



Anthony Beatrice conducts the Merrimack Valley Concert Band during the Sept. 11 remembrance ceremony at the ninth annual Field of Honor at Bartlet Mall in Newburyport.

Jim Valkovics photo

Accent on community

Merrimack Valley Concert Band strikes a chord

When it comes to bringing people together, there are few things that do the job as well as music.

One of the best local examples of this is the Merrimack Valley Concert Band, a West Newbury-based community group that for nearly a century has brought full-scale arrangements of traditional and contemporary pieces to events in Greater Newburyport and beyond.

Formerly known as the West Newbury Veteran Fireman's Association Concert Band, the group's roots date back to 1922, an outgrowth of a time when volunteers from the rural community formed bucket brigades to fight fires with hand-pumped apparatus.

It has evolved over the years — from a fife and drum corps to a brass marching ensemble to its current focus as a concert band.

Today, with about 40 members ranging in age from their early teens to their mid-70s, the band remains exactly what its name suggests: a community band that's also a community in itself.

Just ask band director Anthony Beatrice, who first joined its ranks in 1998 as a seventh-grader and has been at its helm since 2010.

"It really is a community band through and through, and being part of a large ensemble experience that's cross-generational, there's something special about that," Beatrice says.

By JACK SHEA



Ryan Huron photos

Merrimack Valley Concert Band vocalist and flutist Kathy Peavey says the Merrimack Valley Concert Band is very much a family. Indeed, her two sons are also involved in the band, one as a musician and the other as part of the technical support.

Early notes

After West Newbury made the transition from hand-pumped fire apparatus, or hand tubs, to more modern equipment, the fife and drum corps formed to accompany the tubs to pumping competitions known as firemen's musters.

The band remained silent for a period in the mid-20th century and then reformed as a brass marching band, accompanied by baton twirlers and a color guard. But after a decade of league championships and even a trip to the 1964 New York World's Fair, more silence followed.

The group re-emerged to participate in the 100th anniversary of the New England States Veteran Firemen's League in 1990. The event kicked off a new life for the band that saw it continuing to march in parades and perform concerts across the Merrimack Valley, North Shore and New Hampshire Seacoast.

In 1995, the band expanded to regional status, representing 25 communities. In 2004, it officially became the Merrimack Valley Concert Band and achieved its nonprofit status.

Each year, the group presents a series of free summer concerts and a set of holiday



Merrimack Valley Concert Band percussionist Jill McCutcheon keeps the beat during a performance this past summer at Haverhill Crossings.

shows, while also appearing at various special events throughout the region.

The band welcomes members of different levels of musicianship, who gather at Pentucket Regional Middle School for

weekly two-hour rehearsals on Tuesday nights from September through June.

It's a well-balanced group, Beatrice says, with instruments that aren't often found in a community band, like oboe,

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bassoon, bass clarinet and French horn. Flute and saxophone players are especially in demand these days.

There is no membership fee to join, with all of the group's costs covered through local cultural council grants, fundraisers and revenue from paid gigs.

Beatrice led the music department of the Pentucket Regional School District for nine years before becoming performing arts program director for the Boston Public Schools. He says that the most challenging part of his role as the community band's director is selecting music that can suit the skills of members while simultaneously entertaining audiences.

Mixing an array of genres, the band's set list covers some serious ground, incorporating jazz selections like "Birdland" and "Zoot Suit Riot"; music from TV and film, including favorites by John Williams; popular releases from the '70s and '80s; patriotic pieces and marches; and numbers from the Great American Songbook.

"We take the audience on a journey; we try to excite them immediately, then we calm down and play something slower and more melodic," Beatrice says. "I think people are moved emotionally by those pieces."

Musical fusion

Greg Lyons, the band's president and principal clarinetist, describes the band as a melting pot of people from different backgrounds and skill levels, united under a shared love of playing music.

"There are mainly two types of band instrumentalists: people who are more artistic and those who come from an engineering background, but they all have a common goal of making the music," says Lyons, who lives in Merrimac. "It's the idea that people desire to create the sound."

What results, he says, is a massive,

RINGING IN THE SEASON

Celebrate the holidays with the Merrimack Valley Concert Band at two upcoming free performances:

► **Friday, Dec. 7, 7 to 9 p.m.**, Pentucket Regional High School auditorium, 24 Main St., West Newbury. A bake sale at intermission will benefit the band's summer camp scholarship.

► **Sunday, Dec. 16, 3 to 4:30 p.m.**, Murray Hall, The Bridge at 211, 211 Bridge St., Salem.

For more information, visit www.mvcband.com.

variety-filled sound unique to large, community ensembles, blending the cultures and sonic textures of each instrumental section and the slightly differing instrumental "voices" of each player.

"From a musical point of view, I enjoy the sound of having this whole variety of different instruments," Lyons says. "In a group like that, you can generate a different sound. It's much greater than just a group of clarinetists."

Clarinetist Lorrie Arianna Dispenza discovered the band through an online search earlier this year. The 29-year-old Haverhill resident was looking for a new group to perform with and liked the varied repertoire and regular rehearsal schedule that the Merrimack Valley Concert Band offered.

"I enjoy it very much," she says. "Everyone seems to get along very well, and it's a great way to continue playing."

Lead trumpet player Maria Karavetsos came on board nine years ago. A Haverhill native and 1997 graduate of Haverhill High School, she had played in the Hillies marching band growing up. Now active with a senior drum and bugle



The Merrimack Valley Concert Band poses for a group photo during a performance at York Beach, Maine.

Courtesy photo.

corps, she says that the community band provides a different type of experience.

While members do a fair amount of practicing at home and come to rehearsals prepared, Karavetsos says the overall atmosphere is one of enjoyment.

"We have a ball. We don't take ourselves too seriously," says Karavetsos, who considers music a way to keep her mind active and relieve some of the daily stress from her job with a medical company.

"If it wasn't fun," she says, "none of us would do it."

It was Karavetsos who encouraged fellow Haverhill resident Jill McCutcheon to join the ranks. A percussionist who started banging the drums at age 4, McCutcheon has been playing with drum corps, marching bands and community groups since graduating from Haverhill High in 1984.

Like many of her bandmates, McCutcheon was drawn to the Merrimack Valley Concert Band by the energy and direction of Beatrice and the type of music he selects for the group.

"We play music that everybody likes and that everybody understands and can sing along to," she says.

But the enjoyment goes beyond solely the music the band plays, McCutcheon

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says. It's about being part of a group of people who share similar interests and passions.

"Once you play with these folks, they become family for life," she says.

This "family" feeling rings especially true for Merrimack resident Kathy Peavey, the band's flute section leader and vocalist. She and her two sons, Jacob and Aaron Peavey, have been involved with the band for years.

Jacob, 23, started as the band's maraca player at age 4 and currently serves as one of its main drummers, while also sitting on the board of directors. Aaron, 17, helps set up audio equipment and run sound during each of the band's performances.

"Being a part of the MCVB has become a very special activity that the three of us can do together," Kathy Peavey says.

In harmony

As a unit, the concert band holds some historic value in the Merrimack Valley, preserving Americana music from the mid-20th century and bringing it to a variety of events. But for its members, the group also provides local musicians with an opportunity to continue practicing their instruments and performing in front of crowds.



Jim Valknoras photo

The Merrimack Valley Concert Band features instruments not commonly found in a community band, like the euphonium, played here by Valerie Hermanson.

While less experienced members are offered private lessons, Beatrice says that simply practicing and performing with other musicians often helps them elevate their skills.

"Being part of the overall group will raise their musicianship over time, and it's truly enjoyable to see that growth,"

he says.

Lyons says that the band is a disciplined bunch, both musically and nonmusically, with many members who are eager to lend a helping hand to others.

"You have to have people who are able to work together to create the dynamics, the rhythm," he says. "And fortunately, it's a band of volunteers, and everybody really likes to contribute to it. It's sort of like, 'Many hands make light work.'"

The band is currently rehearsing for its holiday concerts, with performances in the works at Pentucket Regional High School and in Salem.

Beatrice is also looking forward to taking part in West Newbury's 200th anniversary in 2019.

"It's our hometown, where the band started, and being a part of that celebration will be exciting," he says.

On his bucket list for the band is the chance to perform the national anthem before a Red Sox game.

But whether the venue is Fenway Park or the West Newbury Community Bandstand, where the band kicks off the summer concert series every year, the mission is the same: to deliver music that inexplicably unites crowds with familiar sounds and fills listeners with emotion in ways other modes of communication cannot.

"Music is very transient — you can't frame it," Lyons says. "For people like myself, it is a medium that connects our inner being to the local community and the broader community. Music is a major way that we view and connect to the world." ❧

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