

# Band takes road trip

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Monday, July 16, 2007



Photo by Scott Rochat

Forget the Three Tenors — meet the three tubas. From left, Patrick Sheridan and Sam Pilafian of Arizona State University and Jeff Hodapp of the Emporia Municipal Band play “A Bugler’s Holiday” during the municipal band’s concert before the Kansas Bandmasters Association in Wichita on Friday.

WICHITA — The Emporia Municipal Band got statewide exposure Friday, performing a complete concert — including the new Emporia march, “Beacon on the Prairie” by James Barnes — for the Kansas Bandmasters Association.

Barnes himself conducted the band during “Beacon,” making a great day for the band just a little better. The concert at the Wichita Marriott was the first time Emporia’s city band had ever played for the bandmasters’ association in the 34-year history of the KBA.

“I think this is a very good step for the band,” said clarinet player Alisha Miller, a seven-year member of the band. “We’ve had the band for years, and to show it’s still at the top of its game, commissioning new works, is really great stuff for us.”

Most of the concert was led by longtime director Gary McCarty, who first tried to get the group a spot at the convention two years ago. Playing for a roomful of band directors, he said, did present a certain challenge.

“On the one hand, they’re more critical listeners and have very high expectations,” he said. “On the other hand, they know where we’re from and what we do. And they love to see a collection of musicians who aren’t in school anymore, playing music because they want to.

“That’s kind of our unstated goal in the schools — to let people know they can continue to be musicians even after they’ve left the band program.”

The band has performed in Emporia since 1941 and still has one founding member, Bob Fry. It plays nine concerts each summer on Thursday nights at Fremont Park.

None of the Fremont regulars would have felt out of place at the Wichita concert. Roger Hartsook was still on the microphone as the emcee. The band still opened with “The Star-Spangled Banner” and closed with “Home on the Range.” In fact, the only thing missing from the indoor concert was the presence of the BNSF railroad, usually rumbling just a block away on performance nights.

“If you could whistle five or six times like a train, it would make us really feel at home,” Hartsook joked to the audience.

The spotlight piece, “Beacon on the Prairie,” was commissioned by the band for Emporia’s 150th anniversary and was first performed July 5 in Emporia. Barnes said the image came in part from the many drives he had made along the Kansas Turnpike, where Emporia was a welcome respite. More metaphorically, he said, it could also refer to the city’s prominent figures such as Pulitzer Prize-winning publisher William Allen White.

Many in the band had been looking forward to seeing Barnes’ interpretation of his own work. During a short rehearsal, he tuned the dynamics carefully: a little more force on the fanfare here, a lighter touch on the connecting passage there.

“Exaggerate the differences,” he urged. “When it’s loud, play real loud. If it’s soft, play so soft you could hear a mouse peein’ on a sponge.”

The song was well-received but was far from the only highlight. Audience members laughed as a line of adults and children paraded American flags around the room for the children’s march, squeezing past sound equipment and around chairs.

They laughed and cheered even harder at a tuba trio involving the band’s Jeff Hodapp of Emporia State University and two Arizona State University professors, Patrick Sheridan and Sam Pilafian. Together, the three launched into the lively “Bugler’s Holiday,” a fast and furious piece designed for trumpets or bugles.

The crowd rose to its feet applauding as the tuba triplets came to the end of their wild ride.

“It’d be nice if they could play it up-tempo,” an audience member quipped.

The three tubas popped up one more time as the municipal band launched into “The Stars and Stripes Forever” — this time playing along with the piccolo part. The band’s spirited Sousa rendition charged up the band leaders in the audience, who began to clap the beat as the musicians thundered into the final chorus and finished with a flourish.

It all added up to one memorable night for the band members.

“This is my first time on a charter bus, my first time at a Marriott and I got to meet James Barnes,” said Connie Conlin, a flute player who joined the band six years ago. “And I’m really excited to be part of a world premiere like ‘Beacon on the Prairie.’”

“That’s a story I could pass to my children.”

Reprinted by permission: Emporia Gazette Monday July 16, 2007