

The oldest brass band in Europe

The “Wieliczka” Salt Mine Representative Brass Band began its official artistic life in 1830, when it was called the Imperial–Royal Salinary Music. The oldest brass band in Europe today, despite its old age, still maintains its “youthful” musical vigour, delighting successive generations of listeners with its performances.

In the 2nd half of the 18th century, the Austrians took on the task of setting up a permanent tourist route. Undoubtedly, the values of the historical underground were among the reasons for the creation of the miners’ orchestra. “Salinary music” made the sightseeing more attractive. The band accompanied tourists during the descent underground, including when they bought the most expensive touring package, that is with Class I or II lighting. They played in the Michałowice, Saurau, Dworzec Gołuchowskiego, Józef Piłsudski and Łętów Chambers. Every week, the brass band gave a concert in the gazebo in Elisabeth Park. During the occupation, salinary musicians could be heard in the courtyard of the Saltworks Castle, and even after 1945, in the Wieliczka parks.

The majority of the musicians were recruited from among Poles, while the first bandmasters were foreigners. In 1867, the band had 29 members, in the interwar period – 40. The 1980s were unsuccessful, with only 17 musicians playing. At present, the “Wieliczka” Salt Mine Representative Brass Band has about 44 members.

The bandmaster selected the repertoire and conducted all rehearsals, as well as led the orchestra during the more important concerts. On less important occasions, he was replaced by a drum major (under-bandmaster). There was a kind of “music school” attached to the band, where practical playing of instruments was taught. In addition to the brass band, there was also a string ensemble.

In its long history, the band played not only to the delight of tourists visiting the salt underground, but also at all church ceremonies, especially those related to the mining tradition and at important historical moments in Poland, as well as during ceremonies, such as the laying of the foundation stone for the AGH University of Science and Technology in 1923, unveiling of the Grunwald Monument in 1910, the 500th anniversary of the Jagiellonian University in 1900, bringing the ashes of Adam Mickiewicz to Poland in 1890.

Nowadays, the band still participates in all important state, church and mining celebrations. As it used to play for Emperor Franz Joseph in the past, it still performs in front of crowned heads and other important visitors to the historical underground, as well as provides the best musical setting for important events. It is always present during the St Barbara’s Day or St Kinga’s day celebrations, as well as during subsequent anniversaries of the mine’s entry onto the UNESCO list. The band marches in Corpus Christi processions, celebrates the 11th of November, and plays at miners’ funerals. In total, it gives about 100 performances per year on various occasions.

The versatility of the musicians allows them to perform not only works written for brass instruments, but also to successfully take on Verdi, Bach, Schubert, Strauss and film music. The high artistic level of the band meant that already in Austrian times, numerous orders were received for performances in Krakow, Podgórze and Eastern Galicia. To this day, the musicians of the Wieliczka mine are still very good at festivals and competitions organised in Poland and abroad, including in Buchloe, Augsburg, Fussen, More, Salzburg, Hallein, Halstadt and Innsbruck.