration and an occasion for shared experiences

Then we turn to a decisive event in the life of the brass band world: contests. These events show that this musical world organises its own forms of production of musical value, with specific rules and criteria. In that respect, they help in disregarding the verdicts of the legitimate musical field and contribute to unifying the brass band world as a partly autonomous universe.

Part II. The local environment of an amateur music

This part focuses on the concrete activities of the brass bands, thanks to in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. Chapter 3 shows the close relationship between music and social integration on a local level. Chapter 4 explores the everyday life of the orchestras and their internal divisions.

Chapter 3. Musical integration

Contrary to sacralised “serious” forms of culture, separated from ordinary life and used in strategies of social distinction, brass band music is embedded in family and social relations and has more to do with conformity and community integration than with individual distinction.

1. A socially embedded practice

1.1. A recruitment in close circles

The social embeddedness of this music is linked to the fact that orchestras recruit their musicians in the same local social groups, if not in the same family. As a consequence there is a continuity between everyday practices or relations and musical activities.

1.2. A musical communalisation

Max Weber opposes two ideal-types of organised groups: “sociations” based on voluntary adhesion in order to pursue a specific goal and “communalisations” based on pre-existing social and affective ties between the members. Here we use the concept of communalisation to analyse the social logics of the making of a brass band.

2. The orchestra makes the musician

Musical integration also means that collective logics are more important than individual ones. Most of the time, brass bands are not composed of already skilled musicians who create or join an orchestra. The brass band is a local institution recruiting and training young people in order to make them part of the orchestra. Accordingly, it is not the musicians who create the orchestra, but the orchestra that makes the musician.

2.1. Choosing an instrument to satisfy collective needs

This process is illustrated by the “choice” of musical instruments, which is generally not decided by the young musician himself but rather by the conductor in order to fill the blanks of the orchestra.

2.2. Learning together to play together

Musical teaching is a second illustration: it is collectively organised and never separated from collective practice.

2.3. A collective relationship to musical practice

This musical socialisation leads to a specific relationship to musical practice, conceived as inseparable from togetherness.

3. Socialisation through music

3.1. Learning social life

Music is also conceived as a means to socialise. Learning music and playing with others is said to encourage generational and social mixing and to teach discipline, respect, positive values and so on.

3.2. A monopoly over the musicians' free time

This socialisation function is also due to the fact that the musicians spend most of their free time with their orchestra, which ends up being a significant part of their social life.

3.3. Loyalty towards the group

Brass band music can be a life-long activity. People usually start around 14 and some people over 65 years old still play in the band in which they started to learn music. They feel a sense of duty towards those who taught them music and give back what they received by teaching the young musicians, giving a hand in organising concerts and rehearsals, or simply by remaining members of the band.

Chapter 4. The social life of the orchestras

Every kind of collective musical practice combines “pure” music with non-musical elements. Even “serious music” ensembles said to concentrate on “music for music’s sake” have their social sides; and even the most “spontaneous” musical expressions imply technical skills and aesthetic concerns. The variable combination of these two dimensions is a good criteria to distinguish the various musical genres and forms sociologically. Brass bands certainly are a good example of a musical practice in which sociability is a salient aspect, even though they cannot be reduced to it.

1. The musical forms of sociability

It is a commonplace to speak of brass bands in terms of sociability, and the latter can also be important in other musical genres. Therefore, we need to be more specific in the use of this notion and the relationships and situations it refers to.

1.1. Social occasions and practices

Several specific occasions enable expressions of sociability: rehearsals, meetings, trips and parties.

1.2. The various forms of sociability

Sociability does not consist in convivial relationships wherein everyone mixes in; rather, it contributes to forming groups within the group. Therefore, three kinds of sociability can be distinguished: a “section sociability” among musicians playing the same instrument; an

“organisational sociability” among those involved in the management of the band; and a “musician sociability” among those playing together in several bands and connected in the local networks we described in chapter 2 (2.2.).

2. Internal tensions

Sociability is not unanimity and brass bands experience tensions that can sometimes lead to splits.

2.1. The repertoire in debate

The choice of the repertoire can be an occasion for debates between musicians from different generations and with different attitudes towards musical practice.

2.2. Musical contents vs. conviviality

We have shown in chapter 2 (1.2.) that sociability vs. aesthetics polarised the social space of the orchestras; it is also a factor of division within the orchestras.

3. The leaders' balancing act

There are two different leading functions: the presidents manage and represent the musical associations and the conductors are in charge of the musical and sometimes pedagogical activities. In most cases these functions are in fact mixed and shared, if not fulfilled by the sole conductor. In all cases the leaders play a prominent role in maintaining the balance between the different groups inside the orchestras, as well as the balance between musical and sociable logics. Here we examine the profiles and concrete roles of these two types of leaders.

3.1. Presidents: low-level notables and musicians

The presidents are almost exclusively male and older than the average musician. Almost all of them have played or still play music in the band. Their position as leaders of an association is part of their position as “low-level notables” in the local social space. In addition to organisational and musical tasks they have a relational and “political” function, asserting the position of the orchestra in the local community.

3.2. Conductors: musicians and animators

Most of the conductors came up through the ranks of the orchestras. They have to combine musical skills and human qualities, those two characteristics being closely related in their concrete activities. Because of this combination, the link uniting the musicians to the orchestra also depends on their personal relationships with the conductor.

3.3. From connecting points to breaking points

Both types of leaders play a strategic role in managing the orchestra and the continuity of its activities. This crucial role can sometimes turn against the unity of the orchestra if not challenge its existence. Personal conflicts with the conductor or his replacement can be a factor of division and sometimes of splits.

Part III. Perspectives on cultural autonomy

The structural perspective adopted in Part 1 has allowed us to put the brass bands in the broader context of the legitimate musical field and showed how these bands are excluded from it. We have also brought some nuances to this dominated position. Part 2 provided a view from inside the orchestras and showed their links with community life. This third part addresses the question of symbolic hierarchy and domination from a different perspective, by taking into account the practical conditions of musical activities which, to some extent, protect the musicians from this domination. We also point out the ongoing changes challenging these conditions.

Chapter 5. The transfer of social constraints

We have seen in chapter 2 (part 1) the various positions of the orchestras and their various relationships to the musical field. This enables us to show that most brass bands orient their activities in reference to the imperatives of local community life more than according to the specific logics and rules of the musical field. This is what we call the transfer of social constraints.

1. The social conditions of symbolic autonomy

1.1. A cultural free zone

Brass bands operate in a quite closed environment. This protects them from the verdicts enunciating their cultural illegitimacy. This is what quoting Bourdieu we call a “cultural free zone”. Here, we examine the various patterns and consequences of this specific situation.

1.2. Alternative principles of legitimacy

Not only can their concrete organisation protect the brass bands from the verdicts of cultural illegitimacy; it also allows for the promotion and use of specific values and principles of legitimacy alternative to those of the musical field.

1.2.1. The brass bands’ ethics

These values and principles are organised in specific ethics, inherited from the mid 19th century “Orpheons” movement, combining togetherness, mutual respect, discipline, mutual help and autochthony. The organisation of the brass bands concretises these ethics in the everyday life of the orchestras and with codified honours as the medals given to musicians to recompense their loyalty and dedication.

1.2.2. Professionalism as a foil

These ethics compete with the rules and values of the musical field. Professionalism can be the yardstick against which “amateur” music is devalued. Here we show that replacing musical by moral evaluation allows for reversing this hierarchy: when the disinterested involvement of the amateur is opposed to the self-interest of the professional, the latter becomes a foil more than a model.

2. The constraints of proximity

The social conditions of brass band activities can reduce the constraints coming from the musical field but their local environment imposes specific demands on them.

2.1. A partly functional music

Brass bands have to fulfil social functions related to their position in the local community, playing in celebrations or ceremonies. The places and occasions for playing music are not based on musical reasons but determined by local social expectations.

2.2. The social factors of a conformist eclecticism

The repertoire reflects these social constraints. The programmes do not express the aesthetic choices of an orchestra but the imperative of adapting to the places, to the occasion and to the audience of the musical performance.

Chapter 6. Social displacement and “musicalisation”

This concluding chapter examines the ongoing changes challenging the brass bands, their recruitment and more generally their specific cultural model.

1. From embeddedness to social displacement

Integration to their immediate social environment has been a factor of stability for the brass bands. Conversely, the changes occurring in this environment destabilise them.

1.1. The undermining of the social basis of brass band music

The link between brass bands and their local community were evident when the characteristics of said community were favourable to the social model of collective activity embodied by these orchestras. Social changes such as increased geographic mobility, job insecurity and access to higher education for lower middle class youth made this link more tenuous and participation to the local brass band a less obvious choice.

1.2. From society member to musician

Social changes affect the recruitment of musicians and their aspirations. They expect more in terms of musical quality and are less involved in the social life of the orchestras. This is a first factor of an evolution in detriment of the sociable activities and values defining the original brass bands' model.

2. The role of cultural intermediaries in the “musicalisation” process

Cultural intermediaries such as (semi)professional conductors or institutional managers contribute to this “musicalisation” process.

2.1. A professional niche

These cultural intermediaries invest brass bands as a niche which does not lead to prestigious positions but allows for a degree of freedom and multi-tasking far more difficult to obtain in other parts of the music sector.

2.2. From cultural aspirations to legitimism

Their personal aspirations orient them towards music institutions and legitimate music in a perspective of professional recognition. This process contributes to bringing to the brass band world the legitimate verdicts and rules from which it was relatively protected.

3. Policies aimed at brass bands: between preservation and renovation

Two ideal types of policies aimed at brass bands can be distinguished: preservation strategies and renovation strategies. This broad opposition reflects the process of “musicalisation” of brass bands and of their integration of legitimate cultural principles.

3.1. Preservation strategies

Preservation policies are mainly implemented by the most local institutions. Their goal is to preserve the practice’s traditional form, on account of its role in territorial sociocultural activities and youth socialization. Funding of local musical schools is the most frequent action carried out in favour of brass bands.

3.2. Renovation strategies

More prescriptive policies are implemented, mainly by the federative institutions of brass bands. They are based on one requirement: renovating brass bands, according to the new balance between the social and musical dimensions of the practice to which musicians and cultural intermediaries aspire.

3.2.1. “Musical” rather than “social” concerns

Renovation strategies try to, at least, redefine the practice by strengthening its musical dimensions – even if it means somehow weakening its traditional social components.

3.2.2. Promoting professionalism

National and local federative institutions as well as local public institutions promote a professionalization of the supervising staff of brass bands, through initiatives such as specific musical education or official certifications for conductors. This is a source of conflict among musicians and orchestras, depending on their respective positions in the brass band space.

3.2.3. Training the conductors

In these strategies, training the conductors is considered a priority, as a means to achieve higher musical quality and diversity.

3.2.4. Renewing the repertoire

Another central aspect of these strategies lies in the actual musical content. The brass bands’ repertoire is renewed in various ways. This reflects the legitimist negative judgements of institutions and cultural intermediaries alike towards the common repertoire. Ambiguously, these efforts are more effective with orchestras which are already the most prone to adhering to this renewal and conforming to legitimate cultural principles.

Appendix: Fieldwork and methodology

This research was conducted in 2004-2005. It consisted in a statistical analysis conducted to objectivise the brass band world as a space of positions and practices. Two questionnaires were conceived and analysed. One was submitted to the musicians, gathering data on their social properties, their tastes, their practices (n = 578). The other was sent to the officials of the brass band associations. It consisted in two parts: the first was a sociological survey of these officials (n = 81 conductors and 125 presidents), while the second was about the orchestras themselves and their characteristics (n = 219). Ethnographic fieldwork was also conducted to understand the practices in light of their closest environment. We made three case studies of orchestras chosen for their polarised positions in the brass band space. 25 interviews were conducted with musicians, conductors and presidents and direct observations of concerts and rehearsals were carried out. This ethnographic research sheds light on the local dimension of brass bands practices, on the habits of the orchestras and on the characteristics of the musical performances. 20 interviews were also conducted with institutional officials of associative federations and of public cultural bodies, in order to understand the institutional structure of the brass band world. Lastly, we used documentary and bibliographical research to complete our other investigations. Despite being rooted in a specific geographical context (Alsace, one of the regions with the most brass bands and musicians), our research followed an approach allowing for generalisations and comparisons with other amateur or popular practices.