

Oberlin Artist Recital Series presents Seraph Brass

by Jarrett Hoffman



Sometimes you find an old scrap of paper with ideas that may or may not have been worth writing down. (“Make friends through multilevel marketing” did not turn out to be a winner.) But if the idea holds real weight, then putting it in ink can have the effect of setting something valuable in motion.

“I found an old journal where I had written down the thought that I wanted to form a touring brass quintet composed of all women musicians,” trumpeter Mary Elizabeth Bowden said during a recent interview. The idea marinated, and eventually, after her solo career had begun, the timing was right. “I felt like I had the tools, and also the time and energy, to really start this group.”

Now, Seraph Brass — with its mission to highlight female brass players and musicians from marginalized groups — is celebrating its tenth-anniversary season, which will take the group to Oberlin Conservatory next week for a three-day residency.

Bowden will be joined by fellow trumpeter Raquel Samayoa, hornist Rachel Velvikis, trombonist Elisabeth Shafer, and tubist Robyn Black for an itinerary that includes master classes, a lunch conversation, and finally a performance at Finney Chapel on Friday, October 13 at 7:30 pm as part of the Oberlin Artist Recital Series. Tickets are available [here](#).

The program includes one of the ensemble's most recent commissions: Jeff Scott's *Showcase*. "We just recorded it last week," Bowden said. (Their second album is on the way.) "He's an incredible composer, and we just love the piece. It's super rhythmic and exciting, and I think it's going to be a very substantial contribution to the brass quintet repertoire."

The extent of a composer's experience with brass can affect the way a collaboration unfolds, with varying degrees of discussion about how to challenge the instruments in a way that is also idiomatic. With Scott, who is the Associate Professor of Horn at Oberlin and was a longtime member of Imani Winds, there wasn't a whole lot to talk about.



"He wrote the piece, we rehearsed it, and we had a couple of back-and-forth exchanges, but it was pretty much this finished product right off the bat from Jeff," Bowden said. "It's challenging, and we love a challenge. And I have the piece in my head all the time. It's quite the earworm, in a very good way."

The ensemble likes to construct its programs with a mix of categories. There are the new pieces, like Scott's *Showcase* and Lillian Yee's *Miracles of the Human Condition*. There are the personal favorites, like Reena Esmail's "Tuttarana" from *Khirkiyaan (Windows): Three Transformations for Brass Quintet*. And there are also the audience favorites, like arrangements of Franz Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* and the Prelude from Edvard Grieg's *Holberg Suite* — a piece that you might say is part of the group's DNA.

"We do the Prelude as our opener, and we've kept that in our program since the beginning," Bowden said. "It was the very first piece we ever rehearsed — it's just a fun opener that we've kept through all the years." (Also on the program at Oberlin: works by Giuseppe Verdi, Eric Cook, Kevin McKee, Grigoraș Dinicu, Catherine McMichael, and Anthony DiLorenzo.)

We closed our conversation with a word that I had to look up: *seraph*, basically an *angelic being*.

“When we started the group, we came up with a big list of names, and we had to pare them down. You look at all the names of goddesses and constellations, things like that, and then you have to see which names have already been taken by another group. But we all felt connected to the name *Seraph* — just the association with angels, and the sound of the word, too. And it stuck: Seraph Brass. And here we are in our tenth year.

“It’s been fun building a brand-new group, and also just having something like this exist in the world, in a male-dominated field. I think that’s been very special for everyone who’s come through the group, and even the next generation of female brass players who have grown up and are now coming in as guest artists — that’s been very exciting to see as well.”

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