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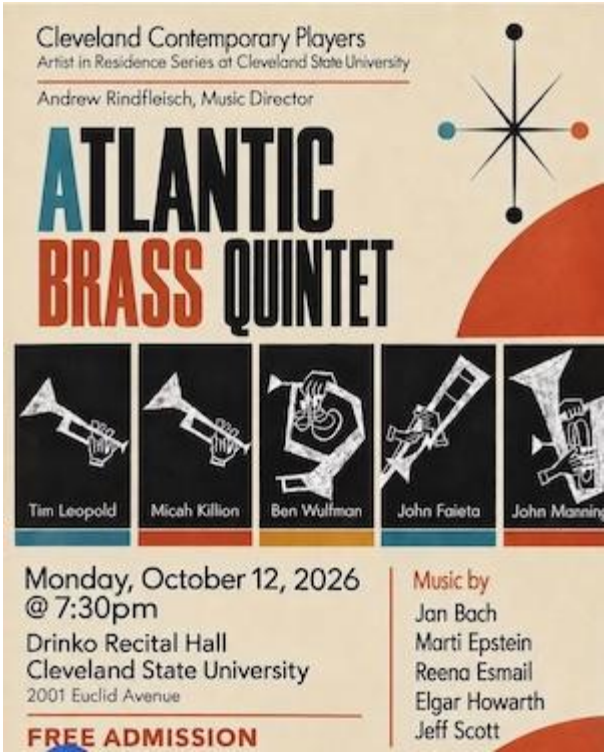
Atlantic Brass Quintet at Cleveland State (Oct. 12)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The Atlantic Brass Quintet brought four decades of experience and a wide-ranging program to Cleveland State University's Drinko Recital Hall on Monday, October 12. The playing was spirited and technically impressive, though the results were sometimes uneven.

Founded in Boston in 1985, the award-winning ensemble has toured internationally with a repertory spanning early music, contemporary works, and Balkan folk traditions. Its current members — trumpeters Tim Leopold and Micah Killion, hornist Ben Wulfman, trombonist John Faieta, and tubist John Manning — brought considerable skill to the evening's demanding program.

The concert began promisingly with *Jog*, from Reena Esmail's *Khirkhiyaan* (2017). Drawing on a North Indian raga whose shifting major and minor thirds create an engaging ambiguity, the music sounded fresh and folk-like. Atlantic handled its spirited rhythms and lively exchanges with impressive agility.

Jan Bach's *Laudes* (1971), a twentieth-century brass-quintet standard inspired by Renaissance tower music, proved less successful. Its four movements demand close coordination, quick changes of tempo and character, and varied colors and textures. Atlantic's reading left rhythmic details blurred and attacks were occasionally out of sync. Drinko's resonant acoustic may have contributed. The concluding *Volta* delivered brilliance and volume, but greater transparency, dynamic shading, and a clearer sense of long-range contour would have helped.

Andrew Rindfleisch's *Four Vintage Songs* supplied a Cleveland connection. Rindfleisch, who heads Cleveland State's composition department and was a 2026 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *American Descent*, was present. Leopold's understandably enthusiastic introduction may have raised expectations beyond what these modest arrangements were meant to fulfill.

Atlantic performed two of the four: Walter Kollo's jaunty German song *Warte, warte nur ein Weilchen* and Stephen Foster's *Ring de Banjo*. Both showed Rindfleisch's craftsmanship and ear for instrumental color. In the German waltz, an optimistic bounce mingled with an undertow of melancholy, while the Foster arrangement captured the spirit of nineteenth-century America. Faieta's sliding trombone solo ginned up some old-time flavor. Curiously, the players left the stage for intermission after the first song. The change was announced offhandedly, but disrupted the pair's continuity.

The evening's most affecting work was Jeff Scott's *Sermon for Saints and Sinners*, commissioned by Atlantic in 2021. Scott, formerly on the Oberlin Conservatory faculty and now at the University at Buffalo, drew on his troubled childhood relationship with his stepfather, Veryl "Farouk" Walker.

The four-movement score combines brass with Scott's recorded narration of poetry by A.B. Spellman. The episodes recount the stepfather's drug use, gambling, public confession, and a final encounter years later on a New York subway. Drawing on the blues and rock music of Scott's youth, the score carries anger, pain, and sorrow.

Here Atlantic played with empathy and conviction, its muscular sound well suited to the material. At times, however, the force of the playing crowded the more vulnerable moments of the narrative.

Three traditional Balkan tunes — *Zvonce Kolo*, *Sat*, and *Bubamara* — brought the evening to an energetic close. Standing to play, the musicians took on the character of a small brass band, delivering infectious rhythms and vigorous, idiomatic playing.

As a finale, the set was fast, spirited, and very loud. Atlantic's technical command and stamina were never in doubt, though the finer points of chamber playing were sometimes neglected.

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