

Annapolis Brass Quintet Final Concert: 1993

Good evening. My name is John Bell. On behalf of Brass Maryland, I would like to welcome you to our last concert.

I ask that you look carefully at your printed program. There are some special things there. These include a separate sheet you may use to make a gift to the Baltimore School for the Arts in honor of the Annapolis Brass Quintet. If you like what the Quintet has done, if you want to do something of your own that furthers the Quintet's long commitment to education, here is your opportunity.

To say that tonight is a sad occasion encompasses much truth, but misses the good things we will experience and remember. Better, let us simply say that it is a unique occasion. Its like will not come again.

Our custom has been to begin these concerts with a brief talk on architecture. We will continue that tradition tonight but with a difference. For the subject is architecture, not of a building but of a chamber music ensemble, a brass quintet, specifically the Annapolis Brass Quintet.

In your programs, you will find some of the external manifestations of this Quintet --the 22 years of performances, the concerts in every state of the Union and repeated tours abroad, from Spain to Sri Lanka, the more than 1,000 educational concerts and the many workshops for young and old, the nurturing of other brass quintets in this country and abroad, the summer festivals here in Baltimore over the past dozen years, the sixteen recordings, the more than seventy-five world premieres, the pioneering and hard work that won it a reputation as one of the world's finest chamber music ensembles.

Please read of these things and take note of them. But what I would like to discuss is not so much what you see and hear as how the Quintet was put together and some of the things that have made it work.

Let's begin with two basic parts of the structure, its founding members. They were once musicians in one of the professional service bands, the Naval Academy Band. While still there they began thinking about what a brass quintet might do, measuring the possibilities, sometimes performing with others as a quintet, and, finally, daring to begin. One of these founders, a man with a trumpet, David Cran, can be seen at tonight's concert sitting on your left as you face the group. The other, Robert -- "Rip" -- Posten, is usually in the middle. If you look at the photos in your program, you will realize that he is much easier to pick out today than he was in the 1970's when the performers were all male and often came with beards appended.

Some of the other parts of the quintet structure were developed in the summer of 1971 at a Lake Placid, New York music camp. There were five brass players who had hired themselves out in exchange for room and board. The head of the camp was not so sure that it was a good bargain, because she complained that her brass quintet ate too much.

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But they were getting the experience they needed, not all of it at the camp. They went to a town on the lake and offered to perform free concerts. They were accepted and rewarded with audience approval that, sometimes, was put into tangible form and dropped into a bucket they brought with them. On the basis of this success, they went to another town with the same offer, and then another.

Still lacking was the necessary ingredient of press coverage. They approached local newspapers in the towns where they were giving concerts. "Sorry, but we don't have anyone on our staff that does music reviews." "Well, that's not really a problem," they replied. "if you will run reviews, we will supply them." And it seems that the reviews they produced were, on the whole, quite favorable.

By the end of the summer, then, most of the elements were in place. Some questions of personnel had been worked out. They had experience. They even had materials for a press packet.

But they were still just five musicians.

There was not yet an aesthetic combination, the bringing of disparate parts into the unity that we associate with high art.

Those who have followed the Quintet know that there is a unity in the programs they have presented, even though the location and audiences may have varied widely. There is a unity in their onstage presence, a personal style. I have no single word for it, but see it as a blending, a trinity, of wit, grace and humility.

And there is unity in performance, a subordinating of the individual to a group effort as five possible very different interpretations of a musical composition are combined into one.

How does this unity come about?

Well, for one thing, a group may begin to come together as a unit through shared experiences, shared risks and shared opportunities. The first European tour is to start in Spain. But Dictator Franco is dying and students will be demonstrating and rioting in the universities where the concerts are to be held. Well, so they may riot, but we are coming anyway.

No one shows up to pay the fees as the Quintet is about to leave Spain. Ah, but if you return on your way home, and come to such and such a hotel, at such and such a time, señor X will meet you with your money. Sure enough, there he is. And there too, just by chance, is an American musicologist who knows about some composers who might be of interest to the group, in fact, a whole family of Spanish composers, once famous but now forgotten, the Cabezones -- the same Cabezones whose works you will hear on tonight's program.

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Unity, encouraged by experience, can be promoted and protected by some prudent rules. On the first American tour, one member of the group always wants to sit in front. There is a rebellion. And for more than twenty years, it is a rule that seating changes on the hour, every two hours. Soon there are other rules.

Job assignments may encourage unity. At the beginning, in Europe, a passport is left on the subway -- but miraculously retrieved. In the future, then, one person will be in charge of seeing that passports are always at hand. The making of travel arrangements and other jobs are handed out -- and authority granted. For each task there is a czar -- or, much later, a czarina. One doesn't argue over their decrees because these are collateral things. Save the discussion for the music. That is what is central to the mission.

Finally, there is work -- rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. On tour, the program may be largely fixed. Particular compositions may be performed over and over. Do we still need to rehearse? We do.

From all these elements -- from shared experiences, rules, job assignments, long hours of rehearsing -- and arising beyond the unities of programming, of onstage style, and performance -- there emerges over time another unity -- a thing called the Annapolis Brass Quintet. It is not the five musicians that may be its members at any given time. It is something that exists apart from those members, that can lose and gain different musicians and yet remain essentially the same. It has its own traditions, its own imperatives, its own dedication to a musical cause.

When it all started, twenty-two years ago, those first five had to make a Quintet. They and their successors did just that. Because it is in large part a creation of mind and spirit, that Quintet will still exist, as a model, as a great achievement, as something many will long remember, even when, in a few days, the last five musicians go their independent ways.

But before that happens, before they go, let us hear the combination one more time. And so please welcome, for its final Baltimore concert, the Annapolis Brass Quintet.