

The Great Lakes Trombone Ensemble



By Daniel Hautzinger

If you're near the music building of Cleveland State University this week, you're likely to run into a number of people carrying trombones. Beginning its third year last Saturday and continuing through Sunday the 15th at CSU, the Cleveland Trombone Seminar (CTS) seeks to teach trombonists important musical skills in addition to physical and mental wellness while performing and practicing. The Seminar is the brainchild of Cleveland Orchestra Assistant Principal Trombone and CSU Faculty member Shachar Israel. It also features a series of concerts by faculty, guests, and participants in CSU's Drinko Hall.

On Monday, June 9, the Great Lakes Trombone Ensemble, a nonet featuring professional orchestral trombonists from the Great Lakes region, gave the second concert of the Seminar. Along with Israel, performers included Jeff Dee, Jonathan Lombardo, and Tim Smith, Buffalo Philharmonic; Jeff Gray, Rochester Philharmonic; David Bruestle, Erie Philharmonic; James Nova, Pittsburgh Symphony; Garth Simmons, Toledo Symphony; and Ken Thompkins, Detroit Symphony.

One would think that the repertoire for a trombone choir would be fairly limited outside of arrangements of music written for other ensembles, but the Great Lakes's program featured three pieces originally written for trombone ensemble. Václav Nelhýbel's resonant *Tower Music* opened the concert with antiphony, a compositional method in which similar phrases ricochet between musicians, creating an effect akin to church bells.

British composer Derek Bourgeois's somewhat misleadingly titled *Scherzo Funebre* then boomed through the hall. "Scherzo" means joke, yet Bourgeois's piece was apocalyptic, with blasting bass trombones. One of the many sections did have a lighter, jesting quality, but it was quickly followed by more baleful music, perfect for showcasing the brassy but controlled tone of the Great Lakes Ensemble.

Lake Effects by Andrew Skaggs of the Washington (D.C.) Trombone Ensemble was written specifically for the Great Lakes Ensemble, and Monday marked only its second public performance. The piece could have soundtracked a movie: it began with scene-setting swells that cut to a sentimentally heroic theme where one could easily imagine the protagonist perched on a cliff, contemplating life the night before a battle. And then came the climactic battle music, with an ambiguous, abrupt ending.

The rest of the concert featured arrangements of familiar pieces. Morton Lauridsen's reverential choral work *O Magnum Mysterium*, in an arrangement by Scott Slutter, bass trombone with the Eastern Wind Symphony, glowed beautifully in the mellow tones of the expertly blended Ensemble. The double-choir "Sanctus" from Verdi's *Requiem*, arranged by Philadelphia Orchestra trombonist Eric Carlson, allowed the trombones to become hunting horns calling out fanfares. Fauré's *Pavane*, arranged by Philadelphia Orchestra bass trombonist and CTS Faculty member Blair Bollinger, lost some of its haunting magic in the move to trombones.

Two John Williams arrangements by Ensemble member James Nova hearkened back to the cinematic scope of *Lake Effects*. The wise *Yoda's Theme*, from *The Empire Strikes Back*, was a natural choice for the trombone's noble sound. *Imperial March*, from the same movie, showcased some amazing triple-tonguing, transforming the trombones into deadly fighter jets.

The encore was one more Nova arrangement of Williams, the exciting *Superman Theme*. It was a heroic evening celebrating a heroic instrument, featuring beautiful and magisterial performances by some of the best in the business.

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