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Brass band restoration

BY TOM IRWIN



I thought about calling this, "Show Me Your Brass or Who Gives a Toot?" like some old Rocky and Bullwinkle episode, but that makes for a lengthy headline and really doesn't do justice to what a spectacular concert lies in store for a listening audience on Saturday when the Vintage Brass Band presents A Vintage Brass Christmas in the acoustically sound venue of the First Presbyterian Church.

The VBB, brainchild of the husband and wife musician team of R. Todd Cranson and Rose Schweikhart Cranson, formed in 2009 with Todd as artistic director and Rose as executive director with a cast of local brass enthusiasts numbering around 15 participating in the group. Both Cransons are employed at the University of Illinois-Springfield, with Todd listed as assistant director of co-curricular music and Rose as assistant to the dean of public affairs and administration, but their passions belong to playing music and especially from tunes and in styles of those golden days of yore when brass ruled supreme.

Whether you know it or not, brass bands were all the rage in the mid-to-late 1800s and well in the 19th century, especially throughout the Midwest. The venerable musical, *The Music Man*, perhaps most popularly represents this culture today, a time before kids played electric guitars, computers and drum kits when cornets, tubas, trombones and other assorted instruments of brass supported by the breath of musicians and popular trends carried the music of the day. From the famous, with John Phillip Sousa's archive of papers and music housed at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, to the obscure, of General Benjamin Grierson's collection of music works from Jacksonville, Springfield and central Illinois retains a tradition as a hot spot of historic brass band culture.

"We see ourselves as a brass ensemble with respect for our local heritage and an eye to the future," explained Todd, who directs and plays tuba in the group. "We're excited to add our brass music to the rich musical offerings available in our local community."

Indeed an important part of the VBB mission entails using local music, including the X.X.O.B. Band from Williamsville (anybody know what the letters stand for?) and following in the footsteps of famous forbears such as the Illinois Watch Factory band, a precursor to the Springfield Municipal Band. The Saturday night concert includes songs from area collections and ensemble works by Giovanni Gabrieli and Paul Dukas plus popular holiday carols from around the world.

"We'll feature historic brass and vocal selections from our cultural heritage," said Todd. "It's very exciting with antiphonal music, Mona Kreitner our soprano soloist from Memphis and Grierson's Sleigh Waltzes. I think anyone, and especially musicians, who comes will enjoy it."

Kreitner, a renowned soprano who specializes in virtuoso vocal music of 17th century Italy and songs by the coloratura sopranos from America in the late 1800s also earned a doctorate degree in historical musicology from the University of Memphis with a dissertation about the women who sang with the Sousa band. Her contribution to the VBB represents the vocal part of brass band music, a rather neglected area of studies in the common perception, but extremely interesting and important in American music history. And yes, since we're at that time of year, Ms. Kreitner will deliver a few holiday carols and seasonal classics with the support of the Vintage Brass Band, including a Jenny Lind number that should bring down the house, just like the Swedish Nightingale commonly did in the 1850s.

"We're trying to keep the brass band excitement going in Springfield," said Rose, who plays, tuba, baritone and bass. "And Saturday night's show is our way of doing it with a kickoff to the holiday season."

The Vintage Brass Band plays at 8 p.m., Sat., Dec. 12, at First Presbyterian Church, 7th and Capitol. Tickets are \$10 and available at the door. More info at www.vintagebrassband.com.