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Quintet takes flight with flair, charisma

Empire Brass delivers on promise to romp through music history

By Elaine Guregian
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The charismatic trumpeter Rolf Smedvig is the only remaining original member of the Empire Brass Quintet, which began in 1973. With more than three decades under his belt, Smedvig made a charming, funny host of his terrific ensemble in a program Tuesday night at E.J. Thomas Hall.

Smedvig had good company in Marc Reese ("I'm the OTHER trumpet," he announced, with a comically dark look at Smedvig); Michelle Perry, French horn; Mark Hetzler, trombone; and Kenneth Amis, tuba.

No matter how many other gifted players rotate through the group, it's guaranteed to leave behind a legacy of transcriptions of works originally written for other instruments and arranged for brass quintet. Whether others can play the arrangements with the dexterity and flexibility of this ensemble is the challenge. Tuesday night, the group's lighthearted program wrapped up Tuesday Musical's season with a virtuoso flair that made the evening fly.

Smedvig promised a "500-year romp" through music history for Tuesday's program at E.J. Thomas Hall. Talk about compact: The recital's first half consisted of dances that ran from the Renaissance through (to name just a few) Mozart's "Rondo alla Turca," (Turkish rondo) movement from the Piano Sonata No. 11, and Dvorak's *Slavonic Dance No. 1*, up to the "Morning Dance" from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. Then, on the second half, the players moved from a few more dances to a plate of American standards by Copland, Ellington, Gershwin and Meredith Willson.

Standing to play, these musicians seemed to thrive on a challenge: the faster the tempo and the more notes, the better. They must have paid attention back when their teachers told them if you want to play fast, play light, because this playing was airborne. Trombonist Hetzler zipped his slide around like a violinist, showing a lustrous tone and a remarkable sense of ease.

Every player in the group is a soloist who knows when to step back or forward. The buoyancy, crispness of attack and beautifully calibrated blend made the quintet's playing soar.

The players took turns making short remarks before each piece. Smedvig, the humorous, ever-gracious veteran, offered personal and insightful comments you couldn't just pull out of a reference book. Hornist Perry, the first woman ever in this ensemble and now in her seventh season, played well but underestimated the audience with her introductions. That's a small thing that was noticeable only because otherwise, the players' remarks added to the music; they weren't just a token stab at being friendly.

The quintet answered its standing ovation with an encore of *Hello, Dolly!* then invited some guests onstage. Earlier on Tuesday, Smedvig had coached band members who study with Tom Weaver at Firestone High School. (Smedvig and Perry also taught University of Akron students during their two-day stay.) For a second encore, the students stood side by side with the pros to play a spirited version of *The Stars and Stripes Forever* that they're not likely to ever forget.

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