



By Jennifer Solis, Correspondent

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## In perfect harmony: Merrimack Valley Concert Band melds diverse backgrounds into a unified sound

Like the opening of Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony," it started with a few distinctly familiar notes, then grew in rhythm and cadence into a symphony. The roots of the Merrimack Valley Concert Band harken back to earlier times - a small town band comprised of local musicians. But as with all fine compositions, the band has expanded and the strength of its harmony, contends Director Karen Mundo, lies in its depth.

Every week for 11 months of the year, Mundo and the members of the band — Republicans and Democrats, born-again Christians and atheists, a retired fire chief, a former big turbine engineer, a speech therapist — all check their differences at the door as they come together to speak the universal language of music.



Director Karen Mundo conducts the Merrimack Valley Concert Band during a recent Sunday concert on Topsfield Common.

"We are a group of 40 musicians from 25 different communities with many interesting stories to tell," says Mundo, a former music teacher in the Triton Regional Schools district who now travels 150 miles each week from her home in Rockport, Maine, to rehearse with the band.

While the band originated in West Newbury and is still based there, only four members currently reside in town.

Formed in 1922 as the VFA Band, the group was initially the musical arm of the West Newbury Firemen's Association, performing primarily at old-fashioned hand tub-pumping musters. Through the years, the band experienced both surges of popularity and periods of relative inactivity.

Then in 2004, it changed its name and broadened its scope. Now its own self-supporting, nonprofit organization, the Merrimack Valley Concert Band, which features wind instruments, drums, glockenspiel and even a string bass, embraces the best of the community band tradition. What was once a local musical troupe has grown beyond the town's borders to proudly promote America's musical heritage at concerts and parades all over the North Shore and up the New Hampshire Seacoast.

The MVCB is Basie, Goodman, Gershwin and Berlin. It's "Singin' in the Rain" and "Sing, Sing, Sing," "Mack the Knife" and the theme song from "Jaws," "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "The Stars and Stripes Forever" — and all of those toe-tapping, flag-waving standards of the Great American Songbook.

"The work of the band is to keep live music in the lives of folks in the area," says saxophonist Sue Grolnic of Newburyport, who played violin for the Boston Youth Orchestra as a child. She took up the sax and joined the band four years ago because "I decided I needed music in my life again."

"In the summer, we're what I like to call a gazebo band, sort of an old-fashioned, come-to-the-green-and-hear-music-you-know-and-love kind of band," Grolnic says. "In the winter, we play Christmas concerts."



Valerie Hermanson of Georgetown plays the baritone horn with the Merrimack Valley Concert Band as it performs last month during Old-Fashioned Sunday in Newburyport.

Mundo also adds, "We're the West Newbury Memorial Day Band, the Amesbury Fourth of July Band, the Newburyport Old-Fashioned Sunday Band."

Mundo, who says her goal is to provide an opportunity and outlet for local musicians, would like the chance to someday play a concert on Newburyport's waterfront, something the group has not yet been invited to do. The reason, she thinks, is partly because the group hasn't completely shed its more provincial reputation. But she's working to see that it takes its place among the serious musical entities in the area.

"I think we have a little of the old VFA still clinging to us, although we are an entirely different organization," she says. "I see us as the wind instrument version of the Newburyport Choral Society, that is, a group which provides a service to the greater community and can survive the ups and downs of the economy."

Grolnic's eclectic background is typical of the diversity within the group. A former Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, she's a Harvard-educated dean at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill who knows how to pilot a plane.

Gloucester resident Nalani Fujiwara, a Japanese-American from Hawaii, plays clarinet, teaches music in Salem and is pursuing a master's degree in conducting from Boston University.

Trombonist Efi Roe Kozorovitsky served as a paramedic in the Israeli army and lived in Switzerland before coming to the United States in 2008. The Andover father of two says he felt immediately welcomed when he found a seat waiting for him at his first rehearsal.

"This is my kind of people and my kind of band," Kozorovitsky says.

For French horn player Kendra Hackett of Hampton, N.H., the group offered comfort during a painful divorce. Of all the bands she's played with over the years, Hackett says the Merrimack Valley Concert "is without a doubt the most fun."

"Our Tuesday night rehearsals were my weekly refuge from the craziness that was my life," she says. "I will be forever grateful to this band for allowing me a place to just be me, whether they knew it or not."

The group was also therapeutic for clarinetist Magdalene Guardino, a native New Yorker forging a career in the music industry when terrorists attacked the city on Sept. 11, 2001.



JIM VAIKNORAS/Staff photo  
Paul Eby of Ipswich on the trombone during the Merrimack Valley Concert Band's performance last month at Old-Fashioned Sunday in Newburyport.

"Suddenly everything I was doing seemed petty and insignificant in a world filled with turmoil and devastation," Guardino says. "I clearly remember the turning point for me, when I read a fax sent to my boss by one particular diva we represented, who was berating me for having the audacity to address her secretary by her first name. I thought to myself, 'With everything that's going on in the world right now, is this really that important?'"

So she left New York and relocated to the Boston area to pursue a doctorate in physical therapy and "do good for people in a meaningful way." She joined Mundo's band as a way to alleviate the stress caused by so much change in her life.

"I can't tell you how good it was for my soul to be involved with music again. It was like I lost a part of myself on 9/11, while the rest of me was drowning in graduate studies and mounting debt," she says. "Once I started playing my clarinet, I became whole again."

Now happily married and enjoying her new career, Guardino says she "still makes time for the band that was there when I really needed them."

"We have no prima donnas," Mundo says. "'Leave your ego at the door' is one of our mottoes. The other is, 'If it isn't music, what is it?' The experience that brings us all together and keeps us together is the music."

Grolnic says there's something wonderful about making music together. Playing for an audience is an added bonus, she says.

"Sometimes I look out at the audience and there will be someone whom the music is really touching and you can see it on their face," she says.

Mundo agrees. "When we've got it down and we're listening and adjusting — communicating, if you will — we can hear the music come alive while we're playing and that is one of the greatest feelings on Earth."

## **A CLOSER LOOK**

The Merrimack Valley Concert Band closes out its summer concert season next week with a free performance at the West Newbury Community Bandstand on Thursday from 6:30 to 8 p.m. The concert wraps up West Newbury's summer series as well.

The bandstand is located behind the 1910 Building at 381 Main St. (Route 113). The rain location is the adjacent annex.

For more on the band, visit [www.mvcband.org](http://www.mvcband.org).

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