

Reprints from the

International Trumpet Guild® Journal

to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet

THE TRUMPETS OF THE AMERICAN BRASS QUINTET BY MARK DULIN

October 2011 • Page 37

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THE TRUMPETS OF THE AMERICAN BRASS QUINTET

BY MARK DULIN

Celebrating its 50th anniversary this season, the American Brass Quintet has been internationally recognized as one of the premier chamber music ensembles of our time and an icon in the brass world. The ABQ's rich history includes performances in Europe, Central and South America, the Middle East, Asia, Australia and all fifty of the United States; a discography of over fifty recordings; the premieres of over one hundred contemporary brass works; and in the last decade, mini-residencies that have brought the ABQ's chamber music expertise to countless young musicians and institutions worldwide. ABQ commissions by Samuel Adler, Bruce Adolphe, Daniel Asia, Jan Bach, Robert Beaser, William Bolcom, Elliott Carter, Jacob Druckman, Eric Ewazen, Anthony Plog, Huang Ruo, Steven Sacco, David Sampson, Gunther Schuller, William Schuman, Joan Tower, Melinda Wagner, and Charles Whittenberg are considered among the most significant contributions to the modern brass quintet repertoire. Premieres in the last three seasons include works by Gordon Beeferman, Nolan Gasser, Trevor Gureckis, Justin Dello Joio, Shafer Mahoney, and David Sampson. In commemoration of the ABQ's 50th anniversary, the ABQ recently released its eighth recording on the Summit label—a double CD of new works called *State of the Art—the ABQ at 50*.

Equally committed to the promotion of brass chamber music through education, the American Brass Quintet has been in residence at The Juilliard School since 1987 and at the Aspen Music Festival since 1970. Since 2001 the ABQ has offered its expertise in chamber music performance and training with a program of mini-residencies as part of its regular touring season. Designed to offer young groups and individuals an intense chamber music experience over several days, ABQ mini-residencies have been embraced by schools and communities throughout the United States and internationally.

Through its acclaimed performances, diverse programming, commissioning, extensive discography and education-

al mission, the ABQ has created a legacy unparalleled in the brass field. Hailed as “the high priests of brass” by *Newsweek*, “positively breathtaking” by the *New York Times*, and “of all the brass quintets, the most distinguished” by the *American Record Guide*, the American Brass Quintet has clearly defined itself among the elite chamber music ensembles of our time.

Raymond Mase has been a member of the American Brass Quintet since 1973 and is responsible for many of the ABQ's performance editions and recordings of 16th-, 17th-, and 19th-century brass music. He is also a founding member of the Summit Brass and principal trumpeter of the New York City Ballet Orchestra. Mase can be heard on well over one hundred recordings, including as soloist on the Albany, Deutsche Grammophon, Summit, Koch, Cambria, Troy, MHS, and Furious Artisans labels. In addition to his performing and teaching, Mase is Chair of the Brass Department at The Juilliard School, a member of the Aspen Music School faculty, and has served on the Board of Directors of Chamber Music America. He is a graduate of the New England Conservatory.

Kevin Cobb joined the American Brass Quintet in the fall of 1998 and with that appointment also became a faculty member of the Juilliard School and the Aspen Music Festival. He also currently serves as faculty at The Hartt School and at SUNY Stony Brook. Originally from Bowling Green, Ohio, his first solo appearance was at age fifteen with the Toledo Symphony. After attending Interlochen Arts Academy, he graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied with Frank Kaderabek, followed by The Juilliard School as a student of Mark Gould. Cobb leads a diverse career and is regularly active with many of New York's top organizations. He can frequently be heard on television commercials, and has even played with Metallica and Peter Gabriel. His solo CD entitled *One* (on Summit Records) features an all-American program of unaccompanied trumpet solos.

Dulin: *Can you both describe how you became members of the ABQ?*

Mase: When the ABQ audition came around in 1973, I think they were more interested in a New York player. Fortunately for me they asked John Swallow (trombonist of the New York Brass Quintet) if he could recommend any young trumpeters to them that they might not know about. Swallow coached the Scholarship Brass Quintet at New England Conservatory where I was in school, and mentioned my name to the group. My audition was, as all of our auditions have been, where I played something by myself and then various brass quintet excerpts with the group.

Dulin: *Do you remember what you played specifically on the audition?*

Mase: I remember the Ingolf Dahl was on there and I know there was also some early music but I don't remember exactly what it was. I remember I played a Bitsch etude and a couple of unusual things, one of which was a Mozart aria from the Arban book.

Cobb: My audition was much harder. (laughing). Actually there were a lot of similarities. The audition for the American Brass Quintet is different than it is for an orchestra. First, it is not a nationally-advertised position. The group discusses who might be a good fit and so the people auditioning are basically hand-chosen. The music for the audition is also obviously much different. As Ray mentioned, each candidate had to have a solo of their choice. Apparently that told a lot about the candidates. What solo they chose gave a lot of information. There



Ray Mase and Kevin Cobb

was also a packet that they had sent out of quintet excerpts. I made a cassette tape of all of the movements and listened to them over and over again. I practiced with them and I tried to learn the different styles. My audition had two rounds. The final round consisted of a lot of interviewing. So I would come into play a little bit and these guys would say, "How do you feel about going on the road for a couple weeks at a time?" I would say, "That's fine" and they would say, "Well why don't you leave the room." And I would go out of the room and they would talk amongst themselves and I was pacing back and forth hoping I would get to go back in again. They would bring me in again and play again and talk again. The audition lasted for about an hour. They obviously wanted a player who plays at the same level of the rest of the group, but I think it was also about how this player is going to fit in the group with their personality and how they saw the group. I think the interview was a big part of the audition. So finally they brought me in one last time and said, "Okay you got the job." That was in 1998 and I was very happy to join the group.

Dulin: *What was your quintet experience before joining the ABQ?*

Mase: I actually had good experience. In my second year of college at the New England Conservatory they formed a Scholarship Brass Quintet, which I was fortunate enough to get into. It came with a full tuition waiver and a stipend. I was in it for the last three years of my undergraduate degree. I think I knew how to work in a quintet more than in an orchestra by time I got out of school.

Cobb: I feel very similar to that. I had significant orchestra training but I also had significant brass quintet training as well. My first trumpet teacher put me in a brass quartet right away. So from the time I was eleven years old until now, I have never been without a chamber music group. That seems normal to me, but I guess is not real normal these days.

Dulin: *At what point did you realize that you wanted chamber music to be a central focus for you?*

Mase: Actually, in college I felt like I would do something other than playing in an orchestra. I enjoyed playing in quintet and liked both early music and contemporary music. New England Conservatory was sort of an offbeat place in the late 1960s. Gunther Schuller was the president and he encouraged

a lot of different types of music making. It didn't feel like orchestra was the central focus as it might have been at other schools. For me personally, getting into the ABQ was a very logical step after school.

Cobb: For me quintet became a central focus when I got into the quintet! (laughs). I say that sort of in jest but in reality I think that these days there is no guarantee about how you're going to make a living in music. I realized that I wanted to be in some sort of ensemble that made a difference. Actually I remember having a coffee with Ray to talk about this—all students as they get out of school make an appointment to see Ray at some point to discuss their lives and ask, "What am I doing?" The quintet was a special opportunity when it came along and it seemed obvious that it was something I wanted to be a part of.

Dulin: *What are your musical activities outside of the ABQ?*

Cobb: I think all of us do many different things. Freelancing in New York has a lot of variety and there is a lot to do. Broadway shows, film scores, chamber orchestras, you name it. But I think for most of us teaching has become an integral part of what we do. For the last few years teaching has been a big focus for me. I enjoy it, and I'm finding more and more students. I think we all feel that the group comes first and everything else is something we do, but it sort of supports our habit of making chamber music.

Mase: I think the key is that when one joins the ABQ, the group becomes the priority. We don't send subs or change concert dates because of people's other commitments. Everyone has to figure out a way to work around the ABQ schedule. And since the group isn't full-time, that includes a lot of different things as Kevin just mentioned. The first few years I was in the group I felt like I was also working all over New York with other groups. As the years have gone by, I have become less anxious to be running around all the time. At this point, Juilliard is the place I'm teaching. I play in the New York City Ballet Orchestra, which is a job with a certain amount of flexibility. In terms of how our personal careers affect the group, I think it's great that we all have identities and a presence in the field outside of the ABQ. It helps the group for individuals to have a strong sense of themselves and who they are. I think a lot of colleges and universities have been enthusiastic about an ABQ visit not only because of what the ABQ does as a group, but because of the work of the ABQ members outside the group.

Dulin: *Can you describe the ABQ's schedule?*

Mase: Basically, we tour in the fall and spring and it can be as much as four or five weeks each season. Generally we go out for less than a week at a time, as longer tours can be more difficult to manage with our Juilliard commitment and other teaching. Usually we schedule recording time for the fall or spring because we're in our best quintet shape. Then of course in the summer we head off to Aspen where we have various functions with the Music Festival, but really try to focus a lot on quintet performance and rehearsing.

Dulin: *Can you speak about the seating of a brass chamber group?*

Cobb: I think a common misconception is that the seating we have is static and it doesn't have any flexibility to it. I think we believe in certain aspects of the ensemble. For example, the two trumpets usually sit next to each other and that is because we like to hear each other that way and we feel it creates a better balance for the group. Now with that said we do many

pieces with the trumpets across and we do this for musical reasons. If we feel the music is illustrated better by having the trumpets across from each other we try to do that. If the hall doesn't work with us quite the way we want, we will be flexible and make the changes we need to.

Dulin: *The B-flat trumpet seems to be the most often used instrument in the quintet. Can you discuss this and other instrument choices that you make?*

Mase: When I joined a group the B-flat trumpet was the standard choice for most of the pieces that we played, and I think for the right reasons. The B-flats are the best blending instruments with the low brass. But we sometimes play on C or E-flat trumpets for more brilliant things we're doing. In the last ten or so years, flugelhorns have become more prominent in some of our early music suites and that really does make the five instruments sound most similar.

Dulin: *Outside of the normal concert series, ABQ performs educational outreach concerts. Would you discuss these concerts and why you feel is important to do them?*

Cobb: A part of what the ABQ has done recently is to promote this idea for a mini-residency. Mini-residencies include many things other than just concerts. They have an educational component to them and we offer classes that take on a variety of forms. Frequently we will go to a college and give classes and work with the students there. But for a regular chamber music series that's not associated with a school, the educational outreach is a real component to what they give. They may have a regular concert series. In fact we were recently in Joplin, Missouri, where their concert series was not part of a college program. And then we went out to the local public schools and to local "Boys and Girls Clubs;" we've even played in pubs and bars! I think this is very important, especially these days when the traditional idea of going to a concert is not as appealing to everyone. It's hard to get the average per-

son to understand what it's about. Now when we can communicate with an audience on their terms and get them excited about the music, then you might have a shot at getting people who might not normally go to concert to come in. But I think it's important to note that it doesn't mean you have to water things down. We play our regular rep wherever we go, no matter the audience—successfully! We play our normal stuff. We don't play sort of schlocky music.

Mase: I always feel like playing our regular rep is an important part of outreach for us. I suppose we could just go into school and entertain the kids for a while, but we want to remain more consistent with what we do which serves the whole purpose of outreach better. I think outreach is critical to the survival of concert series in many communities and we make it clear to our sponsors that we are happy to get out into the community.

Dulin: *Because you perform early music from the Renaissance and Baroque can you discuss performance practice models use and how you bring this into the quintet?*

Mase: Well, actually, the way the American Brass Quintet approached early music was really well on its way and quite distinctively stylized before I was a member of the group. Arnie Fromme, who was the founder and tenor trombonist in the group back in 1960, played sackbut in the New York Pro Musica, which was one of the earliest historical instrument groups in New York. Trumpeters Ron Anderson and Alan Dean both played cornetto. So there was interest in authentic early music performance in the early days of the group. But the ABQ never really tried to imitate the sounds of early instruments. We refer to our early music performance as historically informed which means we try to use our experience and

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The American Brass Quintet performing at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in celebration of the group's 40th Anniversary on November 16, 2000.

knowledge of historical performance in a modern context.

Cobb: One thing that might be unknown about the ABQ and how we approach early music is that we never do arrangements per se. It is basically all five-part music. We will all play these parts and we'll see how it goes. We may add dynamics, phrase marks, articulations and things like that, but we do this as a group. Ray might bring something in with an idea, but the evolution of the early music happens within the group, and we are playing the five-part music as it was written at the time.

Dulin: *Can you talk about the importance of working with new composers? Which composers have really stood out?*

Cobb: I think since the inception of the quintet it has been very important to the members that we get the most recent and well-known composers to write for the group. It's interesting that the most well-known name-brand composers don't always know how to write a very playable brass quintet. It's not like writing for a string quartet where you can just keep writing and writing without any physical concerns. It is surprising speaking with prominent composers because some are a little bit apprehensive about writing for a brass quintet because it's difficult. I won't say they don't understand, but it takes a special knowledge of the instruments and how to write for them to make it happen. We always have new works coming in, and common practice for the quintet is to do a premiere either out in Aspen or at Juilliard. Working

with the composer has been really special because most of the time the composers are thrilled that you are playing their music. And we're not a difficult group to work with. We want to work with the composer. We want their piece to represent what they wrote. We really try to dig in to say, is this what you mean? Is this what you want? Are these the mutes you want?

So for me that part of the process is very rewarding because you are part of the creation. You didn't write the piece, obviously, but you were part of the creative process and you are putting your stamp on it.

Mase: I think when we talk about a mission statement for the group it has always been about bringing forth brass

chamber music, either by historical examples of which there aren't really too many, or by getting new pieces written. We've had many pieces written for us and some have become significant, recognized additions to the brass repertoire. Some of the highlights over the years—works from the 1960s by Charles Whittenberg, Ralph Shapey, and Gilbert Amy; in the 1970s, the Elliott Carter Quintet was seen as an incredible accomplishment for the group, along with works by Jacob Druckman and William Bolcom; David Sampson and Eric Ewazen came along in the 1980s and wrote some pieces that have been embraced by the brass community; the 1990s had Gunther Schuller, Melinda Wagner and Robert Beaser; and then in the last few years we have had fine new pieces from Billy Childs,

Joan Tower, Shafer Mahoney, and Steven Sacco.

Dulin: *Do you think it is difficult to get some composers to write for you because brass music is not always viewed as a serious chamber music medium?*

Mase: My gut reaction is to say no. I think that when composers look at our group, they know what we are about. Now whether we have the clout that the Juilliard String Quartet or the Emerson String Quartet has in the chamber music field, that is a different issue. But I think we've done the best we can do and we've done it consistently. When you open Chamber Music Magazine to see what's going on I think brass is still not a mainstream part of chamber music. I think we have done well, and I don't think that composers look at our group as sort of this "trivial brass thing." I am always very pleased when people talk about who plays modern music and we're at the top of their list. A couple of years ago I was talking to Melinda Wagner on the phone, she wrote a quintet for us about ten years ago, and she said "Do you have any idea how many times you have played my brass quintet?" and I said just off the top of my head, "Oh, I am sure it's been thirty or forty times." and she said, "Really, well, that's been performed more than any of my other pieces by far." And she is a very respected composer who has had premieres by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. But as is often the case with modern music, a piece gets played, maybe several times and it gets set aside. We'll work hard to give a new piece as much exposure as we can.

Dulin: *The art versus entertainment question has*

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The American Brass Quintet. Raymond Mase and Kevin Cobb, Trumpets; David Wakefield, Horn; Michael Powell, Trombone; John Rojak, Bass Trombone.

been a frequent topic in brass chamber music. Can give your opinion on this and how has this opinion developed?

Cobb: The art versus entertainment aspect is a real question for us specifically because I think the brass quintet is mainly seen as an entertainment ensemble. From the 1970s when Canadian Brass came on the scene, they were extremely popular. I am not trying to convict them of simply becoming an entertainment group, or selling out. They were five funny guys doing what they do. They became a huge success. When I was a little kid that was the first quintet I knew about. Their music was everywhere and you could find it at any music store. Canadian Brass recordings were played on all the classical music stations so they were really ubiquitous. That inadvertently hurt the mission of the serious chamber music groups at the time, not just the ABQ, but other groups that were more serious. I mean this in the sense that after the rise of their popularity, people always expected an entertainment group when going to a brass quintet concert. We get comments like, "Why don't you guys play some rags or some transcriptions or something?" or "It's so great what they do, why would you not want to do that?" I think that lack of understanding continues today. As I said before, there's not another group like ours. There are some groups that do some serious music, but I often refer to it as an endangered species. I don't have anything against the other groups doing what they do. In my opinion, it's just not exactly chamber music. And I think what we do is endangered and I think people have to recognize that if they want this kind of music to remain and continue.

Mase: I lived through it. I was in the American Brass Quintet when the Canadian Brass came out and we were viewed as competitors. People were really questioning why we played this or that. People seemed anxious for us to sort of "face off." Chris Gekker, Kevin's predecessor, said it better than anybody. His comment was, "The more we stayed the same, the more different we became." We were simply continuing to do what we had always done. We just chose not to change what we were doing and then became sort of the "poster boys" for serious brass chamber music.

Dulin: *How should brass players go about trying to find the same stature that other groups do? Has it been difficult and has there been any evolution in concert promotion and audience reaction?*

Mase: I encourage young groups to try not to be all things to all people. It seems logical to young groups to say, "Well, we are going to do everything: serious music, lighter rep, pop music, and tell jokes." I think it's the kiss of death because you can't be all of those different things. A young group needs to establish an identity and be distinguished at what it is they are trying to do. Then hopefully they



The American Brass Quintet's newest CD

can create a niche for themselves. I think the Meridian Arts Ensemble is a great example of that. They have an incredibly strong conviction about the music that they believe in and that has helped established them on the highest level.

Cobb: I agree with that and I think that Meridian is great example. They are very serious about what they do and they also do a lot of heavy new music. Meridian has come up with an identity and it's very unique. We have a group identity and within that we sort of pick and choose the music that best fits our identity. But as far as the audience goes, I guess they are surprised when they walk into the hall and don't know any of the composers that are on the program. Some of them don't bother showing up because of that. I know that we've had troubles with some bookings because they don't recognize the composers. Some of the promoters really have to take a risk with us. And I think the audiences do too. They don't know what it means to go to a brass concert and not have the lighter fare. Now having said that, I think every time we play a concert, people come up and say, "I didn't know what to expect but you gave me a little of everything..." or "I really liked this piece..." or "I never expected the brass to sound this way..." etc. It's not like we are beating them over the head with the hardest new music that we can possibly find.

The available music that's out there now is so vast that you can really create a whole brass quintet program that is real music that is written for brass and have it be enjoyable. I think one of the reasons we keep playing real music is because there is so much out there.

"I encourage young groups to try not to be all things to all people."



Dulin: *Are there pieces you feel should or will become standard repertoire for the brass quintet?*

Cobb: I think the most recent piece that Joan Tower gave us should be a regular part of the repertoire. We have played it a whole lot recently and its reception has been quite good.

Mase: Well I would say the pieces by Eric Ewazen and David Sampson have already gone well beyond what we ever imagined. And there are sure others like Carter, Melinda Wagner, and Gunther Schuller.

Dulin: *What impact has the ABQ class had on students at Juilliard?*

Mase: We've had the ABQ class here at Juilliard since 1987. So it has been more than twenty years. When we first came it was interesting in that there was no real system wide organization for brass chamber music. Students would form groups and teachers would coach them but there was no real program. When we first talked to President Polisi it became apparent that if the program was going to be successful, it was going to have to easily work along side the orchestra program. We gave

a lot of thought on how that was going to happen. A good number of brass chamber music players today have come through the program now in groups like the Meridian Arts Ensemble, Extension Ensemble, Manhattan Brass players, Atlantic Brass Quintet, Empire, and Canadian Brass and of course Kevin with the ABQ now.

Dulin: *If you could structure a brass chamber music program for undergraduates how would you do it? How often would they rehearse? What decisions would you make in terms of repertoire?*

Cobb: You know our program here at Juilliard serves both undergraduates as well as graduate students. I think you have to balance the knowledge that people have along with the age. So it doesn't necessarily mean that someone who comes in as an undergrad doesn't have any knowledge about chamber music—someone might come in as a grad student who might not have had any chamber music before. So that has to be understood. But as far as repertoire goes for a new group, we recommend a lot of early music regardless of whether they have had training or not. A lot of the groups that are being put together here are together for the first time. I think many of us feel that early music gives groups a chance to work on the basic fundamentals of chamber music, much like the Arban book would give you the basic building blocks for trumpet playing. Early music gives you a chance to listen to the group's sound, and then there are the "standards." You don't want to feel like an undergrad goes through their college career and doesn't play certain pieces like the Malcolm Arnold *Quintet*, the Bozza *Sonatine* or the Ewald quintets. They should know those. And not just to say, "Oh well, we played that" but to really learn it



Photo by Peter Schaaf. Used with permission.

and really understand it and play it well. As far as rehearsing goes, I think you have to meet consistently just like you have to practice consistently. You can't have a five-hour rehearsal some Saturday, have three weeks go by and have another five-hour rehearsal and then be able to pick up the pieces. It's just not going to happen that way.

Mase: I agree that there are certain things that need to be covered like the standard pieces. Early music pieces are things that people don't always take advantage of but they strengthen the foundations of the elements of chamber music playing. I think that groups have to meet on their own and not rely too much on a coach. The interaction is so critical. But beyond that I am careful not to have a lot of preconceived notions about structure. I would make the analogy of teaching the trumpet where I have seen some teachers who try to have a student's entire four years of college laid out ahead of time. It just doesn't work. Private students as well as chamber music groups need individual "customized" programs. So in terms of a system, I would hesitate to say there really is a system, there has to be flexibility.

Cobb: I would add to that by saying that many groups that I see, especially young groups, don't quite know the freedom that is afforded them in chamber music. Even in trumpet lessons, even in music school it's like you do these things, you achieve this and you audition for that, and you make this chair and you get into this ensemble, etc. It's all very laid out in front of you. And chamber music should be the kind of environment where the coach comes in and says, "Okay, what did you guys decide?" In my coachings, even if I have a very strong opinion about how something should go, I am very hesitant to say it because I want them to come up with it on their own. Chamber music requires you to actually participate. I think a lot of younger players don't quite know just how important that is in the greater scheme of things. I think that is part of chamber music and it's something to be cultivated especially with younger students.

Dulin: *When you do clinics at colleges and high schools, are there certain tendencies that you see?*

Cobb: Yes, the balance is off when the trumpets play too loud, the tuba plays too loud, and that the inner voices don't play loud enough.

Mase: Maybe that students think there is only a right way or a wrong way, and nothing in between.

Dulin: *How do you think ABQ has influenced brass chamber music and where would you like to see it go from this point on?*

Cobb: I would say the American Brass Quintet has influenced chamber music by giving it a very serious quality to it. And I think the consistent mission from the 1960s has been that we want to elevate brass chamber music to the same level and to the same degree of acceptance as string chamber music. And that mission continues today. There has been a lot done over the past several years. I think we all sort of stand on the shoulders of our predecessors and hopefully that will continue. I think the group is facing a lot of question marks for the future, and however things resolve I think that we all hope the group continues on that same mission.

Mase: This question that you ask has recently been posed a little differently more like "Now that it is the 50th anniversary of the ABQ, what do you see for the next 50 years?" And I think some people are expecting the answer to be that it would be great if the ABQ had its own weekly TV show and people worldwide would be into brass chamber music. I have to say I don't see that in that way at all. (laughs). I have to say brass chamber music, or chamber music or maybe even classical music in general has always had a certain exclusivity

about it. It's not for everybody. And I don't know that its goal should be to try to be for everybody. It would be a terrible loss if it went away or if you couldn't hear live performances anymore. It's a vital part of culture and I hope there are always going to be people who want to experience classical music regularly. I hope that the American Brass Quintet is a part of that and the music we play will continue to be relevant and interesting.

In terms of the group itself, I'd hope the group can remain stable. The amount of work that we do year in and year out has been consistent and that is comforting. It would be great to see an ABQ down the road that is still working toward the same goals we have been for the first 50 years.

About the author: Mark Dulin is assistant professor of trumpet at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. He is a graduate of the Indiana University School of Music, the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and SUNY Stony Brook. Dulin's recent edition of Thomas Morley's *Complete Canzonets* for two trumpets is published by Balquhider Music. Dulin is a Vincent Bach Performing Artist.



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