

Concert Review: RCBB's celebration concert a real kick in the brass

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

An exuberant bunch to begin with, the River City Brass Band has taken to calling this season both its 25th anniversary and its "Birthday Bash." Other than adding to the celebratory ambience, what's the difference, you might ask? Well, one term is used only when the subject is living. When it comes to an arts organization -- especially one that has seen tough times recently -- it's better to celebrate a vibrant group than a good memory.

Tuesday night at Upper St. Clair High School, RCBB showed it is very much alive and poised artistically to continue its role as a preeminent brass band nationally after a recent rough transition to its first collective bargaining agreement amid some financial stress. Under music director Denis Colwell, the group as a whole displayed that creamy, yet brilliant timbre that marks the best brass playing, while soloists played with precision and elan.

Purists might have quibbled when founder Robert Bernat "Americanized" the British brass band by adding a trumpet and French horns for its first concert in November 1981, but it is the band's casual, American flavor that has helped it be successful as much as anything. Its performances are enhanced by an easy-going, almost chummy banter -- this concert peppered with self-deprecating jokes between Colwell and the musicians that knocked down the fourth wall.

Helping with some quips of his own was Lanny Frattare. The longtime voice of the Pittsburgh Pirates narrated Copland's "A Lincoln Portrait." It's nice to hear Frattare's voice calling a winner for once, and he articulated the text with a confidence and a cadence that captivated. The same can't be said, however, for his singing of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" in a barbershop quartet.

Actually, the only times the concert dulled were when some of the members effete sang in a few numbers from "The Music Man." Better to hire real singers and stick to what they do best, blowing those horns.

And blowing them in wonderfully varied music. The concert was emblematic of how the RCBB presents amazing variety in its concerts. Like some musical peaceable kingdom,

big band tunes laid down with overtures, Renaissance music with polkas and classical music with new music.

Carnegie Mellon University's Nancy Galbraith's own success as a composer for wind ensemble was born when she wrote a piece for the band 15 years ago. For RCBB's anniversary, she composed an appealing new work, "Washington's Landing." The three part work juxtaposes life in a busy city with that of the repose of the country, the former with urgent percussion rhythms and brass grooves, the latter with pensive music and a gently twisting melody introduced on the flugelhorn.

The concert opened and closed with the same music the band played at the start and conclusion of its first concert 25 years ago, "Men of Harlech" and "Seventy-Six Trombones."

Next stop, 30.

RCBB performs at Heinz Hall, Downtown, tonight at 7:30 and at Baldwin High School at 3 p.m. Sunday .

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