

True North Brass OCA's concert tomorrow

By Constance Scrafield

Building up a repertoire for a brass quintet presents challenges that might not face other musical ensembles.

For one thing, there is not much music written specifically for brass quintets. Often, parts of large works feature the brass section of an orchestra or solos within the brass; there are marches for brass bands, boasting considerably more than five members; and there is lots of music for small groups of two to 10 instruments which might include some brass. Of compositions created for the brass quintet, they are truly few.

Nothing daunted, the members of the True North Brass quintet, coming to Orangeville to perform tomorrow (Friday), simply adapt. They arrange other music to fit their format and they modulate their playing to suit the music. It seems they are willing, in this way, to perform a wide assortment of music, from classical to jazz.

Established in 1997, the group has had changing membership, although two of the founding members remain: Al Kay, who is the chair of the Brass Department at Humber, plays for the Toronto Symphony and teaches at University of Toronto; and Scott Irvine, a prolific composer and arranger.

Since the creation of the ensemble, they have accrued an impressive list of engagements with choirs and individuals. They have toured North America extensively and they went to China as part of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's 1998 trade mission there.

As Richard Sandals, the trumpet player in the quintet, explained during a recent telephone interview, "We always focus on presenting our own repertoire, either written or arranged by a Canadian musician for us. For our concert (in Orangeville), we'll be playing some Bach and Mozart. The challenge is you want to, hopefully, present the piece in a way that suits the brass - something new, not just playing the piece. The first piece is originally a piano solo. When a piece has just one voice that becomes five, to a certain extent, we sound like one person: the difficulty of several voices in the music played by one person becomes simpler for many players."

Like many other musical ensembles, these individuals are busy with their own lives of performing and teaching. Christmas was naturally a very full time for symphony players, like Sandals, with Nutcracker, to which he admitted he owes a great deal.

"The Nutcracker pays the mortgage," he said, meaning for far more musicians than just himself. "We all love Nutcracker."

Throughout the years, the True North Brass ensemble work to fit their other schedules in with the opportunities being with the group offers. Having the chance to come to Orangeville in late January works well for performers and audience: there is a lull in the symphony and ballet schedules in the city and the concert in Orangeville can brighten a dark winter's evening for the audience here. We talked a bit about Sandals' own career. For him, it was all about meeting the right teachers at the right time.

"I started with piano," Sandals said. "My revenge was becoming a trumpet player in the school band in Grade 7."

"There is a long time (as we are learning) when we make terrible noises," he remarked somewhat humorously. "I had parents who could tolerate it."

"I lucked in with my teachers at the time. Later, I went to Western and then did a M.A. at Indiana University which was pivotal to me as a musician," he added. "I met the right teachers at the right time."

"The funny thing about a brass instrument - it's as much a head game as physical," he remarked. "With other instruments, you can see the keys or strings but with a brass, you can't see - the most important things are internal - (learning to play a brass) comes with images. You have to have the right teacher. It's just about having somebody whose ideas resonate with you."

As a teacher himself, he commented, "Really, it mostly gets said in the first lesson: you blow into the little end and noise comes out the other. The right teacher puts the words in exactly the right place; a great teacher made me see things for myself."

Of the pleasure in making music work for the quintet and vice versa, Sandals elaborated, "A piece written for orchestra has a huge pallet of colours - with an all brass ensemble, there's variety of red. The skill is playing the piece with the variety of colours. We don't have pieces written for us by Mozart or Beethoven. So, we have to adapt."

To hear the resulting fun, come and see the True North Brass at the Opera House for the concert tomorrow 8 p.m. Tickets are at the Opera House Box office and on line, tickets@orangevilleconcerts.ca