

Horn player triumphs as soloist

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By ROBERT FINN
PLAIN DEALER MUSIC CRITIC

Eric Ruske, the young french horn player who spent three years or so as a member of the Cleveland Orchestra's horn section not long ago, returned to town in triumph as a featured soloist last night.

His performance of Mozart's E flat horn concerto (K. 447) was both centerpiece and highlight of last night's concert by the Ohio Chamber Orchestra in the Little Theater at the Cleveland Convention Center.

Music Director Dwight Utman, in the first of only two appearances he will make in the OCO's subscription series, in this final season of his tenure, began the concert with a rather scrappy performance of Bach's first Brandenburg Concerto. Also heard were Samuel Barber's modern classic "Adagio for Strings" and Stravinsky's jaunty "Pulcinella" ballet suite.

Ruske, still only 28, played with a big, open, commanding sound that was much different from the leaner, more pointed sound he favored in his orchestra days. In the Mozart perfor-

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mance he was very much the center of attraction; the orchestra seemed relegated to a distinctly secondary status. Ruske's technique was in good order and he took full advantage of the soloist's spotlight to deliver some truly distinguished horn playing. The orchestra played well for Utman too, but there was no doubt where the center of attention lay.

The audience's enthusiasm when the concerto was over brought forth a most unusual encore — the first movement of a Bach violin concerto transcribed for horn and orchestra. It was a pure virtuoso tour de force — all the more so when you realize that horn players have to breathe while playing those long, violin lines. Ruske managed that feat while still keeping the solo line intact.

It was some show. Eric Ruske (who doubles as a member of the Empire Brass when not playing solo) seems to have the musical world at his feet at a very young age indeed.

The OCO sounded a little ragged in the Bach first Brandenburg, and there was a fair amount of out-of-tune playing. Best feature of the performance was the work of the winds, especially in the two trios of the final minute movement. Utman, of course, is something of a Bach specialist since he directs the venerable Bach festivals at Baldwin-Wallace College Conservatory; this thoroughly modern-style OCO performance, however, was light-years removed in spirit from the way things are done at BW each May.

Utman is a crisply efficient conductor rather than a sentimentalist. The performance of the Barber adagio that he led with a group of perhaps 20 string players was well balanced, full-bodied and in tune — and it stripped the famous piece of its tendency toward sentimental moonshine. Many conductors, seeking emotional impact in this piece, stretch the long lines of Barber's melody out to the breaking point; Utman's performance was just as effective in its own dry-eyed way. He

actually infused it with a touch of drama at the climax just before the final return of the main theme.

"Pulcinella" is one of the most pleasant, tender, friendly fun pieces in all music, and once Utman and his players got into it Friday night, it skittered along very nicely.

The beginning, however, was not promising. The sprightly little "Overture" sounded labored, as did also one or two of the earlier movements. But by the time conductor and players got to the "Tarantella," the performance took off and made its cheeky points with gusto from there to the end. There was fine solo work from many players, oboe and horn, especially. The piece took on a rhythmic life after the shaky start, and the playing became pointed and full of satirical bite.

There was a good-sized audience that seemed to enjoy everything it heard, especially — and with good reason — Ruske's contribution.