

ERIC RUSKE

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Empire Brass Brilliant

■ French hornist sails through a Bach piano and violin piece.

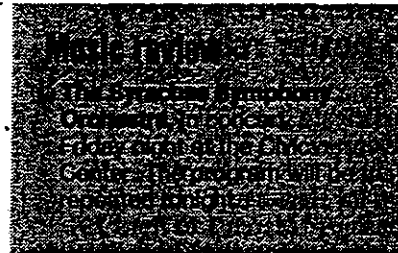
By LARRY MCGINN
Contributing Writer

The quintet that makes up the Empire Brass are not just wonderful musicians — they are also star performers who take total charge of the stage from the moment they enter. And that was the case Friday night, when they held a large audience enthralled for nearly an hour at a concert by the Syracuse Symphony.

Trumpeters Rolf Smedvig and Jeffrey Curnow, trombonist Scott A. Hartman and tubist J. Samuel Pilafian along with Eric Ruske and his magic French horn looked confident as they played compositions by Bach (transcribed, naturally) to Copland. And why shouldn't they?

Their tone can be clarion as in the Processions of the Nobles from "Mlada," by Rimsky-Korsakov; it can be suave as it was in the first movement of Albinoni's Suite in G Major; and it can be utterly thrilling as it was in the encore, the Variations on a Shaker Theme by the late Aaron Copland.

For sheer virtuosity, though, nothing could top Ruske's performance of a movement from a Bach violin and piano piece. There he stood with his horn, one of the most difficult instruments, and sailed through the work with the ease of a fine violinist. It was quite a display.



There was more Bach on the program, excerpts from three cantatas. Sometimes the blend of the bright sounds struck the ear as altogether modern; in other instances, the instruments cradled the melodies affectionately.

Kazuyoshi Akiyama began the evening with an early work of Stravinsky, "Fireworks." That theme carried on for the following Overture from Music for the Royal Fireworks, in which the Empire ensemble made its first appearance. Whether it was something from two centuries ago, like a Handel piece, or music from our own time, such as excerpts from the Suite from "Lieutenant Kije" by Prokofiev, this was a concert to relish. It was a brilliant performance.

After intermission, Akiyama and the SSO gave a warm reading of the Symphonic Dances by Rachmaninoff. The three-movement piece came late in the composer's career and lacks the fire of youth. It is, however, an elegantly crafted work, and the performance was a pleasure, if something of an anticlimax to the night.