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## 'Little by little, the band got good'

City of Fairfax Band celebrates 40th anniversary

by Kali Schumitz | Staff Writer  
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To be accurate, the City of Fairfax Band is actually approaching the 41st anniversary of its formation. The group's first concert was on the steps of City Hall in summer 1969.

But this year the band is celebrating its 40th anniversary season. Band members consider the two concerts scheduled in 1970 to be the all-volunteer musical group's first season, according to music director Robert Pouliot. "Although one of those was rained out," he said.

With the same humble beginnings as many community bands -- a group of people who played instruments in high school, college or the military

getting together to keep up their musical chops -- the now 120-member City of Fairfax Band has grown to encompass a nationally recognized concert band and six other ensembles.

"I am sure that nobody would have imagined that the band would even still be around 40 years later," said Alan Cole, 67, a French horn player who has been with the band since its third year.

Thanks to the leadership of Thomas Hill, a George Mason University professor who took over the baton in 1971, the band moved toward a more professional direction, according to Cole. Hill now holds the honorarium of conductor emeritus.

"Just by his musicianship and leadership he really elevated the standard," Cole said. "Little by little, the band got good."

Hill recalled the band's roots as "a real community band," performing at nursing homes, schools and major community events, such as the city's Fourth of July parade.

Over time, it expanded from holding summer-only concerts to year-round performances, Hill said.

The band performed at Wolf Trap, the Kennedy Center and out of town, attending annual regional music festivals and performing at the Yorktown bicentennial.

"As far as I was concerned, that was the high point," Hill said of the Yorktown performance.

Hill challenged band members to take on different styles of music and more challenging pieces, Cole said. Pouliot has continued the trajectory since he took over as music director in 1994.

The City of Fairfax Concert Band, the organization's premiere ensemble, does not "concentrate just on what would be



Shamus Ian Fatzinger/Fairfax County Times  
 Fairfax City resident George Jorgensen has played his tenor sax "off and on" in the Fairfax City Band for 40 years.



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called standard concert band literature," Pouliot said.

The band plays popular music from Broadway and Hollywood, as well as more complex orchestral pieces. It works with choruses and guest soloists. The band has commissioned new arrangements and premiered original pieces, including a score by jazz pianist and composer Dick Hyman last year.

"We like to be able to put that kind of stamp of uniqueness on the product we're putting out there," Pouliot said. "There are probably only a handful of groups with the kind of organization that we have that are able to pursue that and do that."

He compares the band's musical approach with that of the Boston Pops under the leadership of Arthur Fiedler, "but at a fraction of the cost."

"It's developed into a really fine concert band," said Hill, who still regularly attends the band's performances. "I frankly think it's one of the best community bands around."

The concert band still primarily performs in the auditorium of Fairfax High School. Season tickets to its concerts are \$45, while students are admitted free.

Accessibility to audiences is not the only "community" aspect the band has retained. Although the musicians are experienced and talented, they play for fun and for love of music, Cole said.

"I enjoy playing old, familiar tunes; I enjoy learning tunes that are new and difficult for me," he said. "It's always exhilarating and gives a wonderful feeling of accomplishment every time."

The concert band has a waiting list for every section, so last year the organization launched the Main Street Community Band, an ensemble designed for people getting back into band music after a break. It already has 60 members and has started holding its own concerts.

Other ensembles include the Alte Kameraden German band, which primarily performs polka music; the Fairfax Swing Band; the Fairfax Saxophone Quartet; the Potomac Brass Quintet; and the Rebel Run Dixieland Band.

The band is celebrating its milestone throughout the season, but will cap its 40th year with a gala concert at George Mason University's Center for the Arts on June 5. The program will feature Broadway stars Jodi Benson, Debbie Gravitte and Michael Maguire performing hit songs from Broadway musicals.

The gala will benefit the Alzheimer's Association.

"For people who have suffered dementia or Alzheimer's, one of the things that can still get through is music," Cole said. "So, we're aware of the connection that music has with people."

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