

Preview: Canadian Brass at Blossom: conversations with tubist Chuck Daellenbach & trumpeter Brandon Ridenour

Published August 23, 2010

by Mike Telin



Canadian Brass turns 40 this year – middle age for a human being, but venerable for a touring ensemble. Tubist Chuck Daellenbach founded the group in 1970 with trumpeter Stuart Laughton and trombonist Eugene Watts. One of the first groups to actively develop the practice of audience engagement during concerts, Canadian Brass is still going strong.

Trumpeter Brandon Ridenour was the youngest player in the group’s history when he joined in 2006 at the age of 20. We reached both Daellenbach and Ridenour by telephone last week to ask about their appearance at Blossom next weekend. Chuck Daellenbach was at home in Toronto.

Chuck Daellenbach

Chuck Daellenbach: Blossom has kind of become a regular stop for us. We have had a lot of experience there, mostly on our own and a couple times with the Cleveland Orchestra. In fact, when we were an emerging group, just a few years ago, one of our first big breaks was being brought in by the Orchestra to perform at Blossom with them at the very end of August. I think it was the last concert of their summer season. This was in the late 70’s and it kind of signaled that we were now getting called into the big leagues. It was pretty exciting.

Mike Telin: Congratulations on your 40th anni-

versary. I’d like to spend a little bit of time talking about the early years.

CD: Thanks! I’m, not sure if we should get an award or sympathy, but seriously we have been so lucky.

MT: On the history page of your website, it says “The Brass Quintet was not established as a serious ensemble at the time and it proved to be an irresistible challenge to Gene and Chuck.” Could you expand on this?

CD: Well at the time, we just didn’t have the repertoire. If you think of the string quartet as the core of Western art in many respects, along with the orchestra, they had the repertoire that demands performance. The Beethoven quartets have to be performed, so you would form a quartet to play them. The music is just so compelling. But there was nothing for the brass quintet that would compel a performance. So we were taking an ensemble that we love -- obviously we grew up playing these instruments -- and creating a repertoire for the that sound as we went along.

Compared to string quartet repertoire, back when we started in 1970, the best of the brass quintet repertoire was very lightweight. So we had kind of a two prong effort. One was developing as artists ourselves and developing a concept. The other was developing an audience for the sound of brass, hoping to make it compelling enough that people would want to hear us a second time, which of course is the real key to having a career. First concerts are easy to get, it’s the 2nd 3rd and 4th. So it was very much on our mind that we had to be developing a repertoire at the same time that we were developing an audience. At this point we have commissioned numerous, what you would call serious repertoire from composers all trying to write the epic composition, and the percentages are a little slim -- out of [all of the commissions] I would say that we have a handful of pieces that have the potential of surviving over time. But things on this

count are definitely rising. When we first started, we were in the wilderness. There were only a couple of groups in the states, and the Chicago Brass Quintet was kind of our mentor, back when it was made up of the guys who played in the Chicago Symphony, the famous names in brass like Bud Herseth and Arnold Jacobs. But even to them the orchestra was first, they had no second, and the brass quintet was third. It was a pastime kind of thing so the idea of making a living playing brass quintets was really a challenge.

MT: I believe that you were one of the first groups who really took on the challenge of entertaining the audience and involving them in the show. How did all of that come about?



CD: I think that was a case of survival. We realized very early on that things that were normal to us, like putting a piece of brass on our lips and playing for hours everyday, was not the most natural thing for people to see, so we had to explain ourselves. We wanted people to know what we were doing and why we

were doing it. I think a defining moment for me in presentation was at one of our early concerts when our trumpet player picked up his piccolo trumpet and I saw every head in the audience turn to see what it was. We simply told them that it was a piccolo trumpet and it plays really high and it is very dangerous. We told them about Bach's trumpet player who ruptured his neck and died. We told them that trumpet players always put in their contracts with orchestras that they cannot be forced to play the piccolo trumpet because of the danger, but we are really lucky because our trumpet player does not have a contract.

We always tried to find some way to give the audience new and also interesting and enjoyable experiences. I don't call it pandering, because we realized that the audiences are really smart. They know what is on the performers's minds, they instinctively

know that you are there to serve a social and musical function and we felt that responsibility. I think what set us apart from most musicians from that era is that we took that responsibility -- to really bring the audience to the music and to really have a shared experience, and no one had really talked about it back then. At that point it was OK for a violinist to say, "I played this great chaconne and if the audience didn't like it that was obviously because it was an "uninformed audience". We took it the other way around: we said that if the audience somehow made it clear that they didn't like something, we made it our responsibility to think and to talk about it, and we would try to figure out how to improve the programming. Maybe it was the placement of a piece or how we played it -- something had to be different and because there is no soloist and there is no conductor nobody else to was to blame. Actually we took that responsibility with relish. That became the exciting part for us.

MT: Looking back over the some 90 recordings that you have made, I was really struck by the variety of repertoire. Also in listening to many selections from the very early up to the latest I was also impressed by how consistent the sound of the group is. No matter what kind of music, the attention to the sound of the group seems to be a priority. Am I correct?

CD: I really appreciate hearing that because we always took our art form as seriously as that of a string quartet. When I was in school it was always the string quartet that spent hours and hours troubling over eighth notes, and that is exactly what we did. We spent the time and scholarship, and when it was beyond our expertise, we would encourage the brightest and most talented people to work with us. An example of that is one year at Blossom when we did some Beethoven with the brass players in the Orchestra, and we had Lucas Foss, who grew up in that tradition, coach us. We were never afraid to seek advice, and to this day, if we're doing Renaissance music we would love to have a Renaissance scholar come in and talk to us about performance practice to see how much of that we can apply. It is not always directly applicable, since we are not playing ancient instruments, but so much of that can enhance a performance.

In one case, "Stars and Stripes" ["Canadian Brass Salute America", released for Independence Day,

2010], it occurred to me, thinking back to my old high school band days, that the sounds of percussion can be so thrilling. There is a certain sound that is not as prevalent as it used to be and that is the old rope drum. So we ended up bringing in the four percussionists from the Nexus Ensemble. They played traditional drums and it gives it an entirely different feeling. We have been lucky in taking the role of music directors. We get to explore our musical tastes. One of the advantages is that we simply rely on our own experiences. We are five guys who have been in concert bands, stage bands, military bands, the trombone and trumpet players had played in club bands, as well as lots of experience with orchestras, and so we were able to reach into those various musical genres. We have been really lucky in that because we were creating our own repertoire -- we were not limited to specific titles. In a way it gave us the freedom to raid the library of masterpieces. So if you're going to transcribe or arrange something it might as well be the best.

MT: as the recording industry has changed, you have of course gotten into CD's and DVD's and you have also started your own recording label. Why did you decide to form your own label?

CD: Back in the 90's, we were with RCA, and we saw artists being dropped one after the other until we were the hanger-on in the classical world. [In the beginning] Brass was considered to be the encroacher, but we started to see them drop the pianists, then they dropped the flute player, and then they stopped recording the orchestras, and pretty soon we were the classical artist and so the handwriting was definitely on the wall, But, what we did once gain was to reach into our own experience because we've been with the major labels for over twenty years. So we got the very best people that we knew around us to help. Our producer has recorded everyone from Elton John to the Philadelphia Orchestra, and our label manager is an eighteen-year veteran of the major labels. We decided that we needed to do it ourselves, but we also decided to get the best people we have come to know to work with us so we can be sure that we are still operating at the world class level. We do find ourselves looking back and saying that we could have done these ten years earlier, but it is exciting to be in charge of our own destiny when it comes to recordings. Plus

we can branch out. We just recorded the Brahms Horn Trio with our horn player, Jeff Nelson, who is a world class horn player, and it seemed that we needed to establish him as the fine artist that he is in the classic chamber repertoire.

MT: Is the recording out?

CD: I think September 12th is the release date.

MT: Who are the violinist and pianist?

CD: The violinist is Ik-Hwan Bae, who is on the Faculty at Indiana University with Jeff, and the pianist is Naomi Kudo -- she has won a number of major competitions.

MT: While we're on the topic of changes in the media, I could not help but notice on your website that like so many, down at the bottom it encourages me to follow you on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instant Encore as well as going to MySpace. How do you use these, and to what advantage?

CD: Well for me the process is really simple, I have sons who are nineteen and fourteen, and so I just get their advice. They tell me what to do. We don't make a move until they approve. But seriously, the one that seems to be the most useful is Facebook. It is immediate, and is far more intergenerational. Old guys like me and young guys like my kids can all use Facebook. I think of it this way: the website has become like the library when you're looking for history and documents, and Facebook is for what is going to be going on tomorrow. Any IT guy can link them all together, although for me I want to slim that list a little bit. It is just too unnecessarily confusing. I think that people's interests can be served without all of those outlets. Sometimes it is just too much and people just decide to move on. The scary part for me was when I discovered that it costs money to do these things and that it's most likely IT people doing them for other IT people to look at so they know what to do for other IT people. YouTube has been invaluable for audiences. Even a handheld camera in the audience can get you on YouTube. People can spend money on a recording but when you see people playing and it sounds pretty much the same, they think "Ah! OK, now I like them". It can give people a different feeling about an artist.

I like YouTube a lot. Among other things, I looked up Glenn Gould and they had all of the old CBC recordings. This is not pop culture, this is a really fantastic research tool, or interest tool.

MT: In looking over your list of personnel over the years, I am surprised that you have not had more personnel changes than you have. What is it that you are looking for when choosing a new member?

CD: I think when you speak to Brandon [Ridenour] you will understand the answer to that question. You will find that he is very smart as well as a supernova on the trumpet. We first heard him when he was nineteen, when he came to the Music Academy of the West, and he sounded like a young Bud Herseth even at that time. He also made a point of telling each one of us that if there were ever an opening in the Canadian Brass, that was how he would like to spend his career. He is also very well versed in music history, while also being a very contemporary guy. He can tell you lines out of many TV shows and tell you about pop groups. Be sure to ask him about the repertoire he chose for his senior recital at Juilliard. It will give you an idea about how young musicians are thinking these days. What we inherited back in 1970 was a real division between classical music and pop music. Unlike Europe we didn't have any crossover or light music category, but now you talk to young musicians that kind of division doesn't even come up. The young people have figured out how to blend, and there are some really fine musicians in the pop world. So picking someone for the group, someone like Brandon quickly rises to the top.

MT: Finally, what can we expect at the Blossom performance?

CD: One of the things we are going to have some fun with is that we do a Beatles set and the middle movement of the set is Blackbird, and it has a trombone solo. You probably noticed that the trombonist has just joined the group, and again he is twenty-one years old -- we call him "The Gretzky of the Trombone" up here. He is in his own league, so we will feature him. We are also doing a set of Gershwin. We have had a long relationship with Luther Henderson, who was a well-known figure on Broadway for many years, and he arranged the Porgy and

Bess suite for us. Then of course we will have the [J.S. Bach] Toccata and Fugue, which is our barn-burning piece.

Brandon Ridenour

We spoke to Brandon Ridenour by phone from his hometown of Grand Rapids Michigan, where he was staying with his grandparents as well as performing a concert with his father, pianist Rich Ridenour.

Brandon Ridenour: The concert went really well, and the audience was fantastic. You know, my father played in Cleveland not too long ago with Carl Topilow and the Cleveland Pops Orchestra.

Mike Telin: So you come from a musical family?

JBR: Yes, I do. For a while we had a family band when my brother and I were in grade school. But now, since we all have sort of grown up, my brother has since drifted away from music and wants to be a pilot. My mother is still in music; she is the executive director of the Jacksonville (MI) Symphony.

MT: How long have you been with Canadian Brass?

BR: My first concert was four years ago in August.

MT: How have you managed to learn all of their repertoire -- or is this more or less an ongoing process?

BR: Exactly, I am still in the process of learning it. The group has been around for forty years, and they have such a vast repertoire that I am still playing catch-up. I have taken on some programming duties, and as a result I have had to do more and more homework, listening to all of the albums and studying the repertoire.

MT: Speaking of repertoire, I just got off the phone with Chuck, and he said to be sure to ask you about your senior recital at Juilliard.

BR: He will never let me live that down, but it was a pretty far out program. I did everything I could to get the attention of the president, Joseph Polisi, and risk my graduation. I tried really hard, but they still let me graduate.

Actually, the program was all arrangements of mine. The first half was the Messiaen Quartet for the End of Time, for trumpet and electronics, electric guitar, bass guitar and piano/synthesizer. A couple of us also doubled on percussion -- a gong, cymbals and a drum. It was an interesting experience, and a lot of fun to play that music with instruments for which it was not originally intended. To [clarify], when Messiaen wrote the piece he only had the four instruments to work with, piano, cello, violin and clarinet. So I always wondered if he had had other instruments at his disposal when he wrote it, maybe he would have gone in a more electronic direction. When I first listened to the piece, I heard so many other sounds that could take the piece to another level, although I think it is one of the best pieces ever written as it is.



The second half was on the lighter side. I did some Radio Head and Ben Folds with the same ensemble, only I added a real drummer. I did an arrangement of the Beatles' Eleanor Rigby for strings and trumpet, and we closed with Take On Me by A-Ha, for strings and baroque style piccolo trumpet. It was wired, but they let me get away with it. By the end, I even had people throw-

ing clothing up on the stage. I really hope this was a first at the Juilliard recital hall.

MT: You have just given me an entirely new impression of Juilliard, although Polisi is a very forward thinking person.

BR: Yes he is, and I think that is what Juilliard needed. Even in the sense of giving the students a more well rounded education. I understand the a lot of the students were there to strictly focus on music, and they did complain about having to take English and foreign language classes, but I think it is good for us to do that, and I am glad we did have that opportunity. Juilliard didn't have that before Polisi was there.

MT: I was reading that you first came in contact with the Canadian Brass at the Music Academy of the West; what about that experience made you want to pursue becoming a member of the group?

BR: The first time I heard them perform live was when they came to Kalamazoo, MI, when I was in eighth or ninth grade. But, my first memory of them was the CD that I received as a birthday or Christmas gift, The Essential Canadian Brass. By the time I met them at Music Academy of the West, I was already an aspiring professional musician in the middle of college, and when I saw them perform, I realized that what they do is completely up my alley. Things like arranging music for their ensemble, which was something I was already doing. My dad and I were always arranging things for trumpet and piano.

The CB are also able to cross styles, from strict classical music to jazz to Dixieland to arrangements of the Beatles' tunes, which are great arrangements. This was also something that I had just grown up doing. When my dad and I played concerts together, we would do the same thing. It was a different ensemble, trumpet and piano, but we played very similar music and styles all across the board. So I felt like I had been training for an audition with the Canadian Brass my whole life.

When I was at Juilliard, which is primarily an orchestral training school, I never felt like I fit into that environment. I knew that orchestra playing was not quite my niche. So even though auditioning for the Canadian Brass was a long shot at best, I went for it. I got in their faces and said; "try to not forget about me". Fortunately they remembered me, and when they had an opening, they gave me a call. At that time, they had several trumpet players playing on a rotation basis. So that is how I first fell into playing with them. It was not full time, but on a tour by tour basis, and eventually I became a full time member.

MT: How did you start playing the trumpet?

BR: It was in fourth grade band, although I was bummed out because I wanted to play the drums. I wanted a drum set so badly and my parents just said no. Apparently my band director recognized

that I had an ear for pitch and they strongly encouraged me not to play the drums. Also my dad had played trumpet in middle and high school, and he had a nice Bach Stradivarius horn that was just lying down in the basement collecting dust. He would take it out once a year to play Happy Birthday as loud as he could outside my aunt's window at 6:00 am. So it was just sort of happened that this would be the instrument I would choose with out really choosing it. Now, when it came time for my brother to play an instrument, since we had no more instruments waiting in the basement collecting dust, he also wanted to play the drums, and this time my parents said OK. Boy did that get me fired up, but at least there was a drum set in the house that I got to bang on every now and then, but I was not too happy when he got to play the drums.

MT: Did you ever push him off the seat?

BR: Yes, I did all the time. I would also push my dad off the seat at the piano, and that actually became part of our schtick. We do it at every concert and it all stems back to the baggage that I still have that my parents let my brother play the drums. But I guess it worked out, because I would have never been able to join the Canadian Brass had I been a drummer.

Canadian Brass appear at the Blossom Festival on August 28 at 8 pm. The group's most recent CD, 'Stars & Stripes', is available on the Canadian Brass website.