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American Brass Quintet brings a new dimension to Close Encounters With Music

By Sharon Smullen

Nary a stringed instrument will be in sight Saturday when the American Brass Quintet makes its debut on the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center stage under the auspices of Close Encounters With Music. Founded in 1960, the distinguished ensemble with 60 recordings to its name is a departure from the usual string, piano or vocal artists hosted by CEWM founder and cellist Yehuda Hanani. While Close Encounters has on occasion featured marimba, Chinese pipa, harp and percussion, brass instruments have been notably absent.

"I thought this would be a very nice diversion from the conservative approach to chamber music presentation," Hanani said in an interview with the Eagle. "People know whatever we bring in is of the highest calibre, artistically and performance-wise."

The idea of a brass quintet is a new phenomenon, he added. While the sound could be heard in marching bands and on Sunday afternoons in the town gazebo, bringing it into the concert hall was unheard of until 50 years ago.

Just like a string quartet, "each instrument has its own character, but there is a certain element of unity — 'E Pluribus Unum' in music," Hanani said.

The varied program spans 500 years from the Renaissance to present day. It begins with an early 20th century piece by Russian composer Victor Ewald that Hanani describes as "very rich, in the style of German romanticism."

Philip Lasser's "Common Heroes, Uncommon Land" was a 2018 commission by The Juilliard School to celebrate the

ensemble's 30 years in residence there. Between movements, the musicians recite short poems by Langston Hughes and the composer.

Dan Coleman's "Daybreak" (also 2018) conjures up "that state of mind in the morning between sleep and wakefulness, hovering in consciousness," Hanani said.

The mood shifts to the early 16th century with "Three Fantasias in Church Modes" by Thomas Stoltzer, a work that Hanani describes as "like a madrigal for brass."

The final piece, Eric Ewazen's "Frost Fire," was written for the ensemble's 30th anniversary in 1990, and, Hanani said, represents "the American sound which we love so much, a little bit of Bernstein, a little bit of Copland, those giants who give us our own voice here in this country."

In his 20 years with ABQ, trumpeter Kevin Cobb has traveled across the U.S. and internationally from Australia to Brazil. He last visited the Berkshires to attend Boston University Tanglewood Institute as a high school student.

"For a group like this to have survived for 60 years is pretty incredible," he observed. "It's a labor of love."

Players often stay for 40 years or more, he said, dedicated to the group's mission of bringing serious brass chamber music to audiences around the world.

ABQ plays venues of all sizes, once going from a 3,000-seat Michigan theater with an orchestra to 15 people in a Florida church. They still averaged 1,500 people over those two nights, Cobb joked.



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Regardless of audience size, he added, "we believe in the music and what we do, and hopefully that will reach people."

And, while brass music is sometimes associated with a big sound, "we play bold, but we're not a big band brass section," Cobb noted.

Unlike other ensembles that incorporate jazz or popular music, ABQ performs only classical repertoire, old and new.

Whether juggling mutes in the present or enduring long stretches of playing in the past, "we bring the same attention to detail to everything in front of us," Cobb said. "We are first and foremost considerate of what the music is trying to say."

To approximate the color and tone of period instruments in Renaissance works, trumpets are replaced by flugelhorns, creating a "richer, more mellow sound that blends more with our low brass colleagues," Cobb said.

Advancing 400 years to "a tiny sliver of wonderful Romantic music from St.

Petersburg in Russia" written by civil engineer and amateur cellist Victor Ewald, string chamber music aficionados will find the language familiar, he added.

New music forms the cornerstone of ABQ's repertoire. Over its 60 years, ABQ has premiered some 150 new works that collectively form the basis of modern brass repertoire. Commissions have included distinguished composers such as William Bolcom, Elliott Carter, Gunther Schuller and Joan Tower, as well as new voices.

"People really look to us as torchbearers of modern brass chamber music," Cobb said.

But he promises there will be no aggressive tonality or dissonance in the Mahaiwe program.

"The mission — getting people to recognize the validity of serious brass chamber music — is still ahead of us," Cobb explained.

"Once people experience brass in this form, they really enjoy it. We want them to come away feeling enriched."