

American Brass Quintet visits Oberlin Artist Recital Series

by Stephanie Manning



With more than 65 years as an ensemble under their belt and a commitment to commissioning new works, the American Brass Quintet has a lot of repertoire to choose from. “We’ve got such an extraordinary wealth of music,” bass trombonist John Rojak said. For at least the past 15 years, “every piece that has been coming in is one we want to keep playing.”

Several of those works appear on the group’s current program, which they are set to bring to the Oberlin Artist Recital Series on February 20. Trumpeters Brandon Ridenour and Tiago Linck, hornist Eric Reed, trombonist Hillary Simms, and Rojak will take to the Finney Chapel stage to present works by Anthony Barfield, Philip Lasser, Jennifer Higdon, Osvaldo Lacerda, and David Biedenbender. Tickets are available [online](#).

Although the majority of the evening’s works are less than a decade old, the concert first finds its footing in the 16th century, with John Dowland’s *Earl of Essex Galliard & Can She Excuse My Wrongs*. Rojak described how Brandon Ridenour combined the two pieces into his own, “really cool” edition.

“It’s a great opener,” he said. “The majority of our concerts over the years have started with some sort of early music piece that gets the audience’s ears attuned to brass.”

After the introduction comes Anthony Barfield’s *Samsāra*, “a modern piece that’s pretty accessible.” Barfield, a trombonist and composer, studied with the ABQ at Juilliard, where the group has been ensemble-in-residence for more than 35 years. His piece, named for a Buddhist term about the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, “starts out beautifully, and then gets really energetic,” Rojak said.

Barfield’s is far from the only piece that should feel tonal and accessible to listeners. “We think we may be living in a time of history where tonal music is necessary,” Rojak

said — like a balm to the chaos of daily life. “We’re not going to sacrifice excitement, but maybe some aleatoric, far out stuff is going to wait.”

Philip Lasser, also connected to Juilliard through his faculty position, wrote *Common Heroes, Uncommon Land*, which incorporates sections of spoken poetry for each of the five members. The 20-minute work “is reflective of what many of us think of as the American ethic — work hard, get along, be nice,” Rojak said. “It’s really strong and a very current message right now.”

David Biedenbender’s *Sacred Geometry* also resonates with Rojak, who said he sometimes has trouble holding it together at the end of the third movement. “It’s a really stunning bit of writing,” he said, praising Biedenbender’s use of timbre in particular. “Out of the hundreds of pieces we’ve played, to come up with something that none of us have ever heard before is pretty great.”



Pumping up the excitement will be “Ramp Up,” the first movement from Jennifer Higdon’s *Book of Brass*, a “breathless” selection that Rojak said often elicits gasps from those in attendance. Then, Osvaldo Lacerda’s “spectacular” *Quinteto Concertante* showcases each of the group’s instruments over four distinct movements. Introducing the Brazilian composer’s piece will be Brazilian trumpeter Tiago Linck, who joined the Quintet in 2025 as its newest member.

The past few years have rapidly changed the ensemble, which also welcomed trumpeter Brandon Ridenour and trombonist Hillary Simms in 2023. Given that Simms is from Canada and Linck is from Brazil, now “we truly have the ‘American’ Brass Quintet,” Rojak said cheerfully.

His joining date of 1991 makes him the current longest-serving member, and he still finds plenty of joy in the Quintet life. “We’re playing new pieces all the time, and to make this art come to life is really, really cool.”

He hopes that audiences walk out of their performances with lots to think about. “The way I describe our concerts is that we’re striving to be more like an art film than a blockbuster movie,” he said. You leave plenty entertained, but “the next day, and maybe the next day, you’re still thinking about it.”

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