

A Concert to Warm the Heart on a Cold Winter's Day

On a recent, bitterly cold Monday evening, my wife and I headed to Cedar Falls for a holiday concert at Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center on the University of Northern Iowa campus. When we got there and settled into our seats, we took a few moments to soak in the atmosphere. The stage was a picture of glowing, Christmas splendor. Giant snowflakes, suspended from the upper regions of The Great Hall, twisted slowly in the air currents above the stage. The musicians, decked out in festive, brightly colored shirts with black vests, were arranged in traditional arched rows around the director's podium. Within moments of our arrival the concert began and we were transfixed.

An hour or so later, after delivering a sparkling performance, the musicians and their director basked in the glory of a standing ovation from an enthusiastic and appreciative audience. A typical holiday band concert—except for one little thing: every performer on that stage was on the far side of 50 years old, some way over that traditional milestone, but each playing joyfully. It was, in fact, the winter concert of the UNI New Horizons Band. And it was nothing less than a blast! It was one of those happy times when it is hard to tell who is having more fun, the performers or the audience.

The first New Horizons Band—there are currently some 130 scattered around the United States, Europe and Canada—was the brainchild of one Roy Ernst of the famous Eastman School of Music in New York back in 1991. Professor Ernst, as stated in the notes on the back of the concert program, felt that “anyone can learn to play music at a level that will bring a sense of accomplishment and the ability to perform in a group,” including that special class of folks usually referred to as senior citizens. New Horizons caters to older players of all experience levels, from absolute beginner (lessons are available) to salty veterans with resumes that reflect their many years of playing. The common theme is a desire to make beautiful music with like-minded and equally dedicated friends in a low-key, sociable environment. It's a concept that obviously works!

I am not a musical person, or perhaps I should say that I have had precious little musical training in my 59 years on this earth. The closest I have come to participating in a musical organization would be many, many years of carrying my wife's bassoon around on her behalf. But watching these seasoned citizens play their instruments with such unfettered joy the other night made me want to run home and find the old cornet I bought and had refurbished once upon a garage sale. As New Horizons Band Director and enthusiastic promoter Diana Blake is wont to say, “If not now, when?” And a good question it is. If not now, when? Who knows at any given time how much sand remains in that personal hourglass we call life? *Carpe diem*, I say! Seize the day! I have a lapel pin that says “Now's the time!” Indeed. Maybe now is the time to stop waffling and go find that long-lost cornet. Who knows, if things go well, maybe I'll even get to the point of doing something with that beautiful guitar I got for my birthday five years ago. Yeah, that poor, neglected thing in the TV room with all the cobwebs on it. And then there's always that harmonica languishing in the desk drawer...

If you'd like to find out more about becoming a part of the fun and accomplishment that is UNI New Horizons Band, you are encouraged to contact the UNI School of Music at 319-273-2024 or Diana Blake at 352-3007. Alternatively, you can call Band Administrative Assistant Cindi Mason at 273-2142 or email mason@uni.edu. If a phone call feels like too much of a commitment, hedge your bets by first visiting the UNI New Horizons Band website at www.cs.uni.edu/~beck/uninhb. Maybe *then* you'll be up to making that call.

Whether you're an absolute musical tyro, such as myself, a former player who wants to perhaps take a crack at playing a different instrument, or just someone who wants to enjoy a free live concert, make a point of catching one of the band's always-entertaining performances. But be forewarned, you may find yourself rushing home to dig your old sax out of the closet or from under the stairs. Or maybe you too may have a garage-sale instrument that is begging, if you'll pardon the expression, to get back in the *swing* of things. If you're like me, when you leave a New Horizons Band concert, you'll feel like if you *don't* get involved you'll be missing out on a whole lot of fun. So, don't be shy, give the folks at New Horizon a call. I guarantee, when it comes to fun, there's plenty to go around. And maybe you and I can make beautiful music together—as members of the UNI New Horizons Band.