

Carrying a tune: Community band changes name, but holds on to roots

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WEST NEWBURY - For Karen Mundo, there's something innately nostalgic about a community band.

Coming of age in upstate New York, Mundo was introduced to the volunteer musical ensembles through her grandfather and father, who were members of their hometown bands.

When she was old enough to pick up an instrument, she set her hands on the French horn, and carried it through her education at the New England Conservatory of Music, Boston.

"It's always been something about the music that's excited me," said Mundo. "You even see it with the kids. They perk up when they hear it."

Mundo has brought her passion for music to the Triton public schools, where she works as a music teacher, and, more recently, to the Merrimack Valley Concert Band as its conductor.

The community band based in West Newbury is enjoying a resurgence following a transformation that has included a new name and constitution, while still holding fast to its roots.

On Sunday, the 35-member group with a devotion to the music of the Great American Songbook raises its instruments for a Christmas Concert at Pentucket Regional Middle School in West Newbury.

The band's origins date back to the turn of the century when rural communities throughout New England fought fires with volunteer-manned bucket brigades and horse-drawn, hand-pumped fire tubs.

As more modern equipment began to replace the handtubs, towns began forming volunteer organizations, like the West Newbury Veteran Firemen's Association, to keep the past tradition alive.

The associations, many of which remain in place today, took to competing in handtub contests, called musters. To add to the pomp of the competitions' friendly rivalries, bands were sometimes formed to accompany the handtubs to the competitions.

The West Newbury Veteran Firemen's Association Band got its start on the competition circuit, cheering on the town's Gardner 4 handtub at musters and marching in other community events throughout the year.

The first bands were comprised entirely of male musicians, said Mundo, who were all part of the handtub company. And judging by the size of area community bandstands built around the turn of the century, she said, the bands were traditionally relatively small, numbering perhaps 15 to 20 players.

As musters have begun to fade in the last few decades, becoming more of a novelty event these days, the West Newbury band has evolved into a community group that entertains throughout the region.

To better reflect its modern-day composition, Mundo led the group in a separation from the West Newbury Veteran Firemen's Association earlier this year. The newly re-formed Merrimack Valley Concert Band has incorporated as its own nonprofit organization.

Mundo said the band seeks to fill the vacuum that exists for quality instrumental groups in the region. A traditional community band, it features more seasoned musicians sharing music stands with adult beginners, with a repertoire that includes both modern and traditional material.

Members hail from throughout the North of Boston region, and range in age from 9 to 86. Their backgrounds are varied, from music teachers and students to engineers and retirees.

There are family members who come to play together, and people who have been inspired to dust off their instruments after 40 years in the cases. Some of the musicians also perform with other groups, including the New England Brass Band, Cantemus and the Gordon College Symphonic Band.

But all share a desire to develop and enhance their musical talents, education and enjoyment through rehearsals and performances.

Mundo takes a semi-professional approach with the ensemble, demanding a certain amount of commitment without diminishing the pleasure of performing. She allows no egos to interfere, rotating parts to give everyone a chance at a solo or fill a featured spot. And she doesn't seek to embarrass beginners, instead giving them pointers to encourage improvement.

"My philosophy is that if it isn't music, then what is it?" she said. "Our primary sound has got to be musical. But you still can have fun making it."

Newburyport's Rick Colby, who recently took up the clarinet, joined the band in January to experience the dynamics of playing with a group. Working with

performers who have strong musical backgrounds, he said, has helped him grow as a musician.

"The group doesn't discriminate," he said. "There's a broad range of talent involved."

Colby was prompted to learn the clarinet after his son started playing saxophone in the Newburyport schools. He thought it would be something they could enjoy together. He's also discovered it's been a positive outlet for himself.

"It's good mental exercise," said Colby. "It's something I think you can do at any age."

The 88-year-old Huestis Purdy of Newbury started playing trombone in retirement. "I wanted something to do," he said, "to keep me active, to keep my lungs going."

He joined the band about 10 years ago, and likes the camaraderie that he finds in the group. A former cabinet maker for Towle and Co., he built the podium Mundo uses to conduct the band.

Despite having a pacemaker put in this month, Purdy is determined to take his seat with the band for Sunday's Christmas Concert. While he's under doctor's orders not to drive, he said his physician didn't mention anything about not playing the trombone.

"I'm not a professional. I'm just a do-it-yourselfer," he said of his musical talents, "but I have a lot of friends in the group."

While there is no audition, the group isn't a training band. Members must have a certain level of skill and be able to keep up with the band's material of medium difficulty.

"We tolerate a wide level of talent," said Mundo. "We want to encourage people to get better."

New members are welcome to try the group. Rehearsals are held weekly on Tuesday nights in the Annex behind the 1910 Building on Route 113 in West Newbury. But Mundo doesn't want to see the group get too large, hoping to cap the ensemble at about 50 performers to keep it manageable.

The Merrimack Valley Concert Band makes about a dozen concert appearances a year, playing bandstands from York Beach, Maine, to Ipswich as well as indoor venues. A small contingent also takes to the streets to march in a few holiday parades.

Sunday's Christmas concert is supported by the West Newbury Cultural Council. But Mundo said performances can get expensive, what with the price of sheet music and other costs. While the band has little overhead, it would like to buy some new instruments and equipment to enhance its performances.

The Christmas Concert Program will feature a mixture of classical works, traditional carols and popular holiday tunes. "Once in Royal David's City" and "Infant Hotel" is paired with "Silent Night," "Frosty the Snowman," and "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer." The show will include a visit from Santa.

Mundo hopes the band will continue to grow, both in size and in experience, as it continues to offer musicians in the area a place to play.

"Our job is to try and make the music come alive," said Mundo. "When you get to that moment when everyone's in sync, there's nothing like it. It's such a high."

If You Go

What: Merrimack Valley Concert Band's Christmas Concert.

When: Sunday, Dec. 19, 2 p.m.

Where: Pentucket Regional Middle School, Route 113, West Newbury.

How: Free; visit www.mvcband.org.