



The Ultimate Chamber Musician

The versatile trumpeter Kevin Cobb ('93) is a 20-year member of the American Brass Quintet and one of New York's busiest freelancers.

BY IAN VANDERMEULEN

Halfway through a rehearsal for his second solo CD, Kevin Cobb is conferring with collaborator and hornist Eric Reed on the articulation of a particular phrase. Mr. Reed suggests that on the next run-through, Mr. Cobb simply pick one variation to stick with.

"You mean, play like I mean it?" the trumpeter asks, playfully.

"Yeah," Mr. Reed replies, slamming his fist in the air. "This is a *trumpet* record!"

Suddenly stone-faced, Mr. Cobb raises his horn to his lips and delivers the phrase with over-emphasized articulation, a caricature of big-band lead playing. He then turns to a fellow trumpeter in the room—and winks.

It is a funny exchange in part because Mr. Cobb is arguably one of the least brassy of New York's top-shelf trumpet players, routinely shunning acrobatic bombast for disarming lyricism. This is also a hallmark of the American Brass Quintet, in which he has played for two decades. While some brass quintets opt for flash, the ABQ, founded in 1960, has maintained its dedication to serious concert music, including a heavy proportion of commissions and works by living American composers. Mr. Cobb has now toured three continents, recorded eight CDs, and commissioned dozens of new works with the group, which also holds long-established residencies at the Aspen Festival and the Juilliard School.

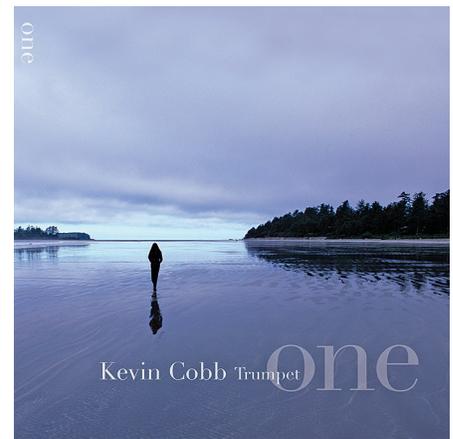
His playing, like that of the ABQ, is pure substance. Yet, while he doesn't see himself as a virtuoso, few would deny his technical prowess. Indeed, aside from the ABQ, Mr. Cobb

Above: Kevin Cobb leads a master class for the Young Artist Summer Program at Curtis Summerfest; and takes a break outside Gould Rehearsal Hall.

PHOTOS: JESSICA GRIFFIN



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Above left: Kevin Cobb, left, with his American Brass Quintet colleagues: Louis Hanzlik, trumpet; Michael Powell, trombone; Eric Reed, horn; and John D. Rojak, bass trombone

Above: Kevin Cobb's first solo CD, released in 2004 by Summit Records, is a collection of works for unaccompanied trumpet.

remains one of New York's most in-demand freelancers across an impressive range of settings, including playing in Peter Gabriel's backup orchestra, recording with jazz trumpet legends Lew Soloff and Byron Stripling, providing musical accompaniment for the live podcast series *Radiotopia Live*, and regularly performing with the New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera. He maintains vibrant teaching studios in Juilliard's pre-college program and at SUNY—Stony Brook, on Long Island.

"I see myself as a chamber musician, but I define that as someone who can be flexible with any style," Mr. Cobb says. "The ultimate chamber musician is the ultimate chameleon. No matter where I play, I want people to feel like I fit and that the work is better because I'm there. That's really important to me, and I take pride in that."

CHOOSING COLLABORATION

Mr. Cobb's early musical path blended destiny and serendipity. Although he started with guitar and still loves the instrument, he found it "isolating." Once he chose the trumpet as his instrument for school band, however, he progressed quickly; and his first trumpet teacher soon involved him in a brass quintet. That seed would find further nourishment during his undergraduate years at Curtis and then as a master's student at Juilliard.

His arrival at Curtis, Mr. Cobb admits, was "somewhat a leap of faith." Arriving from Michigan's Interlochen Arts Academy, he knew little about Curtis aside from the renown of its student orchestra. But he quickly benefitted from the high level of artistry, not just among faculty, but also fellow students. "I look back on my time at Curtis and I think how much I learned from the people around me. And I'm still amazed what that orchestra sounded like."

While Mr. Cobb remembers being "intimidated" by that high level of artistry, the rigors of the program—along with the challenges of urban living in the years before Curtis had a residence hall—brought the students together. "I have lifelong friends from Curtis because of the challenges we had to face," he says. Meanwhile Frank Kaderabek, Curtis's trumpet

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faculty and then-principal trumpet of the Philadelphia Orchestra, impressed on him the importance of preparedness, dedication to craft, and respect for colleagues—fundamentals that Mr. Cobb says remain crucial to the vibrancy of his freelance career.

After Curtis, he pursued graduate studies at Juilliard, bringing him into contact with his future ABQ colleague Raymond Mase. Mr. Mase, who officially left the ABQ in 2013 but still chairs the trumpet department at Juilliard, recalls the group's excitement when Mr. Cobb came up as a possible candidate to join the ABQ. During the extended audition and interview process, Mr. Mase says, "it was very clear that Kevin viewed the American Brass Quintet as the other members of the group did: as a destination. And it certainly panned out that way. Playing in the group means everything to him, as it did to all of us."

That commitment, as well as a dedication to new music, is paralleled in Mr. Cobb's solo work. His first CD, *One* (Summit Records), a collection of works for unaccompanied trumpet, showcases the trumpeter's tonal range and deft articulation. His current recording project, featuring trumpet and mixed chamber accompaniment, took on a unique character after his father's untimely death. Now the lineup is "less academic," he says, with commissions from fellow Curtis alumni Jonathan Bailey Holland and Eric Sessler, and works like Alan Hovhaness's *Prayer of St. Gregory*—a favorite of his father's—lending a personal touch.

EXPLORATORY ARTISTRY

Mr. Cobb's characteristic curiosity and dedication to craft is something he tries to impart to his students. His teaching style is individually tailored, yet artistically demanding, notes Curtis alumnus Eric Huckins, a horn player who has played in brass ensembles coached by Mr. Cobb at Aspen and at Juilliard, where he is now a master's candidate. He recalls that when Mr. Cobb coached his Juilliard horn quartet, an ensemble with a limited repertoire and tonal palette, "Kevin really demanded—in the kindest of ways—that the quartet play in such a way that really brought to life as much color and contrast as four of the same instrument can."

He also emphasizes to students that "the pursuit of your art is not necessarily singular." Mr. Cobb notes, "I want my students to feel a little bit more open-minded about how music fits into their life rather than how to fit a life around music." Indeed, the options for a musical life are increasingly diverse, as attitudes about acceptable career paths evolve. In this sense, he considers himself part of a transitional generation that, once laser-focused on an exclusively orchestral career, has found rich and rewarding experiences in a variety of genres.

"One thing I've learned over time is that, as an artist, you want to feel like what you do matters—above all else—that what you're saying has some sort of impact on somebody."

For Mr. Cobb himself, those are not just a lesson to teach, but words he lives by. ♦

Ian VanderMeulen holds degrees in trumpet performance and religious studies from Oberlin College and Conservatory. A Ph.D. candidate at New York University, he has written for *Overtones*, *Symphony*, and *Musical America*.



WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—KEVIN COBB

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"There are so many reasons—the sense of tradition, the world-class faculty, the inspiring concerts, the gift of being able to graduate without amassing student debt—but above all else, for me, it would have to be the other students whom I was fortunate enough to call my colleagues. I am still continually amazed at what my friends have gone on to achieve in all facets of the music industry, and I feel so lucky that I had the chance to make music with them, share growing pains and laughs, and learn from them. Especially unique to Curtis is the small student body, which fosters growth, creativity, and unlimited potential. If you want to be around the best musicians before they're famous, Curtis is the place to be."