THE AMERICAN BRASS QUINTET continues to swell the chamber music repertoire with new music. Celebrating the ensemble’s golden anniversary this season, these five musicians are looking forward, not back.
Gordon Beeferman’s Brass Quintet is nothing if not difficult. At times, the microtonal composition requires the players to bend notes a third of a half step. The composer told the American Brass Quintet, the work’s first performers, that he “wanted to give listeners a feeling of discomfort.” But as John Rojak, the ABQ’s bass trombonist, tells audiences, “He didn’t realize what discomfort he was giving to the performers!”

Celebrating the ensemble’s 50th anniversary this season, the ABQ’s current members—Raymond Mase and Kevin Cobb, trumpet; David Wakefield, horn; Michael Powell, tenor trombone; and Rojak—could be excused if they opted for some laurel-resting. But instead, the group makes a priority of discomfiting challenges like the Beeferman work. The results have been overwhelming: In 1960, the year of the ABQ’s founding, the brass quintet repertoire was sparse. But now it comprises nearly 1,600 works, and many of the most important of these are a direct result of the ABQ’s commissioning, performance, and research activities.

Huang Ruo’s *The Three Tenses* is another work with demanding and unusual requirements. Like the Beeferman quintet, it was commissioned with support from the Jerome Foundation’s Emerging Composers program. One of Huang Ruo’s goals was for the trumpets, without using mutes (“I like the organic, natural brass sound,” he says) to imitate the Tibetan *suona*, a horn-like instrument used for ceremonial occasions. And the trombone parts call for multiphonics, in which the tenor and bass trombones are meant to evoke Tibetan throat-singing. To get the desired effect, Huang Ruo had the trombonists sing major and minor seconds and unisons. “After I finished working on that piece,” says Rojak, “I was actually thinking I should go back and retake my ear-training test from school.”

Huang Ruo admits that *The Three Tenses* has its difficulties. But what he witnessed when he worked with the ensemble was their “systematic way of rehearsing, with each member contributing ideas, consulting with me about every detail. And when you hear them play the piece, it doesn’t sound difficult. They make it happen.”

The Beeferman and Huang Ruo commissions are just two of the eleven original works, all premiered in the past decade, included in *State of the Art: The ABQ at 50*, a double CD released this fall by Summit Records. *State of the Art* is a testament to the seriousness of the ABQ’s ongoing mission: while the ensemble has now premiered more than a hundred works and amassed a discography of 54 recordings, it chose not to simply produce a “nostalgic compilation of ABQ highlights from the past” (as trumpeter Raymond Mase writes in the CD’s liner notes), but to present “a preview of the future that we hope will inspire chamber music enthusiasts and brass players well beyond this ABQ 50th anniversary milestone.”

The official anniversary concert took place at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall on October 15, when the ABQ’s five members...
were joined onstage by a large contingent of their current and former Juilliard School students. As usual, the program included a substantial dose of contemporary fare: Joan Tower’s *Copperwave*, commissioned by The Juilliard School for its centennial in 2006 and now a staple of the ABQ repertoire, and two New York premieres, David Sampson’s *Chants and Flourishes* (a double quintet written to commemorate both the ABQ anniversary and the composer’s 25-year relationship with the ensemble) and Trevor Gureckis’s *Fixated Nights*, another Jerome Foundation Emerging Composer commission.

Other aspects of the ABQ’s enormous legacy in the brass world were represented that evening as well. The concert included Giovanni Gabrieli’s *Sonata XX* for 22 brass players, in a performance showcasing students in the ABQ’s brass chamber music seminar at Juilliard; Venetian music from the ensemble’s 2005 CD *In Gabrieli’s Day*; and Three Fantasias in Church Modes, by Thomas Stoltzer (ca. 1475–1526), music that can be found in one of the first American Brass Quintet Editions. Nineteen of these critical editions have been published so far, and two others are in the works. Most are the work of Raymond Mase, who joined the ABQ in 1973 and is the ensemble’s unofficial historian.

While brass choirs have been around at least since Gabrieli’s time, the brass quintet as a discrete entity dates only from the mid-20th century, according to Mase. “After servicemen came back from World War II, conservatories were sort of overrun with brass players, and brass chamber music was something that a lot of them started to get interested in. But it wasn’t necessarily going to be a quintet; five wasn’t established as the standard number of players until, let’s say, the 1950s. Robert King, a well-established brass player, felt that the euphonium—the baritone horn—should be on the bottom. Some groups clearly decided on the tuba. Our group experimented and found that the bass trombone was the right instrument for us.” And it was in fact two trombonists, Arnold Fromme on tenor and Gil Cohen on bass, who organized the American Brass Quintet in the late 1950s. Their ensemble first took to the stage—in collaboration with the Renaissance Chorus of New York—on December 11, 1960, at New York’s Kaufmann Concert Hall, and had its formal debut the following year at Carnegie Recital Hall (now known as Weill Recital Hall).

Right from the beginning the ABQ players were hungering for new repertoire; and the seminal event of ABQ’s early years was its inaugural commission, which went to Charles Whittenberg in 1962 for a sum of $1,500. “It was a big risk and a big investment,” says Mase. “The players paid for it themselves, recognizing that it would kind of put them on the map in terms of getting press. It’s a real tour-de-force for quintet—a very colorful piece that throws everything in, virtuosic for every instrument. Everyone acknowledged it as a great piece, and it set the stage for what the group would try to do in the coming years.”

More new American music soon followed, with such commissioned works as the Brass Quintet by Alvin Brehm and the Concerto for Brass Quintet, Strings and Percussion by Alvin Etler getting a fair amount of play. “The work we always point to from the ‘70s,” says Mase, “is Elliott Carter’s Brass Quintet. I had just joined the previous year, and the group was looking for a different kind of presence in the field. No one really knew if Carter would write a Brass Quintet for us, or how it would turn out, but this commission was another aggressive move, like the Whittenberg. It’s one long, 18-minute movement, kind of unbelievable. I look at it today and I’m glad we’re not programming it at the moment. It’s too hard to play. But at the time it really kind of set us apart from other brass groups—Carter’s stature, the nature of the piece. It opened up a whole bunch of doors.”

Within a few years the ABQ had commissioned such major composers as Jacob Druckman, Virgil Thomson, William Bolcom, and William Schuman. “Whether these heavy hitters would have been on board without the Carter I don’t know. But we were becoming well established as the group willing to do the real challenging contemporary stuff.”

As Mase points out, “Endurance is an extremely big issue in a brass quintet. We want composers to understand some of those limitations up front, because we want their piece to be as successful as it can be. We don’t tell composers what to write.
We’ll say, ‘You write the piece you want to write; however, we’ve seen other composers make certain kinds of errors, and here are some guidelines.’ Yet many of the ABQ’s chamber brass commissions have gone to composers who had not previously assayed the medium—one example being Melinda Wagner, whom the ABQ commissioned shortly before she was awarded the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for her Concerto for Flute, Strings, and Percussion. “I’m a pianist and erstwhile cellist,” says Wagner, “and writing a brass quintet was a new thing for me. I brushed up on the literature, but I did not show them sketches—they just let me go, and I think the first time we met over the piece was in rehearsal after they’d already worked it up. It’s quite demanding, but I think they’ve done it something like forty times—many more performances than I’ve had for any other piece.”

Rojak stresses the need to make sure that all composers writing for the ABQ “learn the range of the instruments. And I tell them that if they want their piece played by more than just us, don’t write a second trombone part, just write a bass voice, and I and my tuba colleagues will figure out how to play it. There are some misguided orchestration books, particularly by Piston and Hindemith, that say the range of the bass trombone is almost an octave less than it really is. Even with Joan Tower, I had to ask whether she had used one of those books. She said, ‘Why do you ask?’ and I said, ‘because the lowest note you wrote [in Copperwave] is the C two ledger lines below the bass clef. I wanted to go lower.’ She dropped it another fourth, and I was very happy.”

Copperwave makes the ABQ as a whole happy. “If we look at the last ten years,” says Mase, “we certainly have played that piece more than any of the others. We
In 2008 I probably wouldn’t have been able to do it. Brass is a very hard medium.”

—Joan Tower

often close recitals with it, because no matter how difficult the program has been, this is a piece that sounds great—we can really sink our teeth into it and nobody’s saying, ‘I can’t get through this thing!’ You don’t have to have ever heard a brass quintet, or even much classical music, to get something from it. But if you’re familiar with all kinds of chamber music, you’ll also get something and feel that it’s a quality work you’re happy to hear again and again. We can do it on a show for kids—it’s colorful, has a lot of activity. Older people are happy to hear it. Other groups are already playing it, and it’s a piece they’ll be able to play without having to commit to it for six months. There’s not much question in my mind that this piece will endure.” A measure of the ABQ’s own comfort level with Copperwave is that as soon as the piece was delivered, they were “instantly playing it like we’d been playing it for years,” Mase recalls.

“It’s interesting that it happened that way,” says Tower, “because I’ve struggled with brass and had never written for five brass instruments before. I started learning about those instruments with my Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman”—works dating from 1986, 1989, 1991, and 1993—“and if the Copperwave commission had come along earlier in my career, I probably wouldn’t have been able to do it. Brass is a very hard medium.”

The ABQ’s longtime residencies at Aspen and Juilliard—40 and 23 years, respectively—have not only provided optimal conditions for introducing new repertoire to the public, but ideal forums for the musicians’ teaching talents. (All five also play regularly with New York orchestras, and all but Mase and hornist David Wakefield have faculty posts in addition to their Juilliard and Aspen duties. Mase chairs Juilliard’s brass department; Wakefield has served as the school’s associate dean for performance activities.) For a number of years there was a pattern of three Carnegie recitals a year, says Mase, “but somewhere along the line we decided that we’d have this one big New York concert each year at Lincoln Center, and if other people came along to hire us in the city, fine. But not three a year.

“One of my colleagues tells me that the best idea I ever had in my almost forty years with the quintet is our mini-residencies. It was nearly ten years ago that I sat down with the guys and said, ‘You know, we have assets we’re not taking advantage of—our reputation as teachers, how we work with young people. We’re just going out and playing concerts. We could be at a place for two or three days and it would be phenomenal.’ The mini-residencies were something that a lot of our university colleagues looked at and said, ‘We want this, it’s right for our students.’ The beauty of it is that we can tailor-make them for wherever we go. This year I’m sure that ten or fifteen of our things will be mini-residencies, and only a few of them straight concerts.” Recent support for these mini-residencies has come from the NEA’s American Masterpieces initiative, launched in the summer of 2008. In the latest round of grants, the ABQ was awarded $20,000 for multi-state performances and educational events focusing on such composers as Stephen Foster, Trevor Gureckis, Shafer Mahoney, David Sampson, and Joan Tower.

And the new American music keeps coming. Early in 2011 the ABQ expects to see a score by Anthony Plog for brass quintet and bass-baritone Christopheren Nomura, with a text based on poetry by Walt Whitman; it’s a commission from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and the Chamber Music America Endowment Fund. Plog, a veteran trumpet-turning-composer who now teaches at the Musikhochschule in Freiburg, first met Mase in the early 1970s when the two were vying for a post at the Boston Symphony Orchestra. (The job went to Rolf Smedvig, who went on to become the orchestra’s principal trumpet. He left the BSO in 1981 to form Empire Brass.) About ten years ago Plog wrote a piece for the ABQ called Mosaics (Brass Quintet No. 2) on commission from the NEA.

Like many of the university musicians, Plog turns to the Brass Chamber Music Database (created by a longtime ally of the ensemble, trumpeter William Jones) to look for original works for brass quintet. Plog makes a sharp distinction between serious repertoire and “shlock.” As he sees it, “You can have great performers, and you can have very important performers. Hakan Hardenberger is absolutely the top trumpet soloist now, but he has also done an incredible number of premieres; he’s not only enhanced his career but added to the repertoire. And the American Brass Quintet has done more for the literature than any group in the history of brass quintets. An awful lot of brass groups have essentially gone the route of entertainment music. More than any other group, the ABQ has stayed true to its values. Not only have they added to the repertoire, it seems like they just keep getting better.”

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