

Take Note of the



New Horizons Band

If you're over 52,
this band's for you

“Let’s have a concert B-flat scale,” Roy Ernst says, baton in the air. The hilarity and confusion of warm-up time abruptly ends as New Horizons band members, all senior citizens, focus on Ernst to begin their three-hour rehearsal.

The New Horizons band is Ernst’s creation, evolving from a grant he obtained in 1990 from the National Association of Music Merchants. A small article in a local newspaper described the idea of a concert band open to anyone over age 52 whether or not they could play an instrument.

Ernst, chairman of the Department of Music Education at the Eastman School of Music, hoped for 30 takers. He was delighted when 50 eager would-be musicians showed up, many of whom had played in high school, but since then had done nothing with music.

The band, and the idea, developed a life of its own and quickly grew to 100 strong. Members sharpened their skills with lessons from Eastman School students. It was so successful that Ernst has helped start six other seniors-only New Horizons bands in Wisconsin, Iowa, Arizona and Australia.

Rochester’s New Horizons band rehearses twice a week and plays at least two concerts a month at parks, nursing homes, schools and concert halls. They’ll play anywhere, provided there is sufficient space for the group and the large sound it can make.

Socializing is important, but learn-

ing something new is a driving force for this band. “Use it or lose it” is the operative phrase. Band members challenge themselves by practicing music of increasing difficulty or even switching to a new instrument. To this end, Ernst provides a broad spectrum of music types and searches for new experiences for the musicians.

New Horizons has marched for the past two years in Rochester’s Lilac Parade. Members of all New Horizons bands can attend week-long music camps in Wisconsin or locally at the Chautauqua Institute. This year the band had the rare opportunity to play for the circus while in Wisconsin. Ruth Koss, flutist, joked, “If I write this circus thing into my memoirs, I’m sure my great-grandchildren will think I played in the circus for a living!”

Above: Lester Gootnick on flute.

by Margaret Nichols



A half-hour into the rehearsal Ernst is shouting, "No! No! It's allegro, not geritoso! Pick up the tempo—It's a march, not a hymn!" The band begins again, determined to get it right and smiling at their conductor's athletic efforts to speed them up.

Lois Cameron, pharmacist, played the trumpet in high school but elected to begin the clarinet with New Horizons. Her favorite selections are the Duke Ellington big-band tunes with the swing style of the 1940s. Whether it's Bach fugues or Sousa marches, she never misses a rehearsal. "Who'd take care of the coffee and doughnuts?" she asks with a laugh.

Chuck Bard, retired chemist, had played alto sax for years. This band gives him a chance to play as part of a large group. Bard also plays in the New Horizons dance band made up of select members of the large band, which has a number of gigs apart from the full ensemble. There is also a German band, a clarinet choir and a quartet that calls itself the High Class Low Brass.

Dick Holly, retired engineer, began on the clarinet and has already branched out to the saxophone. "It's fun to keep learning new things," he says. "We all work so hard and spend so much time trying to be as good as the typical high school band. Sometimes we even succeed!"

He feels strongly about bringing the band's music into the schools. When visiting high schools, New Horizons band members sit in with the school



band and play along in concert. In the grade schools they get to act more like grandparents. Each player takes several students aside to demonstrate how his instrument works and sounds. "Wouldn't it be great if we could get these kids as excited about this music as we are?" he adds.

There is more to being a musician than rehearsals and concerts. Daily practice is essential to improved performance. Dick, who lives in Florida during the winter, tried to find a quiet, private spot for his morning practice. While under a tree in a secluded park, engrossed in his musical exercises, a stranger came up and handed him a dollar with the advice that he'd make more money if he played where there were more people.

"I didn't know whether to be embarrassed or flattered."

Most musicians consider practicing to be the hardest part of what they do. Edith Lank, syndicated columnist, disagrees. "The hardest thing for me," she says, "is trying to stand up on time to take a bow at the end of an hour's concert." ♣

Margaret Nichols, a Palmyra freelance writer, plays clarinet with Rochester's New Horizons Band.

Top, left: New Horizons conductor Roy Ernst often employs athletic efforts to speed up his musicians.

Above: Band members work hard to "get it right."