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BIO

## Burning River Brass rocks Cleveland holidays

Friday, December 24, 2010 - [Curtain Up!](#) by [Terry Ponick](#)[Font Size - +](#) [Comment](#) [Share](#) [Tweet this!](#) [Share](#) [RSS](#) [Ask Terry a Question](#)

**Cleveland** — Your peripatetic reviewer returned to his ancestral home this week to celebrate the holidays with friends and family. Concluding that Christmas in Cleveland would be no fun at all without at least one trip to holiday-bedecked Severance Hall, we picked up tickets—at our own expense no less—to catch a performance of the Northern Ohio-based Burning River Brass. Our verdict on the concert: right answer.

A bit of background for those not well versed in ancient history. Sometime back in the 1970s (it scarcely matters when) Cleveland's narrow, winding, heavily industrialized, heavily polluted Cuyahoga River—gummed up with tar, fuel oil, discarded tires, chunks of driftwood and other assorted flotsam—actually caught fire, causing some damage to a lift-bridge and surrounding structures before it was extinguished by an undoubtedly flabbergasted fire department.

Since the national media has long amused itself by poking fun at Cleveland, this story was too good to let pass, sweeping through newspapers and TV alike throughout the country. What a laugh! A river so polluted it actually caught fire!

Interestingly, the very seeming absurdity of the incident became a sort of poster boy for the early environmental movement, causing local and national governments alike to start actually doing something about the nation's waterways. The Cuyahoga is significantly cleaner now as is adjoining Lake Erie, once another disgrace in and of itself.

Meanwhile, the "burning river" has passed on to near-legendary status, honored today in the name of a popular local micro-brew—and by the Burning River Brass. Which brings us back to our review.

Initially cobbled together by a number of young area brass players in the early 1990s, the group gelled in 1996, giving its first real concert in the trendy Tremont neighborhood in Cleveland's near-West Side—not far up the cliff from the now cleaned up river that gave the ensemble its name.

The gig caught on, and the 12-piece group (plus a percussionist who also conducts when necessary) has been performing together ever since although its composition changes from time to time. They've put out several CDs, including two Christmas albums, as their holiday concerts have proved to be big draws even in show-me markets like New York City.

Burning River Brass returned to its home base Wednesday with an eclectic program featuring Christmas classics with an unusual twist. Cleveland audiences have long been rabid holiday fans who prefer the traditional music of the season. Burning River Brass did not disappoint, but chose to serve up some jazzy new updates on these familiar tunes, making for a genuinely festive program.

Standing center stage in an inverted U format with percussion stage right, and madly swapping out a bewildering variety of horns, trumpets, cornets and mutes, the players varied the sound and delivery of each piece as suited the music and the mood, making for a lively program entirely lacking in dull spots: a great idea for an audience that's showed up expecting some fun.



Burning River Brass members strike a pose near the old burning river. (Photo courtesy Burning River Brass.)

Which they got. The playing was crisp, tight, harmonious, and, well, really brassy. Burning River is clearly an ensemble that enjoys its work. Its easy, punchy delivery, which seems unforced and effortless, could only have turned out that way with a significant amount of practice and great attention to detail. With only an occasional insignificant error (horns can sometimes be cranky in cold weather), this Christmas Concert was about as good as it gets, easily equal to and often exceeding the quality of the fantastic Canadian Brass ensemble.

Opening Wednesday with perky, relatively straightforward renditions of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," and somewhat lesser-known carols like the "Sussex Carol," "Infant Holy," and "Fum, fum, fum," the program's first half also featured a delightful version of "Silent Night," which started out with deceptive normalcy, only to veer into a slightly-drunken Viennese waltz tempo. It was unexpectedly but warmly funny, typical of the surprises that lay directly ahead.

The program's first half concluded with vigorous renditions of Simon Wills' "Prelude and Fugue for Christmas," which slyly folded in several Christmas carols en route to its finale; and "Festive Cheer," a brief, lively suite of contemporary Christmas faves arranged by Roger Harvey.

The program's second half opened with what's already become one of Burning River's signature pieces, its own "Burning River 'Nutcracker Suite.'" Arranged for the group by three different composers, the new "Suite" takes three of Tchaikovsky's most beloved Nutcracker snippets—the "Overture," the "Pas de deux," and the "Spanish Dance" (aka "Chocolate")—into entirely unexpected and jazzy directions.

The most over-the-top of the three arrangements was arranger Dave Morgan's take on the Russian composer's, dreamy, passionate "Pas de deux," which takes place roughly at the original ballet's midpoint. Morgan completely re-imagines the piece as a sort of "Pas de doo-wop." The ensemble took it from there, putting a big-band sound into a kind of 1950s mixing bowl, creating a joyful sound that Tchaikovsky couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams.

Burning River followed its post-Tchaikovsky tour-de-force with an amusing version of "The Night Before Christmas," with music provided by Anthony DiLorenzo. With the timeless poem—attributed to Clement Moore—read expressively by members of the Cleveland Orchestra family—in the fore, the instrumentalists provided musical comments on the poem with familiar and sometimes funny riffs on familiar tunes.

Following this interlude, the players next performed perhaps the most raucous-ever version of "Little Drummer Boy." Arranged by Paul Ferguson, this version takes that beloved song where it always wanted to go, particularly in rock-obsessed Cleveland, by handing it off at key intervals to a real drummer boy—in this case, Feza Zweifel, Burning River percussionist, ad hoc conductor, and husband of trumpeter and the evening's master-of-ceremonies, Heather Zweifel. Mr. Zweifel tore into his big opportunity with a creative vengeance, and the delighted audience erupted into applause at the piece's conclusion.

The concert concluded with something completely different, an Anthony DiLorenzo suite of "Christmas 'Toons." Those old enough to remember early TV will readily recall the 2-D cartoon and stop-animated Christmas "Specials" that ran endlessly as the holiday approached. "Specials" like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Frosty the Snowman," "The Grinch that Stole Christmas," and the like. (Many of these vintage shows still show up on cable today.) DiLorenzo's sweet suite pays tribute to these memories from TV's golden age, and the brass players clearly had fun with it. In the background, the Severance Hall stage sparkled and glittered with more of the charming projected Christmas scenes and symbols that had warmed the hall's atmosphere from the start of the concert.

The wildly enthusiastic audience demanded—and got—a brief encore before allowing the Burning River Brass members to depart for their own holiday celebrations. We don't recall whether the group has ever done a Christmas concert in the DC area, but if not, maybe it's time. While the KenCen is usually booked with choral and orchestra Christmas programs, as befits our own chorus-mad capital city, other magnificent area halls like Strathmore, GMU's Center for the Arts, NOVA's Schlesinger, and Manassas' marvelous new Hylton Center might well be able to pack in a good audience for Burning River's uniquely jazzy classical sounds.

**Rating: \*\*\*\*** (Four stars.)