

American Brass Quintet

FIFTIETH SEASON

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New s letter

Still Leading at 50?

By Raymond Mase



Recently a question came up at one of our master classes on tour that got me to thinking about the gentle aging of the ABQ as an ensemble. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't have thought all that much about it, but with the 50th anniversary at our doorstep, it seemed particularly relevant. The question went something like, "Why does the ABQ con-

tinue to do things the way it always has, when the brass field has changed so much? We've heard that type of question before, but this time it seemed less about recognizing what we've accomplished over the years, and more about why we didn't seem up to speed with the rest of the brass world. I chuckled to myself as I flashed on the Newsweek quote from some years ago calling us "the high priests of brass"—clearly this young brass player made it seem as if he thought we were more like the dinosaurs than the high priests. But I answered the question patiently and thoroughly by talking about how when the group was founded in 1960, the idea of a serious brass chamber music ensemble was a new concept. Presenters and audiences questioned how a brass quintet would be more than a novelty with such limited repertoire. The ABQ founders met the challenge head on by not only bringing forth the most viable brass music from the past but by making a firm and ongoing commitment to getting the most reputable contemporary composers to write for them. I referred to the classic statement made by former ABQ trumpeter Chris Gekker twenty years ago saying that he found it ironic that the more we had stayed the same, the more different we had become. Yes, thirty years ago a good number of brass quintets began building their reputations by playing lighter repertoire, but the ABQ never saw that as its mission and therefore, never saw any reason to adjust its programming.

My answer to this student's question was clear enough and fine for the class, but I found myself thinking about it more and more over the next few days. After all, the group has done much the same thing for all of its fifty year histo-

... Continued on page 2

More on the Inside:

New Sprouts in an Old Forest	3
Remembering Arnold Fromme.	4
Hardy Oaks Among New Sprouts	7

Rojak on the Road - 2009

By John Rojak

Being frequent travelers, we in the American Brass Quintet can report on one aspect of a bad economy that's not so terrible. With airlines on the brink of bankruptcy, suddenly there were low fares, empty seats, and personnel who treated passengers as if they were human. Our travel experience throughout last season bordered on pleasant (will this make for a boring Rojak on the Road? I'll do my best to not let that happen) and we arrived at all our venues complete with luggage and instruments, ready for chamber music.

The season began at home, in Merkin Hall near Lincoln Center. Joan Tower was celebrating her 70th birthday with a concert and had invited several groups to perform some of her pieces on the first half. For the second half, she solicited a member of each ensemble who was not a composer to write a piece for her. Being extremely qualified as a non-composer, I became ABQ's chosen one and came up with my first brass quintet. I was a bit surprised that I was the only one to name my piece "Tower



ABQ performed for Joan Tower's 70th Birthday concert. Photo courtesy Noah Sheldon.

Music" but perhaps that's a brass player's awareness. The concert was hysterical—Paul Neubauer wrote a solo viola piece titled, "Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy," Yossi Kalichstein drew on submissions from dead composers to compile a happy birthday medley in the styles of Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach, and my piece had a main theme of "Happy Birthday" backwards, followed by film score quotes from "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," "RoboCop," and "The Running Man." (Coincidentally, the television was on while I was composing.) At intermission, three musicians from eighth blackbird were practicing their trio diligently, trying to learn their very difficult parts. I mentioned to them that my quintet was written in such a style that any rehearsal

... Continued on page 5

Still Leading at 50?

(continued from page 1)

ry—perhaps there really are all kinds of things that have passed us by without our noticing. So I began to examine our operation from top to bottom with an eye toward making sure we hadn't gradually slipped out of touch with the mainstream of brass activity. I considered the question of whether the ABQ's view of modern brass chamber music truly remains at the forefront today. Have we lost sight of progress and innovation?

Since the question was raised at a master class, I first took a look at our approach to education and whether we're keeping up. Our Juilliard and Aspen residencies are the centerpiece of our educational mission and have served as the model for what we offer on our touring mini-residencies. The ABQ Seminar at Juilliard is now more than twenty years old, the Aspen residency over forty. Not much has changed with either program. Are they still providing the brass chamber music training required in the field today? In both cases the programs are remarkably strong and vital. At Juilliard, in addition to traditional coaching, we meet for ten seminars a year with all the brass students to play for each other, talk about our performance objectives, invite guest performers and ensembles to meet with the class, and explore all facets of life as a serious chamber ensemble. If professional placement after graduation is any indicator of a program's success and relevance, then the fact that our graduates hold positions with the Meridian Arts Ensemble, Atlantic, Canadian, Empire and Manhattan Brass, and even with the ABQ, is a pretty glowing endorsement. Little has changed with how we do things because little has needed to be changed. And while the ABQ/Aspen brass program is designed differently to suit the needs of this busy and diverse summer festival, we've still managed year after year to find a way to integrate brass chamber music into the unique orchestral training offered at Aspen.

Even with the confidence my examination gave me in the validity of our educational work, the proof of the pudding still has to be in ABQ's commitment to its mission of performing, recording and promoting serious brass chamber music. Looking at our touring repertoire over the years is as good an indication as any of what music we consider most important to program. During this current touring season we are continuing our long-standing tradition of programming Renaissance and other historical brass music, but also playing four pieces by living composers—three of

them, by Shafer Mahoney. David Sampson and Eric Ewazen, written for the ABQ. A veteran concert-goer at a recent ABQ performance of this program in North Carolina commented to me afterwards that he had no idea that modern brass music had this kind of depth and variety. In fact, the ABQ has prided itself in the performance of its own commissions for decades. Chatting with Pulitzer-prize winning composer Melinda Wagner several years ago I was pleased and surprised to learn that our then 40+ performances of her Brass Quintet (written for us) made it by far her most frequently performed work. But the ABQ commitment to our new works doesn't stop with performances—indeed over the past two decades, the ABQ has released

an impressive list of recordings of just over 30 works written for the ABQ. Next year instead of a pat-on-the-back historical compilation recording in celebration of our 50th anniversary, the ABQ will release a compact disc of eleven works written for us since the year 2000. Just for the record that's over forty pieces that are now available to the brass world in the last two decades that might not exist had it not been for the ABQ. Add to that the work our board and management team does behind the scenes in

securing the necessary funding to support all of this, and the old adage "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" sure comes to mind time after time. Looking at the whole picture—performance, recording and education—I'm finding myself pretty convinced that this 50 year-old group is really far from the old stuck-in-the-mud ABQ that I feared I might discover.

I wish I could thank that student out there for his question that made me take such a close and necessary look at the ABQ's place in the field. In fact, there truly is a lot of the same "old" ABQ now at 50 as there has always been, but instead of the brass field having sped by without us noticing, I think they might still be in our rear view mirror. ■



The American Brass Quintet
(left to right) David Wakefield, Raymond Mase,
John D. Rojak, Michael Powell, Kevin Cobb (Photo: Peter Schaaf)

50TH
ANNIVERSARY
1960 - 2010

New Sprouts in an Old Forest

By Kevin Cobb

This year has been a trying year for most of the country financially. One can hardly turn on a radio or TV without hearing about troubling financial news. The arts, of course, are not immune and there are real concerns about how this will affect the chamber music scene. It seems very true that many series are seeing a down turn in support or a reluctance in annual giving. Many larger institutions witnessed severe hits on their endowments as the stock market tumbled. Our summer home, the Aspen Music Festival and School faced both these predicaments and faced decisions about drastic cuts. Orchestras all over the country are being asked (or forced) to reopen contracts in a desperate attempt by the management to find ways to save money. It is most certainly a difficult time for the arts and a period that some have described viewing the larger picture as historic. Only time will tell how things will resolve, but I think we can all agree that the arts environment has certainly changed. For the ABQ it is no different but I do want to illuminate a few bright spots for us that recently emerged against the backdrop of fear and bad news. There is also one big component that I see as positive not only for the ABQ but also for others in the arts.



ABQ in Aiken, South Carolina

First, we were fortunate to be associated with three inaugural events in 2009. In March, the quintet was invited to play in Aiken, SC as a part of a newly developed residency entitled, Juilliard in Aiken. This five day festival, collaborating with The Juilliard School, took place at a wonderful restored mansion called the Joye Cottage. This sixty-room, 19th-century former Whitney-Vanderbilt seasonal home, owned by Pulitzer Prize-winning authors Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, was bequeathed to the Juilliard School in 1996 as a retreat for future generations of Juilliard students, faculty and alumni. Mr. Naifeh and Mr. Smith wanted to establish a relationship with the school that would bring the artistry of Juilliard down to Aiken and we were honored to be asked to participate in the inaugural celebration. Along with us, members of the jazz division, vocal arts, and the Biava string quartet came down to make several days of

... Continued on page 4

News Nuggets

- The ABQ's Aspen Music Festival recital on July 30th featured world premieres by Shafer Mahoney and David Sampson. For Sampson's double quintet *Chants and Flourishes*, written in honor of the ABQ's 50th anniversary, the ABQ was joined by the Atticus Brass, the 2009 Aspen Festival fellowship brass quintet.
- The ABQ was the featured ensemble at the inauguration of two new brass festivals this year—the Chicago Brass Festival directed by Travis Heath at Northeastern Illinois University and the Midwest Trumpet Festival hosted by Todd Hastings at Pittsburg State University. Both festivals attracted students, professionals and brass enthusiasts locally and from nearby states.
- Nolan Gasser's *GLAST Prelude*, Op. 12, recorded by the ABQ in conjunction with the launch and scientific mission of GLAST: The Gamma Ray Large Area Space Telescope, was performed live along with the accompanying video produced by NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center on November 2nd at the Kennedy Center in Washington. The concert, titled *Cosmic Reflection*, was produced by Classical Archives. The Washington Examiner called the ABQ's performance "superb."
- In celebration of Roger Murtha's 45 years as trumpet professor at the Hart School of Music, the ABQ appeared in recital and in performance with the Hart Wind Ensemble on October 29 & 30. Roger Murtha was Ray Mase's teacher in the late 1960s while Ray was enrolled in Hart's pre-college program. Since the fall of 2008, Kevin Cobb has served along with Murtha on Hart's faculty.
- The ABQ performed as part of the first annual Juilliard at Aiken event in Aiken South Carolina on March 10. Hosted by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith at their home, the Joye Cottage, the ABQ played an afternoon lawn concert as well as a workshop for high school brass players earlier in the day.
- The recording session for *Cornopean Airs*, written for the ABQ with organist Colin Fowler by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Paul Moravec, is scheduled for early December at the Central Synagogue in New York City where the work was premiered in December of 2005. *Cornopean Airs* is the final work to be recorded for the ABQ's 50th anniversary recording slated for release next year. The recording of this work has been made possible by the Gabe Weiner Foundation.



Atticus Brass - Fellowship Quintet 2009

Scott Holben, horn; Achilles Liarmakopoulos, trombone;
Beith Wiese, tuba; Michael Brest and
Douglas Lindsey, trumpets

The Atticus Brass was the ABQ/Aspen Music Festival fellowship brass quintet for 2009. The group appeared with the ABQ in Aspen and Salida, and also played several recitals of their own over the course of the nine weeks in Aspen.

New Sprouts in an old Forest (continued from Page 3)

wonderful music at their glorious home as well as in the community of Aiken. The mission of outreach along with traditional performance is a mission we share, of course. The afternoon of our performance was a typically glorious day for early spring in South Carolina. We even had an inflatable shell that, despite our early reservations, worked perfectly for the outdoor performance on the great lawn outside of the house. The hosts were most gracious and we hope that with their efforts, the continued spread of classical arts takes on new life down there.

The next two events that we participated in were multi-day festivals that took place at Universities. The first back in the spring was the Chicago Brass Festival at Northeastern Illinois University. Travis Heath, a Rutgers University trumpet alumnus and friend of the ABQ, recently became assistant professor there and quickly began working on organizing this first ever event for the school. Besides being a wonderful trumpet player, Travis is very talented organizer and the weekend was a rousing success. We were honored to be a featured group and other notable artists were the brass quintet of the President's Own Marine Band, Travis's own Brassroots Trio, and the Chicago Brass Band. Along with a solo competition for students, master classes, and instrument and music vendors, the whole weekend was well thought out and the strong attendance and positive response assured that he will have pressure to make this an annual event. Indeed, the 2010 Chicago Brass Festival is already planned for March 19-21.



Pittsburg State's "Gus" supports the ABQ

The other similar event was this fall the Midwest Trumpet Festival, hosted by our longtime friend and Aspen alum Todd Hastings at Pittsburg State University, KS. This weekend, also a first of its kind at the school, featured several days that brought trumpeters from far and wide. The mission was to gather leading performers, educators, students, and the community for education sessions, master classes, recitals, and con-

certs. Being a gifted lead trumpeter, Todd brought together talent from both the classical and jazz arenas to ensure that the young trumpeters had plenty offered to them. Seeing as our paths frequently cross with Todd at big, "professionally" hosted trumpet related events like ITG, he surely had a good idea of what effort it takes to pull this off. But his weekend turned out as nice as any we've been to and we were honored to be a featured group. The success of these types of events can only be done by sheer will power of the hosts. And again, with the current financial market, we applaud the tenacity of both Travis and Todd to make these festivals happen successfully. Our congratulations to both!

... Continued on page 5

Arnold Fromme 1925 - 2008

by Michael Powell



The ABQ family mourns the passing, on December 23, 2008, of Arnold Fromme. He was a founder and the original tenor trombonist of the American Brass Quintet for its first ten years.

Arnold Fromme was born in Brooklyn on Dec. 21, 1925. He graduated from Juilliard and received his Ph. D. from Columbia University. He continued his studies at the Berkshire Music

Center, the American School at Fontainebleau, and the Paris Conservatory. He served in the United States Army during World War II from 1944 to 1945. As a trombonist, he was a prominent free-lance player and notably was a member of the New York Pro Musica, one of the first ensembles in the U.S. dedicated to the performance of early music on original instruments.

In 1958, Fromme and another trombonist, Gil Cohen, organized a sextet called the American Brass Ensemble, which was the progenitor of the American Brass Quintet. The ABQ had its first public concert on December 11, 1960, at the 92nd Street YMHA. The official "debut" concert was at Carnegie Recital Hall on November 20, 1962.

Arnold Fromme's objectives in founding the American Brass Quintet remain intact. We honor his memory by preserving the original mission of the ABQ: Bridging the gap between modern composers of brass chamber music and audiences and bringing to light music of the past written for the ancestors of our modern instruments. ■

American Brass Quintet

Raymond Mase & Kevin Cobb, trumpets
David Wakefield, horn
Michael Powell, trombone
John D. Rojak, bass trombone

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Rojak on the Road

(continued from Page 2)

was unnecessary!

Our touring began a couple of weeks later with a trip to the Midwest. First to Houghton, Michigan, then to De Pere, Wisconsin, for concerts and classes. Houghton became one of those places that we remember for its name. We had played in Houghton, NY last year, so the coincidental name was fresh in our memories. (Perhaps not as unusual as playing two towns named Berea (Kentucky and Ohio) in the same season, but equal to our tour of Greenville, NC followed by Greenville, SC.) In any case, our venue in Houghton was at a top engineering school whose musicians were non-majors. Master classes with that type of audience can be the most stimulating for us, producing unique and insightful questions that get us thinking in different ways. Once I was playing for engineers in Iowa and where two such questions were posed to me. The first, "what kind of maintenance do you have to do on that thing?" and the second, "when you move the slide towards you, do you have to adjust your breath to allow for the change in airflow?" gave me pause and reason to examine the science involved in our craft. We had a similar experience with the students in Houghton and learned a little more about the correlation of physics and music.

While in Houghton I had managed to take a hike to lovely Hungarian Falls and took a photo that became the wallpaper on my cell phone. The drive from northern Michigan to De Pere was beautiful too, as it was during peak foliage. We were told that soon all would be buried under mountains of snow, so we were pleased to be there in the fall and witness such an array of color.

After a runout to Rice in Houston, noteworthy mostly for the most torrential downpour in ABQ memory, we were back in the Midwest in November. It had been quite a long time since we performed at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, but we remembered it very well. It's a great music school with a wonderful tradition of choral music. Our old friends Marty Hodel and Paul Niemesto, the trumpet and trombone professors took great care of us. We gained a few pounds dining out with Marty and having a feast at Paul's home, and the cold rain kept us from walking it off in the cute downtown. Their music fraternity has a tradition of hosting guest artists to a breakfast, which led to drowning the previous evening's repast with pancakes and eggs. We departed for the airport with big smiles and pot bellies.

Leaving Minnesota on Sunday morning to make a concert in Louisville, Kentucky by 3 pm created a little stress, especially for the presenters. We considered not being completely forthcoming with our travel quandary, but in case things did not happen as planned we decided to let them in the loop. I had found a nonstop flight which landed in Louisville around 1:15 which I felt was a better idea than taking an earlier connecting flight. Too many missed con-

... Continued on page 6

New Sprouts in an old Forest (continued from Page 4)



Kevin Cobb and student during a masterclass at Baylor University. Photo: Wiff Rudd.

Finally, I want to speak about our own touring for last year and this fall. As I said earlier, the landscape has certainly changed financially. On our end, manager Todd Stanton has again showcased his impressive talent for grant writing as he has secured ongoing funding for our touring from the National Endowment for the Arts. Indeed, so many places we played this past year made a point telling us that our residency was only possible due to the fact that NEA was providing financial help. These grants enable Todd to offer the ABQ at more flexible fees without breaking the (now rather restricted) bank. Conversely, we are able to sustain a regular pay scale for us which means that everyone wins. But I bring this up because help from the NEA has absolutely made a difference for us in our survival, particularly this year. And I believe others have received similar help from the NEA as well. One can certainly argue that in this time of severe financial difficulty, the arts can be seen as frivolous and possibly even wasteful. But others will counter with a rebuttal that it is indeed these times that require a greater attention to the arts. In fact, people often need the arts more in times like these than during more fruitful periods. If we value arts in this country, we should be happy that the NEA is doing its part to insure that arts survive this tough time. We are tremendously thankful for their support, and indebted to our manager for securing these types of grants for us. In a business that, even when running "normal" can feel like it's shrinking, we have been fortunate to find these new sprouts in an old and seemingly vanishing forest. ■

Rojak on the Road

(continued from Page 5)

nections over the years have spooked us from those, yet an arrival less than 2 hours before our first notes did not put our presenters at ease! We were met at the airport, led to the venue, and comfortably changed and warmed up by our downbeat. We celebrated our good fortune at a snazzy downtown brew pub after the concert, all of us welcoming a beer and a tasty meal on a night free. The coup de grace of the evening was our middle aged quintet being asked for ID before we got our drinks.

From Louisville, we had a leisurely trip to Utah for a 3 day residency at Brigham Young University in Provo. That completed our Tour de BYU, having previously performed at their campuses in Rexburg, Idaho and on Oahu, Hawaii. Whoever chooses locations for BYU sure knows how to pick 'em! Provo is as beautiful a spot as any, nestled between Uinta National Forest and Utah Lake. I made sure to grab a hike in the foothills close to campus, walking



Another great photographic landscape from John Rojak. This time it is from Rock Canyon, Provo, Utah.

through a fresh sprinkling of snow in Rock Canyon and thinking of my favorite aspect of our ABQ residency in Aspen. On the journey down hill I met a local retired man who kept me entertained with stories of the local legacies, the region's geology, and some Mormon lore. It was an unexpected pleasure and reinforced what makes traveling so rewarding. Occasionally, we'll encounter someone at random and they'll wind up at our concert. Any way we can win new fans of brass chamber music is great, as far as we're concerned.

The remainder of the season was pretty quiet. Monroe (pronounced with emphasis on the first syllable) in Louisiana allowed us to experience some delicious local fare for lunch. We always try to seek out regional specialties rather than settling for generic chains and in this case were glad to find Ponchatoulas. Fried shrimp, fried catfish, fried hush puppies--I imagine we could have had fried pie

and fried ice cream, too. What doesn't taste good fried? Also glad to have only one meal there without a tailor ready to alter our suits!

In the spring, we were able to spend a couple of days in Aiken, South Carolina at Joye Cottage. Kevin refers to this trip in his article and I would like to add what a great experience it was. A few of us were treated to a 2 hour tour of the art in the Cottage which covered about half of their museum quality collection. I highly recommend reading the book the owners Greg Smith and Steven Naifeh wrote about their restoration project—"On a Street Called Easy, in a Cottage Called Joye." It's a very funny account of their trials of construction and the cultural differences between Northerners and Southerners.

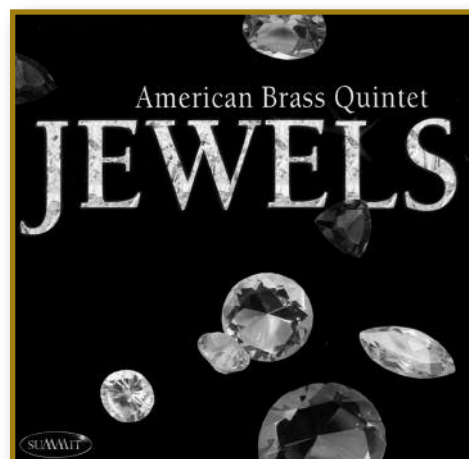
A trip to Durango bisected our summer in Aspen and put a nice finishing touch on a stress free season. The drive between those Rocky Mountain resorts is one of the most stunningly beautiful in the U.S. From Aspen, we passed Mt. Sopris, drove through the great farmlands of Paonia and Delta, past Ouray into the San Juan range which then wound through mountain roads into Durango. On the way back, I took advantage of the situation to stop in Silverton and Telluride, two amazing small Rocky Mountain resort towns.

Performing brass music certainly can have its perks, and we're looking forward to more of the kinds we had during the 49th season, regardless of the economy. Being able to experience the beauty, grandeur, and even the quirks of our country is a privilege we cherish. See you on the road!

Of *Jewels*, the ABQ's most recent recording, reviewer Barry Kilpatrick wrote:

"This album reinforces my admiration for the American Brass Quintet. There are times when they take more risks, play more fluently, express deeper thoughts, and make complexity more coherent than any brass ensemble I have heard."

American Record Guide, Jan/Feb 2008



Hardy Oaks Among New Sprouts

By Todd Stanton

The newsletter this fall contains more than a few passing references to the economic challenges facing the chamber music world. Kevin Cobb elsewhere writes about three new sprouts in the musical forest that are most welcome additions. There are also some quite hardy oaks in this forest which are worth mentioning as inspiration and examples for others.

Pro Musica (Joplin, MO) was founded in 1981 with the mission to foster interest in, appreciation for, and enjoyment of classical music in Joplin and the surrounding four-state area. The organization also provides educational outreach and enrichment to the local schools. All of this free of ticket charges! It is no surprise that the series has been a success considering their very first concert presented a brass quintet (St. Louis Brass Quintet featuring former ABQ member Allan Dean). ABQ's recent visits to Joplin (2006 and 2009) always spark quintet comment about the large, eager audiences and the rapt attention of young people at the educational events. Hats are off to founder Cynthia Schwab and Executive Director Bonnie Yetter.

A major southern state university, which requested not to be identified, faced rather severe funding curtailment for its chamber music series for 2009-10 despite having a relatively new and tremendous chamber music concert hall. Private and business contributors of the series have generously provided additional contributions nearly equal to the state funding cuts. This shows an example of a university/community partnership that truly is a partnership. The Dean of the school is uncertain how long the community side of the partnership can maintain the increased funding but remains optimistic.

The Neskowin Friends of Music is nestled on the Oregon coast in Tillamook County about 90 miles from Portland. The unincorporated village lists a population of 170 people, a general store, a restaurant, and two golf courses. Tillamook County's estimated population is 25,000. Amidst this setting which ABQ has described as idyllic, the Friends of Music present a concert series in Winema Chapel featuring nationally and internationally renown artists who invariably play to sold out audiences (who pay very moderate admission fees).

Travelling north of the US/Canada border you find Virtuosi Concerts in Winnipeg operated by artistic director Harry Strub. Virtuosi Concerts presents 12 concerts per season (plus a festival) in this artistically vibrant city. The series is hoping to move to double concerts in order to accommodate patron demand for tickets.

What do these four series have in common? Among several common attributes are dedicated groups of individuals assuring their continuation, strong private and local business partnerships, affordable ticket prices, and, dare it be said, no particular aversion to music written after 1950, the latter being a lesson still lost upon much of the symphonic world. ■

Recent Grants and Contributions

Among recent major grants to the American Brass Chamber Music Association, Inc. are:

- \$17,500 National Endowment for the Arts toward the mini-residency program on tour 2009-10.
- \$6,000 Gabe Weiner Foundation toward the 50th anniversary recording.
- \$10,000 Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust toward the 50th anniversary recording.

Your contributions to the American Brass Chamber Music Association provide support for composer commissions, recordings, and more!

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Your contribution is tax deductible as allowed by law.

ABQ Emerging Composer Commissioning Program

The next round of ABQ's emerging composer commissioning program has a deadline of January 1, 2010. Please visit www.AmericanBrassQuintet.org and click on Commission for details of the program. The Emerging Composer Commissioning Program received its initial funding from The Jerome Foundation of St. Paul, MN and has so far awarded commissions to Gordon Beferman, Shafer Mahoney and Trevor Gureckis.



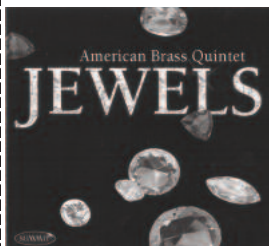
Gordon Beferman discusses his new work in an ABQ seminar at Juilliard

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