

The Women's Work Exhibition Ladies' Brass Band - Melbourne, Victoria, 1907

Gavin Holman, 3 August 2022

The Victorian Bands League recently posted some brief information about the ladies' band that was established to perform at the Women's Work Exhibition held in Melbourne in October and November 1907. This consisted of a full page set of photographs of the individual members of the band, from the *Melbourne Weekly Times*, of 14th September 1907. These images have been extracted and are displayed at the end of this paper.

The First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work was held at the Exhibition Building, Melbourne, from 23 October to 30 November 1907. It was opened by Lady Northcote (the wife of Australia's Governor General) and Pattie Deakin (wife of the Prime Minister), who also ran a model crèche during the exhibition. The five-week exhibition showcased the work of women musicians, artists and craftswomen with over 16,000 exhibits in all fields of artistic endeavour. It emphasized women's craftwork and patriotism and displayed a distinctly feminine response to Australian nationalism. Over 250,000 attendees were attracted to the Exhibition.



In addition to all the women who provided the arts and crafts for the Exhibition, women were also commissioned to design the programmes and posters for the event. Various concerts and musical entertainments were planned, and to that end several female musical groups were established. There was to be a choir of 1,000 ladies, 120 more in an orchestra, 50 in a mandolin society and, last, but not least, 40 women in a brass band. The players for these groups were all recruited some months before, to allow time for rehearsals prior to the opening of the Exhibition.

The idea for the ladies' brass band, as well as the women's choir and orchestra, was that of Mrs Georgette Peterson. Her husband, Franklin Peterson, had been appointed Ormond Professor of Music and Director of the Conservatorium, University of Melbourne, in 1900.

Originally from Scotland, he had been the organist, choirmaster and lecturer in music, music educator and an author at Edinburgh University. Georgette Augusta Christina Lichtenstein, his wife, was Hungarian, and was known as a portrait-painter, singer, pianist and composer of songs. Shortly after her arrival in Australia she founded a small women's choir which she conducted at various concerts and fund-raising efforts – particularly the building of the Conservatorium and Melba Hall. It is clear that the desire to establish these women's musical ensembles for the Exhibition was based on a clear understanding of what could be achieved, given their joint experiences and skills.

An announcement was made in early June 1907 of the appointment of Lieutenant Thomas Riley as the instructor of the proposed women's brass band for the Exhibition. Riley had been a leading bandmaster for various military bands in Victoria and New South Wales, including that of the Commonwealth Forces in Victoria.¹ He had previously brought together and conducted the massed bands displays at the earlier Great Australian Exhibition, held in Melbourne in January 1907.

The ladies' brass band, which actually consisted of 34 players, held its first rehearsal in early July 1907, under the direction of their new bandmaster Thomas Riley.



The Exhibition Ladies' Brass Band [The Leader (Melbourne), 31 August 1907]

The members of the band pictured above were: *Front Row* - Miss Nichol, Miss Refshauge, Miss Bull, Miss Moss, Miss Wilcox, Miss McNeil, Miss Thompson, Miss Prout, Miss Albon, Miss Russell, Miss Walpole. *Middle Row* - Miss Gault, Miss Matthew, Miss Ross, Miss Raff, Miss Kyle, Miss Todd, Mrs. Peterson, Miss Christensen, Miss Stirling, Miss Locke, Miss Darke, Miss Ritchie, Miss Kemp. *Back Row* - Miss Hansen, Miss McKinley, Miss Felstead, Miss Healy, Miss Mornement, Miss E. Kennedy, Miss Kennedy, Miss Ampt, Miss Rubinovitch, and Miss Peterson.

Most, if not all, of the ladies were students at the two Conservatoria of Music in Melbourne, and they gave their time and services free of charge.²

After five weeks of rehearsal, it was reported that the band could play a march, and that their conductor believed they would be able to play well by October 1907.³

The concept of a ladies' brass band was new to the people of Australia, and its novelty was not lost on the citizens of Sydney. There had been previous ladies' orchestras in New South Wales, and it was remarked that it was a shame that Sydney could not contribute a ladies'

¹ Table Talk (Melbourne), 13 June 1907

² The Brisbane Courier, 10 July 1907

³ The Herald (Melbourne), 30 August 1907

band to the Melbourne Exhibition. However it was noted that Sydney was making some progress in that regard:

Mr. J. W. Gardner has got together a full brass band composed of women. Several practices have been held, and good results are anticipated; but it is hardly expected that the band would be ready by August 1 to enter for competition. The instruments in the band are cornets, clarionets, slide and valve trombones, in fact all the brass, reed, and stringed instruments.⁴

Lady Northcote invited the brass band and orchestra members to hold a rehearsal at Government House, on Tuesday 6 August, so that she could see what progress was being made, and she was most satisfied with the results.⁵

The brass band of twenty members, under Captain Riley, gave a pleasant surprise to everyone, for only a few weeks ago most of the players had never handled a wind instrument, and many difficulties had to be overcome in the way of sore lips and strained facial muscles incidental to first attempts at playing a wind instrument. This band played the march from *Scipio*, producing a good volume of sound, and playing well in tune, and in very good time.⁶



FIRST AUSTRALIAN EXHIBITION OF WOMEN'S WORK.

The winning poster design for the Exhibition

On one occasion the girls in the band were spotted on their way from rehearsal:

The strollers down Collins street one day last week were treated to a rather unusual spectacle. I was walking down the Block that day when I met a couple of girls carrying weird-shaped parcels, covered with black fabric. A few steps further on were three more, also carrying unwieldy packages, likewise shrouded in black. Then came another fair maid. Her burden, however, was strapped up with brown paper, not quite large

⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, 17 July 1907

⁵ Bendigo Independent, 24 August 1907

⁶ The Age (Melbourne), 8 August 1907

enough, as the corner protruded. I was forcibly reminded of the lines - "You may drape, you may shroud, you may hold as you will, the shape of the trumpet will startle you still." It was the ladies' brass band, of the Women's Work Exhibition, who had evidently been to rehearsal. All the fair trumpettes, flautistes and bassoonistes, etc., looked somewhat self-conscious of their burdens; but no doubt long before the Exhibition comes off they will be quite inured to them.⁷

Lady Northcote attended a further rehearsal of the ladies' choir and brass band on Thursday 5 September, held at the Guild Hall. Once again, she was very pleased with the result of her visit. The drummer and cornet blower were doing 'excellent work'. The band and singers were all dressed in white, with wattle blossom in their dresses.⁸

Another report of their rehearsals appeared a month before the Exhibition:

The damsels who constitute the Women's Brass Band, for the Women's Exhibition, are rehearsing with great solemnity and vigour. The obvious pleasure of the lady who blows into the biggest brass, when she induces a hollow roar like unto that voiced by Bashan's bull when he ran amok into Gilead, is a delight to behold. The coquetry of the maid whose oboe simpers out a phrase or two is truly captivating. The virile caperings of the conductress, as with flashing eye and tense arms she goads her flock to further, louder efforts, are most enlivening. And their music! Well, that is at least instructive. Later on it may be endurable.⁹

During the month before the Exhibition opened, the Besses o' th' Barn Band returned to Melbourne to give some concerts. The Besses Band had originally arrived in Melbourne in June 1907, as part of their World Tour. They had left England in June 1906 and would not return until December 1907. It is certainly probable that they would have been an inspiration to the fledgling Ladies' Brass Band members.



Besses o' th' Barn Band, on their World Tour 1906-1907

⁷ Punch (Melbourne), 22 August 1907

⁸ Punch (Melbourne), 12 September 1907

⁹ The Bulletin (Sydney), Volume 28 (1440), 19 September 1907

At the ladies' brass band's final rehearsal, on Tuesday 22 October, Thomas Riley was presented with an inscribed inkstand from the band members.

Miss Kennedy, who represented the students, paid a warm tribute to Mr. Riley's unselfish services, and he, in reply, endeavored to assure the band that the magnificent result, a surprise to many even experts in band music, was entirely due to their enthusiastic resolve to let no difficulty interfere with success. Apportioning the praise equally between conductor and "bandsmen", there is no doubt that there is much ground for mutual congratulation in a result which has astonished those who have been privileged to hear the first women's brass band ever organised.¹⁰

A slightly more expansive report of the presentation, and the character of Thomas Riley, appeared in *Punch*.

A Proud Little Bandmaster. A great little man is Brigade Bandmaster Lieutenant T. Riley, whom the Women's Brass Band endowed with an inkstand and silver pencil at their final rehearsal before the Exhibition. Bandmaster Tommy Riley is a man whom you meet wherever you go. At military encampments he is the hero of Sunday services, for nobody listens to the parson, while everybody crowds round when Lieutenant Riley gets the band going. On racecourse lawns you again discover his sturdy little figure – he is shaped like a schnapper - and see his abbreviated arm waving the baton when the Excellencies are unloaded from their carriages amid great pomp and ceremony. There is not a big function which does not try to lure the little man into its service. The vigorous little musician has poised his stick for "God Save the King" so often, and in so many places, that whenever he sees Sir John Madden trotting into Mullen's, he pulls up to a dead halt on the sidewalk. Then he holds up one finger in the attitude of command, and beats slow time until the Excellency is out of sight. The sight of a Major-General - even a superannuated one - sets him beating out "The Englishman" in just the same way. Tommy Riley has brought up more bands than Solomon brought up children. Mr. "Punch" likes the cheery little conductor, and would be glad to see him receive forty inkstands instead of one.¹¹



Thomas Riley

The upcoming Exhibition was certainly the 'talk of the town' and many column inches were occupied in the newspapers speculating on the content of the Exhibition and also the progress of the lady musicians.

The prospective exhibition is answerable for many things. The vision of small girls carrying great brass instruments with a "do or die" expression daily presents itself before us. Now and then the instrument seems nearly as large as its bearer. The fact remains, however, that a fair all round band is being evolved from material hitherto untried. A practice night among the musicians suggests the likelihood of choirs, orchestras and bands for girls continuing long after the exhibition is a mere memory. ... Nearly every individual player is a girl or woman earning her living. The bringing of these girls together to interpret the works of great musicians has roused an amount of enthusiasm among them that has temporarily at least banished monotony from their lives. Altogether there are about 1,000 girls and women included in the exhibition choir, orchestra, and band, and it is safe to say that the large majority of them have profited considerably by the work they have already accomplished.¹²

¹⁰ The Age (Melbourne), 24 October 1907

¹¹ Punch (Melbourne), 31 October 1907

¹² The Age (Melbourne), 21 September 1907

There was a competition for the composition of an ode to be sung at the opening of the Exhibition. This was won by Mrs Ewart, and her music was set to words by Miss Annie Rentoul, and was performed as part of the opening concert by the massed choir, orchestra, and brass band.¹³ It was originally only scored for strings, but Mrs Ewart enriched the score by adding parts for harp and the brass band.¹⁴

The Exhibition was officially opened by Lady Northcote, on Wednesday 23 October. For the opening ceremony, the combined choir, orchestra and brass band played the National Anthem at the start of the procession of the dignitaries, and again when they departed. The Band of the R.A.A. played various selections before the ceremony.¹⁵



Lady Northcote arriving to open the Exhibition, 23rd October 1907

One of the first reports, after the opening of the Exhibition, had complimentary remarks about the ladies' brass band.

The Women's Brass Band is really very funny, how they blow, and how they work, but they manage to get a fairly good tone. It is just as well the "Besses" have departed, for shortly they would have a dangerous rival in the female trumpet blower's band. The drum girl is really most energetic and does her part excellently. It seems impossible, after the extensive advertising the women have done, that there still remains a few beings in the universe who have not heard of the Exhibition. A leading citizen of Dunedin, New Zealand, who has been in Melbourne for a few days, was asked couldn't he prolong his visit till after the Exhibition. "Exhibition! I've not heard of any exhibition!" The questioner, a lady chorister, fainted.¹⁶

¹³ Bendigo Advertiser, 14 September 1907

¹⁴ The Argus (Melbourne), 19 October 1907

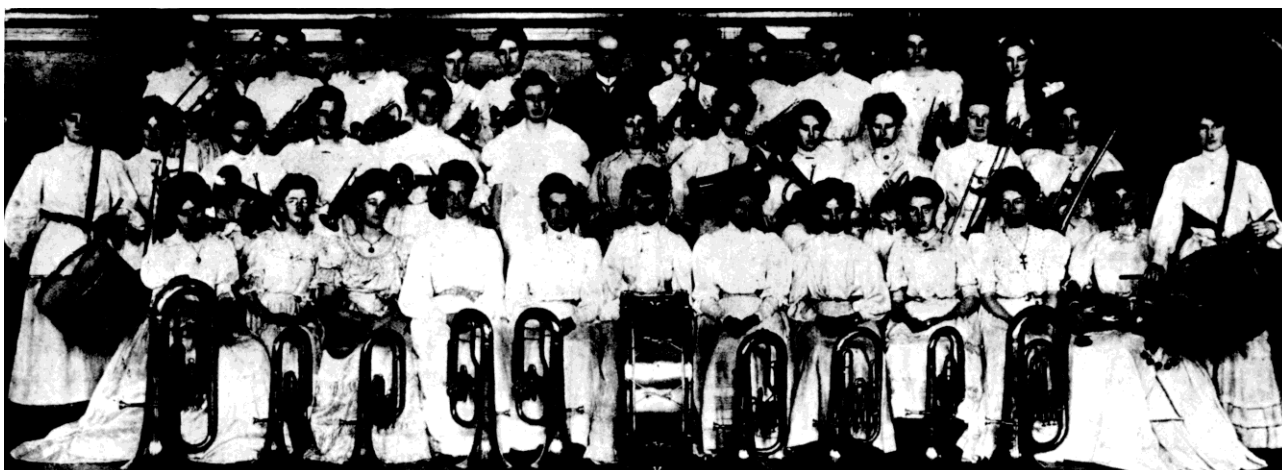
¹⁵ The Argus (Melbourne), 16 October 1907

¹⁶ Punch (Melbourne), 24 October 1907

The ladies' brass band made its first appearance on its own in a concert on Thursday 31 October 1907.¹⁷

A grand choral concert was given last evening in the large hall under the direction of Mrs Franklin Peterson, in which the ladies' brass band made its first appearance as a separate organisation. Mrs Ewart's Ode was splendidly performed under the composer's baton, with Mrs Palmer and Madame Johnson as soloists. Handel's "*Largo*" followed, with brass band and organ accompaniment. Then the brass band played Handel's "*March from Scipio*" and far exceeded the expectations of its most sanguine friends. Elgar's "*Snow*" gets better at every hearing, and aroused a furore of applause; though Gleeson's "*Golden Wattle*" rather suffered in comparison. Again, the brass band showed its skill in "*The Old Hundredth Psalm*" and "*Abide with Me*", the forte verse being in each case played better than the softer one which preceded it. Elgar's "*Land of Hope and Glory*" one of the dozen best melodies extant, was sung in effective unison by the huge choir, the organ and orchestra accompanying, and was enthusiastically encored, and three national songs brought the evening to a triumphant conclusion. There was an immense audience, which packed every available inch of space in the hall, and took every chance of showing its high appreciation of Mrs Peterson and her choir.¹⁸

A second photograph was taken of the band, at the same time as the one above. This one has their tutor, Lieutenant Thomas Riley, in the centre of the back row.



Punch (Melbourne), 29 August 1907

As the Exhibition continued the various ladies' musical ensembles performed regularly to the visiting throngs. A report about the brass band's performance towards the end of the Exhibition, was very complimentary.

The music between the tableaux was provided by the Ladies' Brass Band, under the direction of Mrs Peterson. Considering that six months ago or so none of these young ladies had as much as blown a tin whistle, the skill they have attained is really astonishing. The cornets get a fine clear tone and keep in excellent tune; the euphoniums put in a mellow bass, though they are not always certain in their intonation. The trombones are surprisingly good; and the drums and cymbals are played with vigour and precision. The march from Handel's "*Scipio*" was a thoroughly satisfactory piece of work, and Hume's "*Challenge March*" was firmly played. In Schrappe's "*Heart's Desire*" and again in the "*Tola*" intermezzo, the glockenspiel put in some good and effective work. On the whole the performance of the band may be described as rich in promise.¹⁹

¹⁷ The Herald (Melbourne), 29 October 1907

¹⁸ The Argus (Melbourne), 1 November 1907

¹⁹ The Argus (Melbourne), 23 November 1907

A lady from 'the goldfields' of Western Australia, visited the Exhibition and, on her return home, wrote a largely derogatory report of the organisation, the artwork, goods, and music. She did like a few pieces, but the music was not to her taste!

There is some talk of keeping up the women's choir, but I doubt if it will come to anything unless they add men's voices to give it depth and balance. Undoubtedly it was monotonous as a general thing, though they sang very well. When they sang in harmony without the orchestra, it was much more pleasing, but with the orchestra, their weaker parts were drowned, and one only heard the sopranos which became monotonous. They also talk of keeping up the women's brass band. Heaven save us! I hope they will rig up a curtain in front of them, for they do not look pretty when puffing and blowing. I heard them play at the Melbourne Conservatorium concert, and they certainly did better than at the exhibition, but they were in full view of the audience, and their cheeks were laughable.²⁰



After the Exhibition closed, the Ladies' Brass Band made its last appearance before disbanding. On Tuesday 3 December 1907, Professor Franklin Peterson organised the final concert of the year at the Melbourne University Conservatorium. Many of the musical students contributed to the concert, and the Ladies' Brass Band opened and closed the proceedings, which 'proved that nothing is beyond the powers of a woman – not even blowing a cornet or a trombone within a measurable degree of accuracy of pitch'.²¹

The band opened the concert with the "Scipio March", conducted by Thomas Riley, and closed the event with the "National Anthem" – performing 'with the precision and confidence of a band of veterans'.²²

²⁰ Daily News (Perth), 12 December 1907

²¹ The Age (Melbourne), 4 December 1907

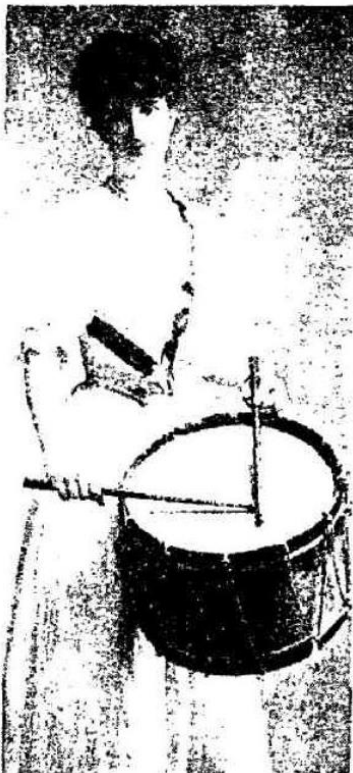
²² Punch (Melbourne), 5 December 1907

Messrs Sutton had lent the instruments to the ladies of the band to play over the previous six months, but they now had to be returned. Although there were some hopes that the band could continue in some form, this was not to be, and this was their last performance.

It will be a great pity though if the Ladies' Brass Band is allowed to cease existence for they succeeded so well in the mastery of their instruments, and altogether made much good progress before the close of the exhibition that we shall indeed be sorry if we have heard the last of this pioneer movement.²³

The women's brass band which distinguished itself at the Women's Exhibition may pay several inter-state visits. The band must not be confused with the women's orchestra, conducted by Miss McBurney. Women playing stringed instruments in an orchestra are a fairly common sight. A band of women playing brass or wind instruments is quite unique in Australia, and rare in any part of the world. The players were got together by an advertisement, stating that the band was to be formed. Mr Riley, the public school bandmaster, instructed the girls, and Mr Sutton lent them the instruments. Mrs Peterson originated the idea, and conducts the band.²⁴

The members of the Ladies' Brass Band



Miss Lily Kemp



Miss F. Walpole



Miss Ida Tryphena Jane
Sterling

²³ Bendigo Independent, 12 December 1907

²⁴ The Ballarat Star, 14 December 1907



Miss Elsie Louisa Treweek



Miss Annie Florence Moss



Miss R. Kyle



Miss M. Bull



Miss Moree Isabel Maud
Refshauge



Miss Leonie Georgette Peterson



Miss Carol Mary (Ina)
Mornement



Miss F. Rubinovitch



Miss Frances Kildahl Darke



Miss Ethel Ross



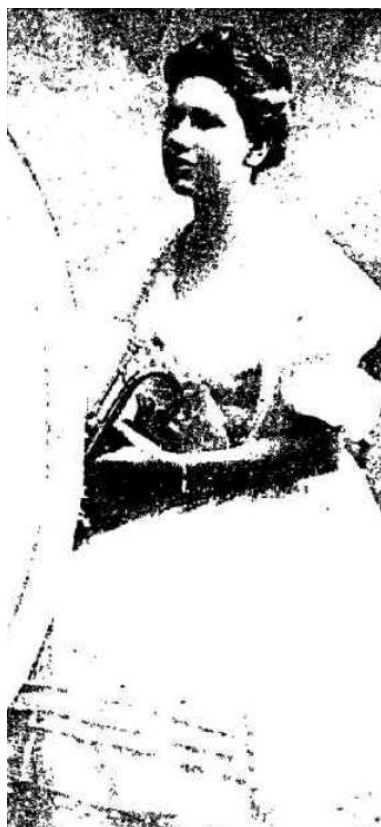
Miss Beryl Healy
(later became a music teacher)



Miss Mary Annie Christensen



Mrs Georgette Peterson



Miss Edith Todd



Miss Isabel Felstead



Miss Elspeth Charlotte Raff



Miss Helen Kennedy



Miss Isabel Thompson



Miss E. Wilcox



Miss Annie Kennedy



Miss A. Albon



Miss Ernie Russell



Miss Elsie Lavinia Prout



Miss M. Hanson



Miss E. McNeil



Miss S. Gault



Miss Emma Louisa McKinley



Miss Nichol



Miss Matthew

The last four images are slightly distorted due to the scan of the original newspaper in a bound volume, them being adjacent to the bent spine of the book.

One of the band members was not represented in this large photo montage. Two others, whose photographs did appear, are not shown here. The scan of the newspaper page on Trove [<https://trove.nla.gov.au>] has them masked by another image. The three missing players are Misses Ampt, Locke, and Ritchie.