

American Brass Quintet

FIFTIETH SEASON

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Newsletter

ABQ: The First Fifty Years

By Margaret Shakespeare



The mid-twentieth century was a fertile time for music in America. Home-grown talent blossomed. Orchestras expanded. Presenters welcomed diverse programming. Players and composers found new opportunities. Just the sowing field where a fresh idea could take root, grow into a whole new tradition and redefine a genre. In

1960 five brass players got together with a mission—to perform serious chamber music and encourage development of a brass quintet repertory. They called themselves the American Brass Quintet. And for fifty years the ABQ has been breaking new ground and indeed has changed the landscape of brass playing and, particularly, chamber music.

The late Arnold Fromme, an ABQ co-founder and tenor trombonist until 1970, had started collecting editions for brass ensembles during his Juilliard School student days. In an interview several years ago he said, "We had a workshop, always with a conductor—not quite chamber music. In the 1950s a few groups emerged and found work, mostly demonstrating instruments and playing pop tunes, through Young Audiences." Fromme and co-founder, the late Gilbert Cohen, a bass trombonist, along with trumpeters Robert Heinrich and the late Theodore Weis, and the late hornist Arthur Goldstein, focused elsewhere. And on a

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50TH
ANNIVERSARY
CONCERT
FRIDAY
OCTOBER 15
ALICE TULLY HALL
LINCOLN CENTER



The American Brass Quintet in 1963. Standing l to r: Robert Biddlecome, Ronald Anderson, Robert Heinrich, Arnold Fromme. Sitting: Richard Happe.

ABQ's 50th Anniversary concert is Friday, October 15, 2010 at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, New York City. Information on tickets: 212-769-7406.

The program will feature Joan Tower's popular *Copperwave*, the New York premiere of Trevor Gureckis' *Fixated Nights*, Venetian music from the ABQ recording *In Gabrieli's Day*, fantasias by Thomas Stolzer, the New York premiere of David Sampson's *Chants and Flourishes*, and Gabrieli's *Sonata XX* for twenty-two brass players in five choirs.

"It is with great enthusiasm that all the members of the Juilliard community celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the American Brass Quintet. This great ensemble and its individual members have had a transformative impact on brass chamber music at Juilliard since their historic residency began in 1987. With intelligence, artistry, and imagination, the ABQ has exemplified the highest standards of chamber music for brass instruments during its remarkable existence." Joseph W. Polisi, President, The Juilliard School

ABQ: The First Fifty Years (continued from page 1)

snowy December 11, 1960 an audience at New York's 92nd Street Y heard the Quintet's debut, works of Byrd, Gabrieli and Holborne. Real chamber music for brass.



While players whirled in and out a revolving door, that original ABQ mission took hold. They started compiling a repertory from the Renaissance, the Golden Age of Brass. Fromme among others had experience in the New York Pro Musica and other period-instrument groups, which informed their performance practice on modern instruments. Since transcriptions were never part of the ABQ mix, the group struck out to commission works for a second Golden Age of Brass. Charles Whittenberg produced *Triptych* in 1962, the first of nearly 200 such works. Some composers, notably Eric Ewazen, have an ongoing ABQ relationship, writing multiple pieces. "I love that they are chamber musicians, and they want that kind of music—with solos and contrapuntal writing," he says. David Sampson, who first wrote for the ABQ in 1986, says, "I liked that they were the bass trombone quintet...because the timbre is a continuous line from the trumpets all the way down." That was exactly the idea—bass trombone, not tuba, suited the idiom.

With a well-laid foundation, the building started. By 1965 personnel stabilized with trumpeters John Eckert and eighteen-year-old Gerard Schwarz and hornist Edward Birdwell joining Fromme and bass trombonist Robert Biddlecome. The earliest reviews glowed: "...gifted performers, expert ensemble...[they] do everything but blow the walls out..." (The New York Times). "But we felt that we had to have a recording," says Biddlecome, a member from 1963 until his

retirement in 1991. And two Folkways releases did raise their profile, as did an eight-week European tour in 1967. "That's when we really got our motors going," says Birdwell, remembering reactions. "They'd never seen five guys come out and play a two-hour concert ranging from the fourteenth century to the latest hot thing. It blew their minds that anybody could sustain such a concert."

Did a musical style or ABQ sound develop? Yes and no. Gerry Schwarz, who went on to have a fine conducting career, says, "We had perfection as a goal." And he contributed mightily, along with a lot of midnight rehearsals, to reach it. Composer Ingolf Dahl, hearing a live broadcast of his own *Music for Brass Instruments* (1944), fired off a fan letter: "...I would never have thought such breath-taking virtuosity and refinement of brass playing possible. It was music making of the highest order." Virgil Thomson once said, "...these boys are a lot of fun to write for because they can do things other people can't... I love the sound they make, and I would say they are the best in the business." The "boys" never tried to match sounds when auditioning new members. "It's always been part of our philosophy that the best person is a combination of an excellent player and someone who identifies with who we are and what we do," says Raymond Mase, trumpeter since 1973. That worked. John Rojak, Biddlecome's successor, says, "Bob has such a legacy, establishing bass trombone as a crucial quintet ele-

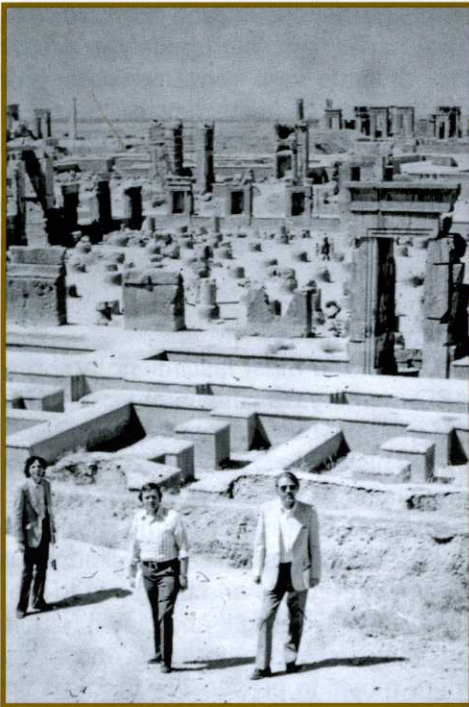


ABQ and faculty of the Beijing Conservatory on ABQ's first tour of China in 1982 marking the first American brass ensemble to perform in China.

ment. But Bob and I are very different players. The group looks for an elegant sound, without sacrificing the brilliance of brass, but not in your face, like French wine as opposed to big California Cabs." Critics have praised their stable personality. Andrew Porter, of *The New Yorker*, reviewed the 1974 Elliott Carter *Brass Quintet* premiere, then heard it

again a decade later, after three personnel changes, and said, "...the ensemble's performance [has become] even more lyrical, confident and nuanced."

Two residencies reinforce music-making—at the Aspen Music Festival and School (since 1970) and at The Juilliard School (since 1987). "Aspen keeps us together year-round," says David Wakefield, hornist since 1976. "We touch a wide range of students there, and a fair number who go on to university teaching remember their excellent training and will book us for a mini-residency to give that experience to their students. Also we have had opportunities to work more intensively with composers." David Sampson, whose *Strata*, commissioned with a National Endowment for the Arts grant, they premiered at Aspen in 1999, says, "We have an exhilarating give and take. They can play the most difficult brass music, and they make an extraordinary commitment to living with a piece."



Exploring other cultures has been integral to ABQ's touring. Above Raymond Mase, Herbert Rankin, and Robert Biddlecome explore ancient Persepolis on a 1976 tour in Iran.



ABQ's formal photo from 1998 when Kevin Cobb became the newest member of the quintet. Standing l to r: Raymond Mase, John D. Rojak, Kevin Cobb, Michael Powell. Seated: David Wakefield. Photo: Peter Schaaf

"And Juilliard, just the prestige of the name associated with the ABQ, is an extraordinary endorsement of our role in the chamber music field," says Mase. The School's president Joseph Polisi, says, "With the ABQ appointment there was an immediate growth of student ensembles. Chamber music is an essential part of any musician's training. The ABQ introduced Baroque brass playing to Juilliard. And now brass players will be meshing with our new historical performance program." For its 2006 centennial, Juilliard commissioned *Copperwave* from Joan Tower, which has become the most requested work in the ABQ touring repertoire.

The ABQ has toured all fifty states and five continents (twenty-nine weeks in 1968 set the record). The US State Department sent them to Asia and to South America. They were the first American brass ensemble to perform in China. But touring has taken a few new turns with the guidance of Todd Stanton, manager since 1991. "Todd is not just our manager, he's our best friend," says Michael Powell, tenor trombonist since 1983. Stanton says, "The mini-residencies have really taken off—over a hundred venues in seven countries." Stanton also linked them with composer/jazz pianist Billy Childs who wrote *Two Elements*, a work which he and the Quintet toured. And for their com-



The ABQ in 2001 on Charles Bridge, Prague. (l to r) David Wakefield, Kevin Cobb, Raymond Mase, Michael Powell, John D. Rojak.

missioning of emerging composers, he found grant support from the Jerome Foundation.

Ray Mase says, "In fifty years we've never been awarded big prizes or had our picture on the cover of fancy music magazines. We have quietly stuck to our guns and brought forth many important pieces—and done so with integrity and commitment." "Since joining [in 1998] I have been struck by the consistency of purpose, no matter the membership," says trumpeter Kevin Cobb. "Our mission is bigger than any individual, so it's easy to imagine that on the hundredth anniversary the group will be continuing to celebrate its dedication to serious brass chamber music. Let's hope someone reading this will be attending that concert."

ABQ Memories

Edited by Kevin Cobb

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary, we thought it might be interesting for our readers to hear what we, the members of the ABQ, feel are some of our favorite memories as we look back. Obviously, none of us was around at the very beginning, but we've compiled a short little segment to make note of a few special moments from each member. As hard as it was to select only a few memories, we think what follows will provide a nice picture of what stands out over the years.

Michael Powell

I have been in the American Brass Quintet for 27 years. I consider myself an extraordinarily lucky trombonist. Even after so many years in the same seat, it is still a great thrill for me to perform in this wonderful ensemble. I auditioned on December 30, 1982. My first performance with the American Brass Quintet was January 29, 1983 at the Arts Club of Chicago. We played works of Bertali, Holborne, the *Americana Suite*, two fugues by J.S. Bach, and the Suite of William Lovelock. Musically and personally, I felt very much at home in the ABQ from the beginning. There have been many memorable and rewarding experiences with the ABQ. Being a participant in the premieres of so many great works written for the ABQ by composers of our time is something in which I take much pride. Working directly with and befriending these composers makes it all the better. One of the greatest rewards was the beginning of the Juilliard residency in 1987, which did as much as anything to validate our *raison d'être*.

Actually, I will never forget a very special summer ABQ performance (c. 1985) of Jacob Druckman's *Dark Upon the Harp* (for mezzo-soprano, brass quintet and percussion) in

which he conducted and the soloist was Jan DeGaetani. That performance fortunately is preserved on a compact disc of Jan's work from Bridge Records. Both artists were among the greatest, mezzo-soprano and composer, and they are missed. Another performance I will not forget is when we played the Elliott Carter *Brass Quintet* at Avery Fisher Hall in the middle '80s, as part of the New Horizons Festival. Interestingly, Jake Druckman was running that show as well.

Raymond Mase

One of the most fascinating and rewarding times in my ABQ memory was the summer of 1974, my second year in the group, when we worked with Elliott Carter as he composed his *Brass Quintet* for us. Here we were "stuck" in the mountains of Aspen, Colorado for our summer residency with Elliott Carter as Aspen's composer in residence writing for us. It was amazing. Elliott would compose a short fragment of music and bring it in to the group. We'd spend a few days working it and play it for him. He'd listen, make adjustments and before the end of that session, give us more music to prepare for the next time. I still remember the excitement each and every time we met with him and got new music. Eventually Elliott provided a "key" so that the 19 sections of the piece could be woven together into the one continuous work just before the end of summer. With some careful cutting and pasting, we all had our parts put together in time for the September premiere for the BBC in London. It was a summer to remember.

My favorite ABQ travel episode seems particularly relevant today with the ongoing problems musicians have with carrying instruments on board flights. We were headed out of Kennedy Airport for San Francisco on a Pan American 747. The plane was late arriving from London and ultimately bound for Asia. We've always carried our instruments on board with us, but this time there was a snag. Not only were they telling us at the gate that they wouldn't let us bring the instruments on board, but all the checked baggage was containerized—if we didn't check the instruments immediately, they would not be able to be checked later on. We decided we'd take our chances—if we couldn't find a way to stow them in the cabin, we'd simply get off the plane and probably have to cancel our concert. I remember the group's anxiety as we hurried down the ramp to get on board. But then just as we entered the plane came a voice—"Hello Mr. Biddlecome—how are you?" It was Evelyn David—a piano student for two years at Aspen and PanAm flight attendant. Bob said, "Am I glad to see you. We have a problem." Bob quickly explained our problem and Evelyn said calmly "Come with me, I'll take care of it." When the gate attendants arrived a few minutes later (and after finding a cabin closet to take care of the instruments) we were sipping champagne and having a friendly chat with Evelyn about our wonderful Aspen summers. Not sure the gate attendants ever really found out where the instruments disappeared to, but for once we



Oracle Brass Quintet - Fellowship Quintet 2010

(left to right) Malcolm Williamson, Michael Blair, Jay Villella, Emily Schroeder, and Jonathan Heim

The Oracle Brass Quintet was the ABQ/Aspen Music Festival fellowship brass quintet for 2010. The group appeared with the ABQ in Aspen and Salida, and also played several recitals of their own over the course of the eight weeks in Aspen.

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