

The BIG Role of a LITTLE Band

Both the history of The Salvation Army and of music in general are included in a thorough yet accessible way in Niels Silfverberg's book about the Danish Staff Band, 'Fighting for the Lord'.

By Levi Giversen

In just a few years The Salvation Army's pioneers changed the face of the church in Denmark. Resources were few and in many places the number of soldiers was low. Nevertheless they managed to set up corps even in the smallest of Danish villages.

Without a doubt there are several reasons why this phenomenal growth was possible, but the fact that the Danish Staff Band played a role is something that is presumably overlooked by most people.

Not by Niels Silfverberg, however, who has explored his way through old issues of the War Cry and a range of other sources from the time of the pioneers. He has closely examined notes and reports and turned the material into an exciting book that is accessible to all.

The title of the book is 'Fighting for the Lord', with the subtitle 'A history of the Danish Staff Band of The Salvation Army'.

This title is taken from a march of the same name, composed by a member of the band, Emil Söderström,

whose parents were officers and who later became a world-renowned composer of brass band music.

The foreword has been written by another well-known figure in the Army's musical world, Colonel Robert Redhead.

Month-long Campaigns

That the title relates to the content can be confirmed before the first chapter has even been finished.

Here we meet a handful of young musicians who carried out a unique service on their month-long campaigns around the country – often travelling from town to town on foot.

The staff musicians made a particular difference in smaller corps in tiny villages. They didn't come to entertain the public, but to win the inhabitants for the Lord. When the instruments weren't being used, the musicians sold the War Cry or lent a hand at the corps.

In many places the Staff Band also helped local corps establish a brass band – thereby helping these soldiers to help themselves.

Overlooked Role

The extent of the Staff Band's service in the first years of the Army also took Niels Silfverberg by surprise.

'Yes, I was amazed. Those books that have been written about the history of The Salvation Army in Denmark so far focus very little attention on the Danish Staff Band. Some of what is written about it is completely wrong.

'It seems that the Staff Band wasn't taken seriously previously,' he says, and adds that the role of the Staff Band was perhaps even greater in a broader context.

'The visits of the Staff Band greatly strengthened the morale in several hard-pressed places. The Staff Band was visible proof that the little corps belonged to a larger family and that others were interested in them and supported them,' he says, highlighting the income that the band brought in for the running of the local corps.

The Holy Spirit and High Goals

One of the reasons behind the book is that Niels Silfverberg, who himself has

been a musician at Valby Corps for many years, feels that the brass bands of today can be inspired by the Staff Band.

‘The conditions for brass bands are different now, but I think that something completely fundamental was behind the success of the Staff Band,’ he explains and draws support for his view from a recent interview with General Linda Bond, who was also in a brass band in Nova Scotia in Canada.

‘Among other things, she made two points I would like to mention. First of all, a brass band has a task, and one of the strengths of brass banding is that it is a team ministry; the band accomplishes its task by working as a team.

‘It’s a good example of the Body of Christ, where everyone has a role and together it becomes something special. The General considers that to be an important quality of the Salvation Army as a whole.

‘Secondly, she sees brass banding as an effective means of communication, but it’s important to consider what it is we communicate. The music tells of salvation through Christ; it is used to worship and but it also has to do with holiness.

‘The most important thing that we in the twenty-first century can learn from the Staff Band, I think, is that being saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, having goals, determination, real ambitions, professional skills and personal competence and then constantly

developing these really worked. I’m convinced that that’s also the case in 2012.

A Band – Not a ‘Cosy Club’

The Staff Band existed – with one or two interruptions – for 42 years. The book suggests that it perhaps became surplus to requirements once so many local corps bands had started up.

Today, even though there are only a few corps bands in Denmark, Niels Silfverberg does not necessarily advocate the creation of a similar active and mobile band.

‘I think what we should think about in today’s context are those things I mentioned before – goals, determination, ambitions and a strong spiritual life. I’m concerned that our main obstacles are mediocrity and self-sufficiency,’ he says, and indicates that it can be tough to rise to the challenge.

At the same time he emphasises that goals and objectives need to be in place.

‘I think we should be better at being self-critical. We shouldn’t start bands or just keep them going without having some of the qualities I mentioned.

‘Bands in The Salvation Army should not be ‘cosy clubs’. They have a task and a mission, both internally and externally’.

Niels Silfverberg works in the development of further education courses and in developing the skills of

teachers. Niels also teaches. He is married to Dinah, and they have a son, Marcus. All are active at Valby Corps, Copenhagen.

‘Fighting for the Lord’ has been published by Niels Silfverberg with the company Books on Demand. The book can be ordered at: Books on Demand (www.bod.dk), Gyldendal’s online bookshop (www.g.dk), Gucca (www.gucca.dk), Saxos online bookshop (www.saxos.com) and Amazon (www.amazon.de). It can also be purchased from The Salvation Army’s trade department in Denmark. The book is in English, with 214 pages, and costs 172.90 Danish kroner.