

Canadian Brass: five reasons to be a proud Canadian

In January's Kelowna Community Concert Association offering, the members of the Canadian Brass ensemble opened their program with a funeral march to the stage of the Kelowna Community Theatre. Once on-stage, Charles Daellenbach, the tuba player, announced that the processional was one of the group's encores.

And thus started the craziness and brilliance of the evening. The Canadian Brass, which will celebrate its fortieth anniversary next year, delighted the capacity crowd with its dazzling musicianship and its capacity for fun.

Imagine, 40 years as Canada's cultural ambassadors and two of the founding members are still with the group. These are trombonist Eugene Watts and the aforementioned bassist Daellenbach. Mind you, these members play the lower instruments, which are somewhat kinder to the embouchure. Still, 40 years with this group--not to mention previous experience--and still going strong is incredible.

Replacements to the Brass since I last saw them in Toronto include hornist Jeff Nelson and trumpeters Joe Burgstaller and Brandon Ridenour. All three of these gentlemen embody virtuosity in the highest degree. The horn is an especially dicey instrument to play, particularly in its upper range, because the harmonic tones are so close. Pushing any valve up there easily results in a harmonic neighbour to the desired note. In view of this, it is astonishing that Nelson produced no obvious bloopers during the entire concert.

In ensembles with more than one of a given instrument, it is customary that the best performer be designated the principal and that that person be given the juiciest parts and most ostentatious solos to play. But both trumpeters of the Canadian Brass are so excellent that I was at a loss to determine which was superior. The Canadian Brass solved the dilemma by letting Burgstaller be principal trumpeter in the first half of the concert and switching the honour to Ridenour after the break.

The first half of the program was mostly baroque music, heavy on J.S. Bach, although the numbers from the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook contained harmonies that might have caused old Bach to raise an eyebrow or two.

After intermission and an unprogrammed Beatles number, the Brass launched into a Glen Miller medley that garnered them a tumultuous ovation.

I was particularly impressed with Samuel Barber's Adagio, a piece of surpassing beauty and pathos. It was originally scored for strings, but the members of Canadian Brass demonstrated that it also works for wind instruments. Moreover, they proved that they can discard every shred of frivolity when they want to.

Switching back from gravity to levity, the group returned to the stage in rudimentary costumes to perform Peter Schickele's spoof on opera and TV westerns, Hornsmoke. The players had a ball having a ball, miming all the action while accompanying themselves on their own instruments. It was quite clever.

As the hornsmoke lifted and the applause continued, the group emerged from the wings to play a real encore: Echoes of Harlem.

Charles Velte is a former opera singer (1962-67) who holds a Master of Music degree in Music Theory from the University of Wisconsin (1961). He now leads a music appreciation group at the Society for Learning in Retirement.