

Burning River Brass opens Arts Renaissance Tremont season (Dec. 19)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Presented by Arts Renaissance Tremont, Burning River Brass's annual Holiday Spectacular filled Pilgrim Congregational Church on Friday evening, December 19.

The handsome late 19th-century sanctuary rang with brass, and the season arrived. Many in the audience were regulars, a familiarity that

showed in the musicians' ease onstage — the kind of exchange that gives these concerts an enduring appeal.

Trumpeter Heather Zweifel helped set the tone with spoken introductions that were relaxed, conversational, and disarming. More than an emcee, she shaped the evening's pace and sense of welcome, guiding listeners through the program with an ease that mirrored the ensemble's assured playing.

Introductions revealed the players' far-flung origins — New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Michigan, anchored by a strong Cleveland core — but the playing suggested long acquaintance.

Pilgrim's resonant interior favors brass, letting the sound bloom and carry. Chords linger, rewarding a full, rounded sonority more than brilliance. Burning River plays with sensitivity to those conditions, and that attention extends beyond acoustics — call it a philosophy of unity over individual spotlighting.

The arrangements did much of the work. Many were by the British composer Roger Harvey and Cleveland's own Paul Ferguson, both of whom favor sectional interplay over solo flash. *O Come All Ye Faithful* opened the program confidently, establishing a ceremonial tone, followed by a set of French, Polish, and English carols. Harvey's *Fantasy de Noël* and *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly* invited the brass to sing rather than shout. When solo moments arrived, they felt integrated rather than showy, with graceful turns from Heather Zweifel's flugelhorn and tonal richness from the horn section.

Now in its 34th season, Arts Renaissance Tremont has helped anchor the Holiday Spectacular as a neighborhood tradition, one that Burning River Brass has carried forward since the group's founding in 1996.

Morten Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*, sensitively arranged by percussionist and artistic director Feza Zweifel, offered a moment of calm. The long lines and gentle flow again suited Pilgrim's resonant space, offering stillness amid the holiday bustle.

The second half leaned toward the television-familiar. In her introduction to the first set, Heather Zweifel pantomimed mid-century channel-surfing, when changing stations meant getting up and crossing the room, drawing knowing laughter from the crowd.

Ferguson's arrangements from *A Charlie Brown Christmas* preserved Vince Guaraldi's gentle swing and nostalgic charm, translating the pianist's light touch effectively to brass. Anthony DiLorenzo's *Christmas 'Toons* medley (Rudolph, Frosty, et al.) delighted the audience.

Throughout the program, the ensemble's blend and balance were exemplary, brightened by agile piccolo trumpet solos, sonorous French horns, and the steady underpinning of the low brass. Feza Zweifel, usually at the percussion, stepped forward at key moments to conduct, keeping the program moving smartly in both roles. His big moment came, naturally, in *The Little Drummer Boy*, with a drum-kit solo so expansive the rest of the ensemble could only sit in wonder.

The concert was generously sponsored by Ken Noetzel, who watched from the balcony, in memory of his wife Lynne. The dedication added a quiet note of remembrance to the evening's good tidings.

As the final chords faded and the audience rose in applause, this seasonal ritual felt secure.

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