

UNDERGRADUATE ART IN  
THE YALE COLLEGE DEAN'S OFFICE

*The Yale Bands* 2012–2013





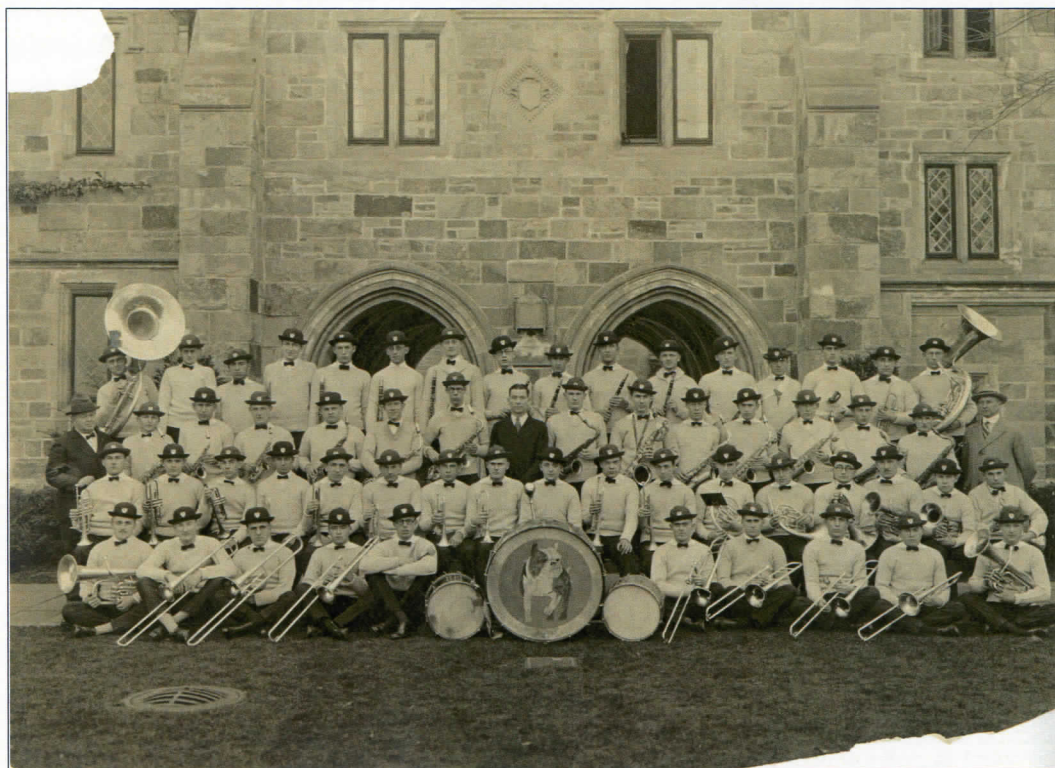
Cover photo: Harvard-Yale Game, 1928

## Interview with Thomas C. Duffy, Director of the Yale Bands

*By Susan Cahan*

**SUSAN CAHAN:** The Yale band started in 1918, right after the end of World War I. What was the relationship between the ending of the war and the founding of the Yale band?

**TOM DUFFY:** The idea of a Yale University Band first occurred to Joseph R. Ellis in 1918 when he was a lieutenant in the Army and was assigned to the Yale Student Army Training Corps [S.A.T.C.].



Yale Band, 1924





"To Mr. Smith—Our Director 1925.  
Best wishes, Milstein."

Before then, he'd been stationed in Washington, D.C. and worked to secure players and leaders for bands in training camps throughout the country. When he got to Yale, he started planning a band here. We think funding is tight now, but back then there were no funds whatsoever, so he took up a collection from the military units in training. He brought in a professional coach, Charles F. Smith, a New Haven musician who had considerable band experience, and bought a few instruments. He recruited musical talent from the S.A.T.C., and the band provided music for military formations.

When the Corps was demobilized in December, after the Armistice, the instruments were turned over to the University to provide the nucleus for a student band later on. Fortunately, Lt. Ellis remained at Yale to become Registrar of Freshmen, and by October 1, 1919, he and Charles Smith had succeeded in persuading twenty students to form the Yale Band.

The first year, they played at some of the minor football games. The following year, there were thirty-four players, and they showed such improvement that they were *permitted* to play at the Princeton and Harvard games, in addition to the minor contests. Soon about sixty players represented Yale at football games and also presented occasional concerts of light and popular music.

This went on for the next two decades, led by a collection of local musicians, but mostly by Charles Smith, a burly, enthusiastic guy. You can see him in the pictures. Joseph Ellis served as the dedicated Faculty Adviser and Treasurer of the Band until his death in 1934. His equally enthusiastic successor was Stuart H. Clement '17, Associate Director of the Office of Placement, who helped the band to function successfully for eight more years. At that time, there was no distinction at Yale between

the marching band and the concert band, except for the repertoire. The boys were on the field for the games and went indoors for winter concerts. They did everything until 1946.

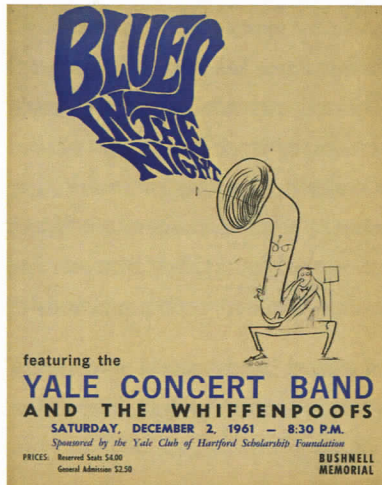
SC: What happened then?

TD: Yale hired its first serious band director just after World War II. The School of Music hired Keith Wilson to teach woodwinds – all of them – and to kind of handle the boys in the band. Keith came from the University of Illinois, one of the Big Ten schools. He had been a student of Albert Austen Harding, who was one of the founders of the American band movement.



Yale Concert Band, 1947

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Concert band poster, 1961

By 1947, Keith had put together a concert band, an artistic band spawned from the marching band that did all the ceremonial services for the University (and for the most part it still does).

SC: Can you back up and tell me a little more about the creation of bands in the United States?

TD: Every community in the United States had a community band in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They would play at civic functions, summer concerts, and parades. (It was like this in Europe for hundreds of years. After the European Council of Trent banned musicians from churches, troubadours and “mobile” musicians led parades and civic functions.) But, as Lawrence



Levine talks about in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, bands then were different than bands today. Most of America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries heard opera arias and symphonic works through their community bands' transcriptions. In fact, almost all the repertoire of the wind band before the 20<sup>th</sup> century consisted of transcriptions of opera, chamber music, and string music. The artistic enterprise of writing music for band is a twentieth century phenomenon.

The marching band began to appear in the Big Ten schools at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which then gave birth to its artistic version, the concert band, in the thirties. And the movement took off. The bands became huge. They were called "symphonic bands." You might see a band of 150 people with thirty clarinets. How'd you like to be the fourteenth alto clarinet? I mean, there wasn't a lot of individuality in playing in these bands, but there was power. And the bands competed with each other.

In 1955, Frederick Fennell, at the Eastman School of Music, created the new mold for the modern band. He said, "We're going to do a recording with one musician on each part." And that was the beginning of the wind ensemble movement, which was a real challenge to the Big Ten band directors who wanted

hundreds of people in their bands. By the seventies, the Wind Ensemble was a significant artistic endeavor, enough so that in 1973, Yale University hosted the second national wind ensemble conference, at which people who wanted to talk about music and aesthetics got together. The sentiments were, "We're sick of competition. We're sick of painting the band sound with such a thick brush."

So the concert band is one of two original indigenous ensembles that America has



Yale Band, 1943

given to the world. Actually, let's say three, if you consider the Broadway musical to be its own art form. Then there's jazz, and this phenomenon of the American concert band – it is not for military marching – that would be the British brass band; it is not for civic ceremonies – that would be the Italian band, *banda musicale Carabinieri*; it is not for anything other than art.

SC: So the Yale band started after World War I and another major shift happened after World War II. Can you talk a little bit about why the wars constitute these turning points?

TD: During World War II, football was suspended and all of Yale was converted to a war school. Branford College was a school for the Japanese and German code breakers. Old Campus was where the Army Air Corps trained. Almost everybody here at Yale was involved in wartime activities, the non-combatants and the regular ROTC people. The class of '45W is very proud of the fact that they went to school here for two and a half years every day, 365 days a year, and graduated early and went off to the war.

There was no football, but a band was needed to play at civic events and services. You see the uniforms in the photo from 1943? They're not marching



Concert Band Poster, 1995



band uniforms, they're soldiers who got together and did part of their duty playing at military and civic functions.

Then Glenn Miller, who had a successful big band, volunteered to organize service orchestras for the United States military and was stationed in New Haven. That was from March 1943 to June of '44. He sent a note out to all of the musicians in the country saying that if you get drafted, you need to ask to be transferred to New Haven. He didn't want these musicians going to the front lines. So he had string players who were drafted and sent to him from the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Philharmonic, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He had the best string players in the country playing in his "jazz" army orchestra. In the nine months that he was stationed here, working out of Durfee Hall, he did six coast-to-coast broadcasts from Woolsey, to boost morale during the war. He played War Bond Drives on the New Haven Green, Woolsey Hall, the Yale Bowl, Old Campus.

In June 1944, he went to Europe to play for the troops, and on December 15, 1944, while flying from England to France, his plane disappeared. My band has recreated Glenn Miller's 1940s Yale concerts in which I'm Glenn.

After the war ended and we got the GI Bill, all of the American colleges got hit with former soldiers. What kind of music do they listen to? Most of them listened to swing music. While they were gone, Be Bop had emerged. So band attracted non-orchestral musicians. Lots of them.

Prior to that, the bands were only on the field for the games and then would play one winter concert indoors. After the war, they go inside.

**SC:** What was distinctive about Keith Wilson's leadership of the bands?

**TD:** Keith Wilson's band played really cutting-edge music. The things that, now, I think of as old-time classics, Keith was premiering. Darius Milhaud's *Suite Française*, a six movement piece that Milhaud wrote, one for each province that the allies liberated in World War II. I first played it at the University of Connecticut in the '70s and it was hard, new stuff. Well, Keith had done it in the





Yale Concert Band conducted by Keith Wilson on Cross Campus, 1958

fifties. Now it's one of the classics, the *Firebird* of the band repertoire. Paul Hindemith wrote his *Symphony in B<sup>b</sup>*, one of the most prominent pieces composed for band. When it was first written, in 1951, nobody could play it. Keith did it here. Now we play it fairly regularly.

SC: What about big band music?

TD: That wasn't part of the concert world; that was part of the jazz world, although there are Broadway and jazz medleys, show tune medleys for concert band, just as they play pops concerts.

SC: When did the marching band fully separate from the concert band?

TD: When Keith left the directorship, in 1973, and the next director, Keith Brion, came in.

SC: Going through the archives, I've noticed a lot of letters of complaint between the years 1973 and 1977. What was going on then?

TD: Keith Wilson went on sabbatical in 1968 and left the marching band in the hands of a grad student, Dick Kilmer, who turned out to be one of the world's greatest oboe teachers. Keith had been doing it for twenty years by then, and believe me, that's a long time. After his sabbatical, the students really wanted to run the marching band themselves, and as the concert band flourished and as his teaching responsibilities in the School increased, I think he was glad to let them do it.

SC: Yes, that was during the student movement, a time when students wanted to take on more responsibility for directing their own education. That was the era when Yale created the College Seminar program. It was a sign of the times.

TD: Of course, this is the time of the Vietnam War approaching its zenith. May Day 1969, the Yale campus is in an uproar, so this is right in line. You've got a bunch of guys who are long-hairs; they're counter-culture; they're liberal beyond belief; they're in a marching

band, which they perceive as a fascist organization. They go, "Good! This is gonna be great! We're not wearing hats anymore. We're not wearing bowties, at least not where we should be! We're gonna dress any way we want and we're gonna do everything we can to parody the stereotypical image of the militaristic marching band. And what better place than while we're doing maneuvers on the football field?" This is what happened. So finally Keith Wilson, acknowledging the increases in his duties teaching clarinet, coaching chamber music, and directing the Norfolk Chamber Music Institute, said, "I think it's time to let someone else direct the band." He resigned. And he often told me that he regretted stepping down as director of bands, but he couldn't reconcile it with his other duties and couldn't keep up with the crazy marching band anymore. But it really wasn't so crazy – just different and changing every year. Keith was a gentleman. He never really understood why the Marching Band wanted to do what it ended up doing.

SC: What was his forte?



Yale Marching Band, 1970



**TD:** He was a world-class clarinetist, best known for classical music. He was also a world-class arranger. Paul Hindemith's transcription of the *Symphonic Metamorphosis* was Keith's. So if you say, "Keith Wilson" people will say, "Oh my god, Yale University, great clarinetist, great concert band director." The marching band so distressed him that he quit the whole job, because the two bands were inseparable.

So in came Keith Brion in the 1970s!!! And it got 1970s crazier! The musicians in the band enjoyed political satire that some alumni at the games found disrespectful and wrote letters voicing their concerns. Former students have told me that Keith encouraged them to push the envelope even further. At the time, I was in and directed the UConn Marching Band and used to love to watch the Yale Band on the field. I thought that they were brilliant, and I even made the UConn band stop taunting them on the field so that I could hear their show. I remember the show that was a tribute to Nixon's secretary, Rosemary Woods, and featured the band marching and playing, but... no sound...get it? UConn students jeered at the "no music." I was impressed at their cleverness. Three years later... they were mine!

**SC:** What was the position of women when all this was going on, seeing as Yale started admitting women in 1969? How did they interface with the concert band and the marching band?

**TD:** With the concert band there was no issue. You take the best players. And at the time there were "female" instruments, there were flute players, although there had been men flute players for the last fifty years....

**SC:** Why is the flute associated with the feminine?

**TD:** There's no reason for it now, but for years, it wasn't a big instrument you marched with. If you didn't have big muscles, you played the piccolo. You know, it's stupid. I mean, look at me: I'm a conductor and I wave around a phallic symbol and expect everybody to clap and tell me I'm a genius!

But really, women came playing instruments and in the Concert Band it was always about choosing the best players. Marching Band? Any position of leadership was denied to women for a long time. So Jenny Roberts was the first woman drum major of the band in 1980 – just before I came.

It was 20 years before another woman was chosen to be the drum major, Betsy Golden '01. Now it's no issue whatsoever. We try to find the best candidate, and gender isn't a factor.

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Yale Marching Band, 1981



SC: What did Keith Brion contribute artistically?

TD: High musical standards and an exposure to the wind-ensemble movement and contemporary wind band literature. Keith was a terrific flautist, and his major band contribution was bringing Sousa's music to the foreground and, in fact, his claim to fame is that he did an authentic recreation of John Philip Sousa here at Yale. He got the uniforms. He talked to all the living members of the Sousa band, and after he left Yale, in 1979, he made his career of being John Philip Sousa. You want to know how to play Sousa, you talk to Keith Brion. He also was a specialist in the music of Percy Grainger.

Then Richard Thurston was hired. He had just retired from twenty years in the Air Force, the last few of which he conducted the United States Air Force Band – *the* United States Air Force Band – and I think somebody thought that he, the colonel, was going to be the answer to the Marching Band being out of control. This didn't quite go as planned. First of all, the students called him "Colonel Thurston." Now, this was 1980 and '81. His rehearsal technique included (at least once): "Practice. I order you to practice." (I think this was a joke!) Uh uh. Students aren't going for it. He'd review the scripts for the halftime shows, but the students often disguised things so that they appeared to be ok – until you saw them on the football field with the accompanying script. Maybe that cigar didn't look like a cigar anymore!? Letters of complaint continued to arrive. Thurston also was the Associate Dean of the School of Music – he was one busy man. So in May of '82 he accepted an invitation to go be the dean at Oklahoma State University, his alma mater, and off he went.

When I show up in '82, the students regrouped, "Okay, what's this guy going to be all about?" I'm 26 years old and I walk in, "Hey guys. What's happening?" And they go, "Oh no! He gets it. We can't do to him what we did to the others." I mean, the reason I've lasted so long is that I was too young to know anything.

SC: What brought you to Yale?

TD: I got a call. I'm sitting at home in Ithaca, New York where I was doing my doctorate in music composition at Cornell University. My TA-ship is running the bands. I help with the concert band.

I conduct the second jazz ensemble. I'd written for the marching band, but I was doing a DMA in Composition and Theory, and my phone rings. Yale needed someone to fill in for a year. So I come down to meet Bart Giamatti, who was then Yale's president, and Howard Lamar, the dean of Yale College. And they hired me for a year. So I took a year's leave of absence from Cornell and came to Yale.

Things went well.

I'm a composer. I wrote all the music for the Marching Band, every number, and of course it fit perfectly with the script because I wrote it. And I didn't try to squash them, but I tried to corral them. And it was really successful and we had great music. So Howard Lamar called me in in November and said, "Why don't we just keep you?" I had done all my coursework at Cornell and had a waiver for the rest of my residency and I stayed.

I had my tense moments with the president of Yale. One of them was after the "Nuns for Elvis" skit and the "Hooked on Hymns" thing. But that's another story, and it was nothing like what it once was.

**SC:** So, there have been a number of historic events with which the band has been involved, such as the interaction with Walter Cronkite, concerts in Carnegie Hall, and the inauguration of George Bush, in 1989. How did the inauguration gig come about?

**TD:** I was sitting at my desk and the phone rang and this person said, "Hi. It's Sergeant whomever. Do you guys have a band?" "Of course we have a band!" You know, we were the first band to tour internationally so I was kind of annoyed. "Why do you ask?" "Why didn't you apply for the George Bush inaugural parade?" So I said, "Well, Sargeant, it's winter; my band doesn't march, neither my marching band nor my concert band marches; we've never done it before; I didn't think of it; I don't have the resources..." He said, "Okay, well, the president wants you to be in his inaugural parade."

**SC:** Because of his affiliation with Yale?

**TD:** Yes, he's an alum. So, I said, "Alright, let me call you back." So I call up President Benno Schmidt, who gives me to Sid Altman, the dean, and Sid says, "You're going." And that was it. He gave me

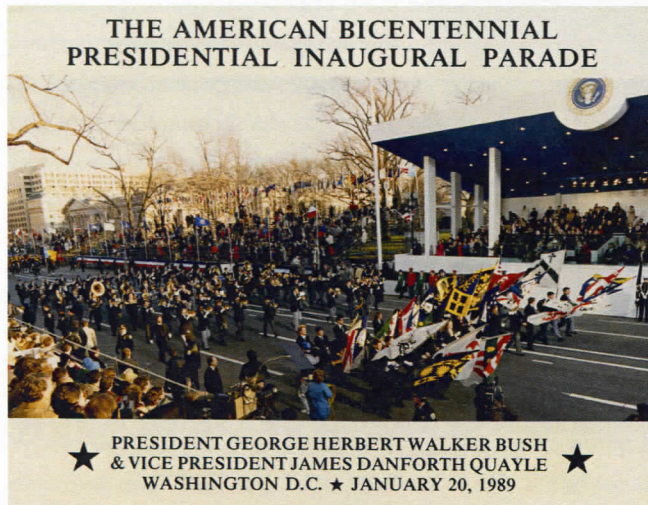


money for uniforms and all the transportation. And I had to call extra rehearsals so that my non-marching marching band could go out and march. And the *Washington Post* raved about us. The article started out, "After the gussied up robots of the University of Texas Marching Band came real people, the sometimes scraggly but exceptionally proud processional band from Yale University."

SC: Who picked the repertoire for the Bush inauguration and what was it?

TD: I picked the repertoire. It was a piece of music called *The George Bush March* written by Ervin Litkei, who had written the presidential marches from Roosevelt on. There was a piece that I had written for the Society of the Cincinnati Centennial, at West Point. And we picked Yale songs. Bush wanted Yale songs. George jumped to his feet when we played *Bulldog* and Barbara clapped and sang. I have news clips of them singing along.

SC: Were you invited to play for the inauguration of George W. Bush?



Yale Band playing at the inauguration of President George H.W. Bush, Washington, D.C., January 1989

TD: We were not invited. We applied and we were — of course there was some confusion about when he was going to be president, so nobody knew until January who the president was. But, no, he selected the University of Connecticut. I think that may have been an attempt to appear to be a president of the people and not elite. And we applied for Clinton and he also didn't favor his Yale connections.

SC: And in '94 you started the Glenn Miller concerts?

**TD:** We did. We had a Glenn Miller show for the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. It was terrific. We did thirteen shows over the course of two years, made thousands and thousands of dollars that made it possible for us to go to Europe, and played in all the places Miller had played for the soldiers: Southampton, Portsmouth, Cherbourg. It was unbelievable. Really amazing.

**SC:** So where did Keith Wilson first get the idea to take the band on tour in 1959? Did it have anything to do with exporting American culture during the Cold War?

**TD:** No, I don't think so. Keith just thought it was important to do. I believe he had some connections with the travel industry through some of the boys in the band, and I think the University was looking to have a presence in Europe at the time. They went to Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, England, and Belgium. Six countries in six weeks, I think, and they played the music of the countries they were in.

Now we're touring all around the world. The Yale band was the first college band to go on tour, and eventually what started off as pioneering became programmatic. When I first got here in 1982, because I didn't know how long I'd be at Yale, I just went on tour because we'd gone on tour before. And so we did our first trip to Bermuda. Then the second one, I said, we should go to England, the next closest country that we could afford where we speak the language. Then came Japan in '87 and I realized that this could really be something.

So, I began to pick places where there was a really compelling reason to go. What country needs a band? Why, it's the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Petersburg, so we went to Russia. It's the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second World War; we went to France and England. My teacher Karel Husa won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his *Music for Prague 1968*, a work in memory of the 1968 Soviet bloc invasion of Czechoslovakia. So after the Velvet Revolution I took the band to the Czech Republic to play his music. There's always a reason.

**SC:** How do you choose the repertoire in relation to your destinations?



TD: Rather than be evangelists, my goal is to set up a genuine reciprocity when I go places. So, in South Africa, where we went last summer, there wasn't any South African band music to play, so I wrote some. I took *Bawu*, which is a Zulu hymn, and arranged it for the band. We did *Megar*, which is a Khosa hymn. So I did stuff that they recognized as their own, though it was *ersatz*.

The most phenomenal part of the African tour, and there were a lot of interesting parts, was the day that our percussion instruments didn't show up. Our tour guide said, "This is going to be a disaster." I said, "We'll live." And we played the *Symphonic Metamorphosis* for band by Paul Hindemith on African percussion instruments. I exhorted the band, "Come on. Make it work." It was a hybrid. And the band loved it. I wish we had recorded it.

Where the timpani would ordinarily go "bump ba bump ba ba ba," this drum went, "dink da dink dink dink dink." And the band laughed and we all smiled and it became so much fun.



Poster from Yale Band's first concert tour in Europe, 1959.

SC: On a deep level what do you think was happening when your students were playing Hindemith on African drums?

TD: Two things: one, they were out of their comfort zone. They had to improvise. They had to consider an aesthetic that wasn't theirs. The other side of it was that the audience saw us playing their bongos, wood blocks, shakers, metal instruments and putting them into our piece of music, and it worked. They loved the music. Imagine a pole vaulter going to the Olympics and their pole gets lost, so they run next door and grab a piece of bamboo and they win the Olympics. You go, "Oh my god, it's not just about physics. It's not just about training. It's about people making stuff work. It's about resilience." And, can you imagine how the person felt who owned the bamboo? So it kind of broke everything down to the basics. It wasn't that we had all these shiny new instruments or that we had money or that we were from Yale. Even when the Yale band plays in Woolsey, nothing else matters. Uniforms don't matter. Reputation doesn't matter. It's about you and your intrinsic musicianship. It's just honest.

July 3, 2012

New Haven, Connecticut



The Yale Bands installation is the fourth in a series of presentations of Undergraduate Art in the Yale College Dean's Office organized by Susan Cahan. Special thanks to Stephanie Hubbard, Kate Gonzales, Derek Webster, Stewart Johnson and Hull's Art Supply, Ken Lovell and the Digital Media Center for the Arts, Denise Meyer, and Jürgen Bank.



Yale

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