

Experiences of a Lifetime - the First Master Class for Oceanside Classical Concerts

The first Master Class for Oceanside Classical Concerts Society was nothing short of magical. In the planning stage, persistent research opened the door to possibility - a class for local music students with OCCS's internationally acclaimed guest artists, the Foothills Brass Quintet (slated for their OCCS performance at Parksville's Knox on Saturday February 22, 2020), seemed doable. Anticipation was front and centre.

After considerable back and forth discussion with Foothills Brass trumpet player Derrick Milton and local secondary school music teachers, Mary Leigh Warden (OCCS Director, Coordinator of the Master Class Program) confirmed that FBQ players were keen; Kwalikum Secondary School/Qualicum Beach music teachers Susie Craven and Crystal-Anne Howells, and Ballenas/Parksville music director Brent Kellas were enthusiastic. Five student brass players from Kwalikum Secondary School were eager and available to participate.

Step by step, plans for the event took hold: Friday February 21 would be the date; the session would start with the FBQ in open rehearsal, with lots of Q&A between the professionals and the students; next would be the masterclass, with students actively participating as players in a class-like setting.

Derrick Milton sent FBQ music charts to the KSS music teacher. The students would practise a section of music in preparation for the masterclass (Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* - a piece included in the FBQ concert programme for OCCS). The FBQ players' plan was that, if the students' skill level was high enough, an invitation would be extended for the KSS quintet to play the Bach with the FBQ in concert. Milton and KSS teacher Susie Craven agreed that the students also could bring a piece of their own choosing to play during the masterclass session.

Friday February 21 arrived - a milestone in the making! The FBQ arrived from the mainland on time, thanks to the cooperation of BC Ferries. Mr. Kellas from Ballenas and Ms. Howells from KSS were in the house, as well as a keen young music student, with his family. With camera and tripod set up, we were ready!

At 3:55 p.m., a van pulled up in front of the church; the KSS teacher stepped out, followed by her five students with instruments in tow - Hana Rogers, trumpet; Ethan Dowdle, trumpet; Mathew McDermand, French horn; Thys Westerhof, trombone, and Gwaiidon Duckworth-White, tuba. Teacher Susie Craven confidently guided her quintet into Knox. For us (OCCS Directors), there was perceptible excitement.

The five students walked directly to the front, onstage, and settled themselves on the choral risers where they could be close to the FBQ (who were in the midst of tuning/warming up). It was obvious - the students were there because they wanted to be there. They knew this was something special. From that point onward, there was no question - this first OCCS Master Class was going to be stellar.

David Douglas, OCCS Artistic Director/President, extended greetings. The FBQ set a comfortable tone in welcoming the students. They explained the process, then began rehearsal. The students were in awe - they watched carefully, leaned forward to inch even closer to the playing. They commented, asked questions. The professional players chatted openly with each other and with the students - they discussed the pieces; gave focus to specific lines; talked about techniques required, about 'tricks of the trade; dynamics, fingering, phrasing, breathing.

The FBQ finished rehearsal and invited the students to pull up extra chairs and music stands, join the semi-circle. One of the FBQ players asked everyone to tune to a Bflat. When the students tuned, the FBQ player reacted with an astonished 'WOW!' The other four professionals chimed in - 'WOW!' The students had tuned perfectly. With that positive start to the session, the players launched into the Bach. The next 60 minutes or more were filled with detailed instruction - discussion between the professionals and students was non-stop. All ten players worked keenly together; then in small groups; often one on one. Excitement was at a high. The students played their part in the Bach brilliantly with the FBQ,. The students' Early Music piece, Die Bankelsangerlieder (Anonymous, 17th C.; translation: The Bench Singer Song), received full attention next. The end result was a beautiful 10-piece brass rendition played together. Rewards leapt out - for the FBQ; the KSS students; the teachers; the OCCS Board, and guests. In a word, it was extraordinary.

The culmination of the masterclass event, as hoped, was an invitation for the KSS student quintet to join the FBQ onstage in concert the following night, to play the Bach, plus the student's Early Music piece, together.

And that is exactly what transpired - the KSS student quintet were surprise guests in the second half of the FBQ concert programme for Oceanside Classical Concerts on Saturday evening, February 22. Cheers from the sold-out subscription-only audience surely were heard all over Vancouver Island.

From the KSS players - "My experience with Foothills Brass helped me better realize the role of the French horn in a brass choir environment." "Even though they did play at a much higher level than us, I for one didn't feel intimidated by them nearly as much as I would have predicted, it felt like we meshed as a group pretty quickly." "Performing with the Foothills Brass revealed how comedic and informative a show can be on top of a musical show." "It was really amazing being able to play and work with such experienced and passionate musicians. I found it very helpful to work with them in a workshop and having the opportunity to play with them on stage was an honour and I loved it." "...I think the OCC should continue to do this and reach out more to other young musicians in the area."

KSS quintet teacher Susie Craven told me that these were experiences of a lifetime for her students. An added note, later, reflects what followed due to the impact of the COVID-19, not long after the OCCS Masterclass and concert with the FBQ - "...it turns out that it (the OCCS/FBQ concert) was our last formal performance now that all the festivals and concerts are cancelled, so even more memorable!"

This was the beginning - OCCS's Master Class program was launched. Going forward, OCCS plans to offer a masterclass each season, always with prestigious professional musicians, gifting experiences of a lifetime to up and coming talented music students in the Oceanside area.

Written by

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(accompanying photos by Don Dempson, Director, OCCS)

Link to video courtesy of PQB News <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=652153092211155>

