

ARTS & LEISURE

DOUBLING IN BRASS

Young ambition in music, dance

Alex Browne



Arts Focus

Brass instruments can be a genuine pain, if not for the listener, then certainly for the instrumentalist.

depositories of spit, they depend for their effects on the meeting of fallible flesh and inflexible metal, not to mention a great deal of puff.

How pleasant, therefore, to be able to listen to the excellent musicianship of the Foothills Brass, the quintet whose concert last Friday at White Rock Baptist Church provided a stirring curtain-raiser for the 1992-93 season of White Rock Concerts.

Which is not to say that the playing was absolutely flawless, even with this acclaimed Canadian ensemble — on occasion the odd split note and suspect intonation confirmed that, as they say, it can happen to the best of them.

What's not clear is whether they were suffering an off-night or the rigors of an almost recklessly ambitious program.

Leader Chris Morrison pushed himself and his group through close to two embouchure-punishing hours of everything from Elizabethan dances to the flurrying sixteenth-notes of the Vivaldi/*Bach Concerto for Brass*, from sal angularities by Dmitri Shostakovich to even a credible evocation of early jazz.

And, for the most part, it was a harmonious journey through musical history that left the capacity crowd well satisfied.

Morrison's Calgary-based ensemble is following two paths: the jokey pop classicism of the famous Canadian Brass, and the more recent image consciousness of the classical field, which is producing increasingly youthful, increasingly photogenic touring attractions.

Not the least of the appeal of the Foothills Brass are the impromptu, comedic and elongated introductions to pieces by members of the group (giving everyone's lip a chance to rest) — particularly those of the raffish tuba player, Jean-Francois Cotnoir, who had the audience in stitches with his

Morrison's Calgary-based ensemble is following two paths: the jokey pop classicism of the famous Canadian Brass, and the more recent image consciousness of the classical field, which is producing increasingly youthful and photogenic touring attractions.

rough-and-ready Gallic interpretations of pieces like Debussy's "Girl With The Flaxen Hair" and Dvorak's "Humoresque".

It was an approach also followed by trumpeter Brian Sand, who explained the accelerations and decelerations of tempo inherent in Johannes Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5*, in terms of an extremely large woman struggling to her feet to participate in the dance.

But the true measure of a brass quintet is not in its jokes but in its ensemble blend, the roundness of tone, the precision of attack and

the handling of dynamics.

There were pleasures to be had in all these aspects of the Foothills Brass' performance — the agility of Cotnoir's tuba in the Vivaldi/*Bach Concerto* and the Overture to Handel's *Water Music*, the mellifluous tone of the 'low trio' (Cotnoir; Rosalee Morrison, french horn; and Michael Thomson, trombone) in Holborne's 16th century dance "The Fruit of Love"; the bravura trumpets and beautiful dynamics in the Suite from Bizet's *Carmen*, and Morrison's sensitive solo statements in this and the brass adaptation of Samuel Barber's famous *Adagio*.

Also notable: Thomson's drunken trombone in a witty arrangement of the folk tune "Landlord Fill The Flowing Bowl" and the group's spirited jazz versions of "Amazing Grace", Handy's "St. Louis Blues" and the well-received encore, "Darktown Strutters' Ball".

Sand suggested that the folk-inspired themes of early jazz will be increasingly appropriated as classical music, just as Brahms' Hungarian pieces long ago entered the repertoire.

It may not be an original hypothesis, but it's one that groups like the Foothills Brass are well on the way to proving.

Dance groups usually emphasize the artistic angle, more than the commercial angle, to their endeavors — a fact pointed up by the unabashedly commercial *raison d'être* of Dawn Govier's Dance West Youth Company, whose second annual gala (Oct. 22 and Oct. 23 at Surrey Arts Centre) was pre-saged by the information that the group or members are available for videos, movies, television, corporate entertainment and convention packages.

The artistic component was there, of course, courtesy of the talented young performers, the rigorous training that most have received through the Dance West studios prior to winning a place in



The Foothills Brass: humor and musicianship scored well with the White Rock Concerts audience.

the Youth Company, and the opportunity to work with such professional choreographers as Crystal Pite and Joe Laughlin and some excellent guest dancers, including Sarah Brewer and members of the Ballet B.C. and Judith Marcuse troupes.

Outstanding work included White Rock-South Surrey dancer Kathleen Mullin's intense, self-choreographed and beautifully executed solo "Stay"; and two courageous forays into musical theatre: Jana Burge's effectively sung and danced comedy number "Little Girls", and a medley of songs from *Hair*, choreographed by Valerie Easton, performed with impressive aplomb even if some of the voices were thin and relatively untrained.

The latter piece emerged as an exercise in historical quaintness; it

and Crystal Pite's bluesy, moody group piece "Trying Times" made a welcome contrast to the shallow hip-hoppery of many of the other group numbers.

That, unfortunately, seems to be the downside of the group's commercial imperative — that its members are seeking a place in the imitative, repetitious world of pop video.

This was particularly apparent in the number "Is Your Heart In The Right Place" in which the group accompanied a singer, Janice Lazano, who seemed to be uncomfortably aware that she was being upstaged.

The Youth Company, we are told, appear in Lazano's forthcoming video of the song, but the energy and accomplishment of the dancing could not overcome the triteness of the vehicle.