Bands of the Middle West

By A. C. E. SCHONEMANN

NO. 16—CHICAGO FIRE DEPARTMENT BAND

THE Chicago Fire Department Band, which completed its first year of work recently, has a personnel of 75 men who have been recruited from the force of several hundred men in the stations of Chicago. The band was organized June 27, 1921, and is one of the several bands that has been sponsored by bureaus or departments of the City of Chicago.

James V. Sylvester, bandmaster and instructor of the band, has been identified with the organization since the first day the firemen assembled for assignment to instruments and preliminary instruction. Bandmaster Sylvester has not only supervised the work of the men in the one hundred or more rehearsals that have been held in a year’s time, but he has given up four hours of every Tuesday and Friday for private instruction during the time that the band has been working as a unit.

The question of a public appearance of the band has been secondary during the formative period of the organization, as it has been the desire of Bandmaster Sylvester to put his men through a year or more of intensive work and then, after having developed the sections of the band and finally the band as a whole, to give the men an opportunity to appear in public. The band made its debut May 30, 1922, and the firemen were equal to the occasion when the band of 75 with its drum and bugle corps swung onto Michigan Boulevard in the annual Memorial Day parade.

The success of the Chicago Fire Department Band has been due to the fact that Bandmaster Sylvester and his men have from the beginning been intent in perfecting first the individual, then the section, and finally the band as a complete unit. This has necessitated individual instruction for every man, as only about five per cent of the men had a knowledge of things musical in the beginning. The firemen, however, have entered into the band idea with a spirit of enthusiasm and co-operation that has been productive of results which have been of such a nature as to insure the future success of the band.

John Cullerton, business manager of the Chicago Fire Department, is the sponsor of the band, and his two aides who have assisted materially in building up the band are Lieut. Tony Sweeney and Lieut. Samuel Wilson. Messrs. Sweeney and Wilson, with Bandmaster Sylvester, have been active in the work of development, and from the beginning they have directed the band’s affairs.

Following the organization of the band, the
first three months were devoted to individual work and development of the various sections. After playing as a unit, and regularly since that time, rehearsals have been held every Monday and Thursday at which two and a half hours are devoted to work while the individual instruction is carried on from week to week.

During the last six months the band has been working on programs, and its first public appearance on May 30, 1922, Memorial Day, gave the firemen an opportunity to prove that their work of the year or more during which they have been organized has been of a character that generally culminates in success. The band is now working on a series of programs that are to be given in connection with the Pageant of Progress Exposition which is to be held in August.

The men in the band are granted extra time for rehearsals. Every man is expected to devote a part of his time to practice, and rehearsals of sections are being continued from week to week. The men are provided with instruments by the fire department, and about $8,000 has been expended in this way thus far.

Samuel Wilson is president of the band and Tony Sweeney is secretary. These two officers are the only men aside from Bandmaster Sylvester who bear titles, although in the fire-fighting organization many of the bandsmen have the rank and position that are parts of the Chicago Fire Department.

Bandmaster Sylvester was born and raised in Chicago. When a youngsters he studied with the late A. F. Weldon, devoting five years to study with that master of the cornet. Sylvester played with the Chicago Daily News Band when he was nine years old. At the age of fourteen he went to Europe, spending three months in Paris, and later going to Italy where he spent four years in study at the Musical College of Naples.

Upon his return to Chicago he played trumpet in the old Whitney Opera House, and later was identified with Sorentino’s Band, Collindo’s Concert Band and the Chicago Italian Symphony Orchestra. Later he began teaching band instruments and for a number of years he has devoted his time to band work. At the present time he is director and instructor for the Chicago Fire Department Band, the Hull House Boys’ Band and the Addison Band of Addison, Ill.

During the war Bandmaster Sylvester had charge of the band attached to the 149th field artillery, 42d division, the outfit being known as “Reilly’s Bucks.” He went overseas with the band, the unit remaining intact throughout
the war and returning to the states after the armistice was signed. The unit was discharged in 1919. The band numbered 106 men.

Bandmaster Sylvester is an enthusiastic supporter of army bands, and is an advocate of a plan whereby bandmasters of army bands will be musicians not only in name but in fact. He believes these men should be accorded the rank and standing of the higher officers in the army. He contends that by recognizing musicianship and according it the place it should have in the army, the army bands will be better organized and that the best musicians will eventually be attracted to such bands.

THE CORNETIST
Continued from page 12

days will be over. That old saying to "Watch your step" is no more important than the advice to "Watch your teeth," for therein lies the secret of a prolonged life as a player-musician. A few dollars spent now will mean an income of many hundreds of dollars later in life, so the question is, can we afford to be negligent in this respect? If a little care and expense means so much to us in the future, then we should heed the advice immediately.

G. R. L., (Lady Cornetist)

Q. Does it pay to procure one of the high-priced instruments for ordinary purposes, or would one of the cheaper, foreign makes be adequate for the general run of professional engagements?

A. I have frequently been asked this same question in regard to using the cheaper grade of instruments for student purposes, but have always held that the better the instrument the more easy to learn to play, and the more interest one will take in the work. It stands to reason that a cornet which is built carefully as regards intonation, valve action, general workmanship, etc., will appeal to one's interest and hold it, more than would the abominable atrocities turned out by many of the foreign and some of the domestic factories. Choose your instrument with the same care that you should exercise in the selection of a husband, for up to date very few of the foreign-made have proven satisfactory and it seems the BIG money was paid for all of them.

Call in the aid of an experienced performer, and permit him to exercise his judgment for you in selecting an instrument. Suppose he does receive a commission? Is that any reason why you should attempt to handle an expert's job and thereby run chances of being "stung" in your deal? Get the best you can when procuring your cornet, and you will find the work much lighter in every degree. It is not necessary to send to Europe at all, for the best grade of brass instruments are now made in the United States, and this has been proven beyond any doubt.