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Showcasing symphonic heritage

First Coast Wind Ensemble serves as cultural resource, musical outlet for local residents



Photos provided by First Coast Wind Ensemble

Artie Clifton conducts the First Coast Wind Ensemble during a performance earlier this year at Terry Concert Hall at Jacksonville University. Clifton helped found the ensemble, now celebrating its 25th year.

By Jennifer Jensen
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"I've always believed in community music making," said Artie Clifton. "It's been an important part of our country's musical heritage."

Clifton has been helping maintain that heritage in this community since 1990 through his work with the First Coast Wind Ensemble. Marking its 25th season providing free concerts, the ensemble — an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization consisting of woodwind, brass and percussion musicians — was founded in 1990 by Clifton and past conductor Dr. Dale Blackwell.

At the time of its founding, Clifton had recently moved to Jacksonville from Pennsylvania to teach music education at Jacksonville University and also became a member of the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra. Having been involved in community bands before, he sought out one in Jacksonville, but found that one did not exist. He enlisted the help of Blackwell, a faculty member at the then-named Florida Community College at Jacksonville, to start a band of their own.

The ensemble's mission was, and remains, to serve as a cultural resource by providing free concerts to the com-

munity while giving members an opportunity to participate in a cultural service organization and an outlet for musical expression and growth among musicians, and to continue the tradition of community bands.

"We give free concerts as a cultural resource," said Clifton, who's now the group's conductor. "It's a benefit to the local community. We promote live music, free of charge." It gives people who may not be able to afford to go to a professional music performance a chance to still hear a high-quality performance, he added.

In creating the ensemble, the two conductors decided to cap the number of musicians for performances at 55-60, and to ensure the group performed the highest quality of music, require auditions to be a part of the ensemble, as well as a small membership fee.

But the group is not comprised of only professional musicians. "We represent people from all walks of life, and the quality of what we do is really high," Clifton said. "This is not some amateur group."

There are many members of the ensemble who are band directors or music teachers, but there are also students and players of all ages and occupations.

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puts on six to seven concerts a season, with music varying from classical to musicals, pop tunes and even songs from Disney movies.

"During the course of one year, we make sure we cover all of that," Clifton said of the different musical styles offered by the ensemble.

They also perform a holiday concert each year with the Don Thompson Chorale, and this year's concert will feature past members from the ensemble's 25-

year history.

Over the course of its history, the group has produced a DVD and three CDs: "Symphonic Spirit," "A Christmas Celebration," and "Prevailing Winds." They have also played at two national conventions of the Association of Concert Bands (1995 and 2003), which the ensemble had to audition for to be included.

"Those two performances really solidified national exposure for us," Clifton said. "It was a great sense of pride being a part of that."

The band has also established a guest composer series where well-known composers come and re-

hearse with the ensemble and then conduct a concert with their own music.

"The composer comes in and he rehearses with us and we get to hear stories about how the composition came about, and we also get to learn exactly how they want it to be played," Paje said.

The group gets a chance to meet and work with a composer whose music they have played before, Clifton said. "The group really loves that project."

For the 25th anniversary, the group has commissioned a composer to create an entirely new piece just for them. In February,



Kim Beasley, an assistant professor of voice at Jacksonville University, performs with the First Coast Wind Ensemble during a recent performance at the university's Terry Concert Hall.

"Jacksonville really has a very secret gem," said Vladimir Paje, an ensemble member and who also serves as its publicity chair. "I really feel we are one of the premier community bands in the nation."

The ensemble, part of the Association of Concert Bands, a national organization of community bands from all over the country, provides a place to continue to play mu-

sic with others and grow musical knowledge for people who chose not to make music a career.

"We provide an opportunity for people to continue music making as a lifelong activity," Clifton said.

The group performs at venues all over the region, including Jacksonville University (the home base for the group), the Bolles School (another sup-

porter), Moosehaven, Thrasher-Horne Center for the Arts, the Jacksonville Landing, and others. They also performed at the grand opening of the Jacoby Symphony Hall at the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts and will play at the grand opening of Unity Plaza next year in Riverside.

The ensemble typically

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Robert Smith, a composer of band music, will conduct a concert of his own works and the featured composition with the ensemble, who will also partner with the Jacksonville Private Schools Honor Band, which is the best-of-the-best of musicians at local private schools.

"The idea is to promote new music," Clifton said. "We're excited about that. It's a great opportunity."

The partnership with local high schools isn't new for the ensemble. A big part of what they do is music education, Clifton said. They have performed several concerts with local

schools and will this year as well, including Douglas Anderson School of the Arts and St. Johns County All-County Middle School Honor Band.

The ensemble also conducts a concerto competition for high school musicians in the state of Florida. The winner is selected through a competitive process, including a live audition, and receives a \$1,000 scholarship and gets to perform with the ensemble during one of their concerts.

Clifton encouraged those who have not attended a concert of theirs in the past to come out this year and

bring a friend.

"Come out and enjoy the music that we perform," Clifton said.

The wind ensemble is a part of that great tradition of the arts, he said. "It enriches the lives of people."

The first concert of the season will be their fall season opening concert, "Fiesta!" on Thursday, Oct. 9 at 7:30 p.m. at Terry Concert Hall at Jacksonville University. It will feature H. Owen Reed's "La Fiesta Mexicana" folksong symphony with the wind ensemble and the JU Wind Ensemble. As always, admission is free.

For more information, go to fcwe.org.