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Concert Review: US Army Blues

The US Army Blues is a group of many amazing musicians who mainly play a variety of jazz selections. This group is made up of some of the best musicians we have here in the United States. As a musician myself, I was extremely blown away by this group. I have been playing different instruments throughout the past ten years, and therefore have been exposed to many different works of music and other musicians, but I have never seen musicians like the ones in the US Army Blues.

Because this concert did not have a program, my first thoughts were based strictly on the title of the concert “US Army Blues: Jazz Concert.” From prior knowledge and past experience, I knew that the army only accepted the absolute best musicians for their bands, but I had never had the opportunity to hear them play. I had expected them to be great players, but they exceeded my expectations. Of course, I knew that they would be playing jazz music, but I did not know which songs they would be playing, and was surprised at how many original songs they played. They announced the songs they would be playing before the beginning of each piece, but it was hard to clearly hear and understand each title they named. Although I am unsure if I heard the titles correctly, I believe they played the following pieces in the following order: “Frank Speaking” by Stan Kenton, “I’ve Never Been in Love Before” by Frank Sinatra, “How Do You Keep the Music Playing” by James Ingram and Patti Austin, “In Locked Hearts” (maybe), “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning” by Frank Sinatra, “Alighted” (maybe), “Flip Flopper,” “Swinging at Newport,” and “Armed Forces Medley.” I did not realize until after looking up the names to these songs to see who sung them that more than one piece was by or about Frank Sinatra. I was pleasantly surprised that I had heard some of these songs before, and even played some of them before in band in high school.

I think the way that the pieces were ordered gave the audience more variety. For example, they did not play all of their slower songs at once and then switch over and play all of their faster songs; there was a good balance between the speed of the songs. They seemed to start out playing songs that the audience might recognize and then added in songs that the musicians in the band had written or arranged themselves, which would most likely be unfamiliar to the audience. They also could have done this to arrange the songs in a more chronological order—the songs written and arranged by the Blues players being newer than the songs already written by composers in the past. I think the order of the pieces was chosen wisely and sounded good in general.

I believe the number of musicians and of each instrument was appropriate for a jazz ensemble. The US Army Blues allows only certain instruments and a limited number of each instrument; I believe they do this to have good musical quality. The different types of instruments and number of each instrument sounded good and blended very well. The instruments used in the Army Blues concert were saxophones (both alto and tenor), trumpet, trombone, guitar, drum set, piano, upright bass, flute, and clarinet. Throughout the performance, the trumpet players occasionally used mutes as well. Saxophones are an essential part of a jazz ensemble; it would not sound the same without them. I liked that they had both alto and tenor for a difference in sounds and parts. I was impressed by the high notes that the trumpet players and trombone players hit in their performance. Although they were not the main focus, I liked that they incorporated a piano and an upright bass for a steady background. The drum set also kept a good rhythm throughout, and the guitar player added a nice touch. I was surprised to see the players use a clarinet and a flute, as they are not typical instruments in a jazz band. Of course, as a flute player, I am biased toward the instrument, and enjoyed hearing it, even if it was for only one song. All in all, these instruments sounded very good together.

I was somewhat surprised at how informal the band seemed to be throughout the program. I was expecting more formality because they are the US Army. To start off, there was no introduction for the ensemble or the first song they played, which is normal for a concert from my own personal experiences. They were all dressed in their army uniforms, which made them look very professional, and gave the performance more formality. Personally, I think that jazz music in general has an informal feel to it, especially when improvisation takes place. I found it interesting that the band did not have a formal director; although, as talented as they are, they do not really need one. They did have one of the musicians directing the beginnings and endings of songs, as well as some cues and solos. He was also the main player that introduced each song and interacted with the audience throughout the concert. He was pretty informal in his speaking: he was making jokes and being very light hearted, which I think helped him connect to the crowd. These interactions were suitable for the event and occurred at appropriate times throughout the performance. The musicians themselves interacted with each other to determine when to start and stop playing, and for certain cues and solos. They also interacted to know when to change tempo and dynamics, and exchanged some informal banter. I noted that some of the soloists would stand at their seats to play, while others would come forward to the microphones at the front of the stage, which seemed more formal. I think that everyone’s perceptions of what is formalized and what is spontaneous is different, and can be highly affected by how much experience the individual has had attending, or participating in, concerts such as this one.

I wish they had given out programs for this concert, so that I would have been able to easily follow along with each piece, and be able to have the correct titles to each of the songs, as well as know their composers. I do not think that I was lost at any point in the concert because I have lots of experiences with concerts similar to this one; although, I am used to being on stage rather than in the audience. The last time I attended an event like this was this past July when I went back to my high school to watch my friends from marching band perform the music to their show during band camp, which was a very informal event unlike the Army Blues concert. I have experienced acoustic music performed live a lot throughout my life, but I have usually been the one performing the music. Because of this, it still feels strange for me to be in the audience rather than on stage, and I honestly prefer to be the performer. Before I was in band in middle and high school, I took piano lessons and had recitals for that, and my brother was also in band throughout middle and high school so I attended many of his performances as well. Aside from high school performances, I have also attended concerts at JMU and Drum Corps shows. I think that live music is much more raw than recorded music. While recorded music may sound better because it is perfected, I like hearing music live and being able to watch the performers.

Throughout the program, I thought that the song choices were interesting. All of the solos were lengthy and very well played. The first two pieces related to Frank Sinatra, but differed in a few ways. The first piece was very lively and upbeat and showcased a trombone solo throughout, while the second piece started off slower with a solo and gradually sped up to a saxophone duet with an alto and a tenor. It then went to a trumpet solo and came back to a variation of the first tune after the solos were completed, as many of the songs we have listened to in class have done. They then transitioned to a slower piece that sped up in the second half and featured a trumpet solo. This song also included a flute and clarinet, which differs from the rest of the songs in the program and added a unique sound. The fourth piece they played was arranged by their own trombone player, and featured two trombone players and the drummer. The next song was much slower than the previous pieces and included a saxophone solo. During this piece, the ensemble drastically decreased their dynamics to feature the pianist. The sixth song they played was composed by their guitar player and had a spacey sound. It had a saxophone solo and, of course, a guitar solo. The next piece had a rock feel with blues incorporated. There was a drum solo, and a trumpet trio who went back and forth with their solos. The eighth song had lots of features, including piano, saxophone, and trumpet. The last song they played was the “Armed Forces Medley.” They said they save this piece for the end of the concert so that they can honor everyone who has served. While they played this song, they asked that if anyone in the audience heard their song, they stand up. Hearing this song performed reminded me of when I used to perform it in marching band in high school for Veterans Day each year. We also asked our audience to stand up to their song, and it is something I always enjoyed. Overall, I thought that each song in the performance was well written and well played.

I think that the performers added a lot of their own interpretations to the pieces, especially during solos. I am sure that many of the solos included lots of improvisation, and I thought that each solo was very unique and the musicians did a good job of adding their personality. Aside from the solos, some of their songs were arranged or composed by some of their own musicians. The fourth song they played was arranged by their trombone player, the sixth song was composed by the guitar player, and the seventh song was composed by a former drummer for the US Army Blues. I enjoyed hearing their original pieces and improvised solos throughout the program. Jazz music in general is a very unique and personalized genre, so I think the musicians in this program communicated a mixture of the composer’s ideas and their own.

Although we have not talked about more modernized music or jazz music in class, we have talked about all of the different instruments that make up a jazz ensemble, as well as dynamics, tempo, rhythm, improvisation, variations, etc. Most of the pieces this group played would be considered allegro and forte, but there were some parts that were andante and piano. While I do not know the composers because there was not a program, I do not think that any of the selections they played were old enough to be written by any of the composers we have talked about so far. Like we have discussed in class, some of the songs returned to a variation of what was heard at the beginning of the piece. In general, a lot of jazz music has a swing rhythm and improvisation, which was seen in this program.

Overall, I was extremely impressed with this group. Knowing that majority of the solos were probably improvised amazes me. I heard notes that I have never heard anyone hit on certain instruments before. Throughout my nineteen years of life and ten years of playing different instruments in different groups, I have never seen anyone who knew how to play their instruments as well as these musicians did. I would definitely go see this band perform again, and would recommend others to do the same.

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