

Don't stop the music: Strike a chord for community



The Sackville Concert Band is composed of passionate players, retired professional musicians, former Stadacona Band members and music teachers.

There's a powerful chord resonating from Lower Sackville on Saturday mornings, as a diverse group of musicians converge from all facets of Nova Scotia community life, proving high school graduation shouldn't be a time to pack away those French horns, clarinets and oboes.

Together, this array of passionate players make Sackville Concert Band, one of Canada's premiere concert bands, composed of passionate players, retired professional musicians, former Stadacona Band members and music teachers, like band president Tom Rusinak.

"There's the Symphony, then HMCS Stadacona Band, then us," says Rusinak. He's enthusiastic about engaging the Halifax community to come and enjoy their playing, take part in their concerts and embrace music for life.

"The nice thing about our organization is we have two bands," says computer tech entrepreneur Mike Johnston and president of Red Space. "We have the proper Sackville Concert Band, made-up of professional musicians, retired stad players and a few of us who've managed to sneak our way in ... b there's also our 9 Am band, which rehearses Saturday mornings at 9 a.m." The 9 AM band, a learning band that doesn't require an audition, has musicians ranging from 10-to-68-years-old. Johnston says it's a family affair.

"It's fun for me to do with my family and be able to share it with the kids, to foster their love for music," says saxophonist Johnston, whose 11-year-old son also plays sax, while his 13-year-old daughter and wife play clarinet.

"In one family there's a clarinet player, trumpet player and a dad who plays baritone horn," says Rusinak.

"There are teachers who are learning new instruments and people who haven't played in years who are coming back ... sort of second chance," says Johnston who has seen the band grow from about six to about 40 participants.

"If you haven't played an instrument in a few years, it's a nice place to start," says Steve Rigden, a retired engineer with Department of National Defence.

Growing up, Rigden played in the Middleton Band, but took a break when opting to study engineering instead of music at university. "I was never much of an athlete so music was my thing," says Rigden. He's played with Chebucto Concert Band and Chebucto Big Band over the years and now plays w five different ensembles. "It's my release, I guess. It's what I do for fun."

"For me, (Sackville Concert Band) is about the calibre. It's by far the most challenging band I've played in," says Johnston. Originally from Truro, he says one of his earliest influencers was 'musical god' Ron MacKay, before leaving for Harvard to complete a biochemistry and physics degree.

"I kept playing there and I played at the College of Music in Boston, sort of on the side with an ensemble, while at university." Johnston stopped playing when his family was young, but says he began seeking out ensembles a few years ago, playing saxophone, clarinet and has recently begun learning t obo.

Rusinak says the concert band has performed to sold out crowds at the Portia White concert series and will be guest performers at the Musique Royal Concert series in Lunenburg this October.

The 9 AM band recently won gold in the Atlantic Band festival where 69 bands and 3,200 kids participated from Canada and the states. "For those kids to get out of bed on Saturday mornings and be dedicated, interested and passionate ... and their parents are driving them, it's really rewarding," says Rusinak.

"We hear from a lot from high school music teachers that kids don't think music is something that continues after high school. Most kids think you park the instrument and do whatever you're going to do for a career," says Johnston. "So doing these kinds of joint events together, you know having a band that welcomes kids, doing concerts in conjunction with some schools ... the music teachers are so appreciative."

Music for life

Second Chances Community Band of Nova Scotia recently organized the Halifax Community Band Festival at Saint Mary's University, where 114 community musicians from the Atlantic Provinces gathered for a weekend of learning and performing under the direction of four guest conductors and accompanied by 10 experienced clinicians.

"We borrowed some music from the Sackville Concert band for the weekend," said event co-organizer Chris Ward. "They're quite a high end band in the city. They're really, really good."

He says the festival weekend is all about learning. "We wanted to host this community band program because we're really passionate about this idea of community within the world of community bands."

"You've got all these people coming together and being inspired. The Stadacona band performed and it was amazing," said guest conductor Jason Caslor. A professor and music conductor at Memorial University in Saint John's, Caslor said participants' dedication was incredible. "They don't have to be here. They love playing and they want to get better."

Caslor conducted beginner band, the MacKay band, in Rising Star, a slow and lyrical piece and South Hill March. He said the more advanced band, named after the late Jim Hargreaves, played a piece called Zooveniers. "It's like seven animals from the zoo, with cheetahs, pandas, primates and elephants ... the elephants start with big drums in the back and the French horns and trumpets do elephant calls," said Caslor. "If you pick the right kind of music, at the right level, then everyone can feel successful right away. All the conductors are great and they've been doing it a long time."

Ward says there's an abundance of programs to bring high school players together. "After leaving high school, there's this void ... it's either the really high end, professional or talented groups of musicians, but there's no intermediary step between the two. We're filling in that gap."

Ward founded Second Chances Community Band of Nova Scotia, a three-tiered program for beginners to advance players, to give access to anyone interested in learning how to play music in an ensemble.

Based in Spryfield, Ward says the organization has really been adopted by the community as their community band. "It kind of morphed from the number of players we have from the area, the charity we do in Spryfield and our mandate of giving back to the community," says the conductor and instructor.

"There are some really really great musical ensembles in metro and throughout the province, but a lot of them are looking for players who have an ongoing playing experience." Second Chances, he says, welcomes people who have never played in their lives.

"A lot of wonderful things have developed out of these band festivals ... having professionals sitting with amateurs, the professionals realize why they got involved in music in the first place," says conductor and music director Laura Mercer of Second Wind Community Concert Band from Cape Breton. Second Wind hosts the Cape Breton Community Band Fall Festival, celebrating its 20th anniversary this season.

"My motto is 'music for life'. Ron MacKay and I used that tagline all the time," says the musician. "That's been the joy, I think, of the band fest, getting the professionals married up with the amateurs." She says it allows new musicians to take themselves to the next level, whatever that may be. "It's not like high school. They're community people who are doctors and reporters and they're chemists. They have another life, this is their fun, but they take it serious."

Dianne Thibault is a biology teacher and trombone player from Clare. Thibault travelled to Halifax for the festival with a few members from their band, Fanfare Régionale de Clare. "I've been playing quite a few years, but am very much an amateur," said Thibault. She said the weekend helped improve her technique and her music reading. "If there's one next year, we'll be back."

Sackville Concert Band is under the musical direction of highly acclaimed Jim Forde. Forde is a senior member of the World Association of Marching Show Bands, an active instrumentalist, clinician, conductor and international adjudicator. When he's not conducting the Sackville Concert Band, he can be found co-producing the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo.

The band, originally created to offer Sackville its own marching band, has since evolved into a community band, but they still march in the annual Canada Day parade. "We had to pick Tom up at the end of the last one," laughs Rigden. "You've got to be able to march three kilometres."

"You'd see our principal first clarinet marching beside a 10-year-old little girl ... it was great," says Johnston.

"It's a community band, but it's a community in itself. Everyone's so different but everyone is there for the same reason," says music teacher Bradley Reid. The professional musician is no stranger to the pit at Neptune Theatre, recently playing flute and clarinet in the play Sweeney Todd. Reid plays everything from woodwind to saxophone, oboe and bassoon.

“He plays a great fiddle,” chimes Rusinak.

“It’s another community. We all tap in from everyone’s different backgrounds and learn from each other ... It’s about giving kids an experience with music so they continue in life,” says Reid, who returned to Sackville in 2009, after spending seven years playing aboard cruise ships.

There are all kinds of bands out there from concert, jazz and big bands to deep-toned German oompah bands, says Johnston. “It’s about activation energy. People are just scared to try it. But there are a lot of groups around that are very popular, very welcoming and very forgiving at the adult level.’ At the youth level, he says there are lots of opportunities for kids to stretch their skills outside of school.

“You go to the grocery store and you feed your tummy. You go to a concert and it feeds your soul,” says Rusinak who taught in more than 60 schools spanning 32 years. If he had his way, he’d probably feed his soul first. He says he hopes more people will be encouraged to come out and engage the bands.

Their musical assortments are as varied as their backgrounds; lawyers, doctors, crown prosecutors, journalists and military specialists, all coming together in a harmonic community.

“We’re all somebody...” laughs Rusinak “... we all need jobs to make money. If we had to choose, I bet we’d pick this.”

[About the Author »](#)

CYNDI SWEENEY | HERALD COMMUNITY

From Around the Web

Promoted Links by Tabc

Dal dentistry whistleblower only student still banned from clinic

Leaders And Beautiful: 20 Stunning Republican Women
USASocialCondition.com

Is Financial Planning Better for Men?
Bentley University

Download your FREE Comparison Guide to Health Insurance

What is Leadership? Difference Between Leaders and Managers
St. Thomas University Online

Andrew Younger's status unclear as legislature nears spring sitting

COMMENTING POLICY - UPDATED AUG. 19, 2014

As a Chronicle Herald subscriber, you have the added benefit of commenting on articles.

Sign into your existing account or
subscribe today for as little as 43¢ per day.

LOGIN

The
ChronicleHerald

AdChoices