

Charlotte's Band – An “unending chain of musicians”

Dr. Gary T. Sullivan, Conductor

Unique in our band's one hundred (100) year history is the fact that the band was started by the students themselves. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the “The Symphony Six” began a “chain” of student involvement that led to today's grade 6 – 12 program of hundreds of musicians. Unique to Charlotte, is the many generations of band membership and the family pride that is present with each successive generation of performers.

In the early 1920's, the band movement was sweeping our nation. Charlotte did not have an established band, so the students, themselves, organized a group called the “Symphony Six.” Miss Gertrude Babcock organized a small orchestra in 1921, followed by the first band, directed by Mr. Lester Kaler in 1924. In 1925, the small orchestra, then conducted by Mr. Higby, was combined with the band. By 1932, band conductor, Mr. Wendell Anderson, had instituted a “German Band” and the “Junior Band.” Dressed in new black uniforms and trimmed with orange, the band had grown to forty-five (45) members when conductor Ward Hynes presented the first concert appearance in 1937 to dedicate the “new” high school building. The tradition of Band Bounce and travel to the Holland Tulip Festival began at the same time. Mr. Hynes left Charlotte in April of 1944 and Mr. Sam Robinson of Olivet completed the school year. Mr. Russell Anderson directed the Charlotte Band during the 1944 – 1945 school year.

Mr. Robert K. Powell led the band from 1945 to 1976. During his esteemed thirty-one (31) year career as director, the band grew in numbers and reputation. Mr. Dale Bartlett and Mr. Herbert Phillips served as assistant directors during Mr. Powell's directorship. Mr. Powell organized the Charlotte Band Boosters in 1947, expanded the travel performances of the band, and instituted band camp in 1949, when one hundred (100) students traveled to Butler State Park in Carrollton, Kentucky. (Band camp was moved to Traverse City's Twin Lakes Camp in 1955 and to the Kettunen Center in Tustin, Michigan in 2000.) In addition to many exchange performances with bands in and out of Michigan, Mr. Powell introduced the band to numerous guest clinicians. The band's national reputation was made as a marching organization when they earned a 1st Division at the Virginia Beach Festival in 1967. The band participated in many domestic tours, and the 1972 - 1973 band organized its 21-day trip to Europe. The band traveled to the Mexico Aztec Marching Pageant in 1975.

Former Charlotte Band student, Mr. Karl Wirt, assumed the leadership of the Charlotte Bands when Mr. Powell retired in 1976. Mr. Johnson assumed the role of assistant director when Mr. Phillips retired the same year. During Mr. Wirt's six years as Band director (Mr. Sutherland, who followed Mr. Johnson as Junior High Director in 1977, led the band during 1981 – 82 as interim director), the band continued to travel to Holland and provided Band Bounce performances. Mr. Wirt conducted, successfully, performances at MSBOA concert and marching festivals and Michigan events. He organized tours to Edmonton Canada in 1980 and Chicago in 1983.

Dr. Gary Sullivan, now in his twenty-fifth (25th) year in Charlotte, assumed leadership of the Charlotte Bands in the summer of 1983. (During his tenure as director, junior high directors have included William Sutherland, Jeff Haston, Stacie Detgen, and Kirk Gronda.) Under his leadership, the Charlotte High School Bands have maintained their traditions in marching and Band Bounce, while increasing the emphasis on individual solo performance, concert performance, touring, and national festival participation. The Marching Band was awarded their 50th “First Division” performance at the Holland Tulip Festival in 1989. The Oriole Marching Band performed at Holland until 1991, when the Holland officials discontinued the Band Review. The change allowed the band to extend their concert season through the spring and to establish the tradition of touring to the National Music Festivals. The band has participated in extended tours to Washington, Florida, Atlanta, St. Louis, Chattanooga, Gatlinburg, and Virginia Beach. Of the eight (8) National Band Festivals attended by the bands, Charlotte has been awarded “Superior” ratings, consistently, in Symphony, Concert, and Jazz Ensemble categories, while the Symphony Band has earned six (6) National Festival First Place Awards in the most advanced concert division. This ensemble has performed four (4) times as a featured group at the Midwestern Music Conference held at the University of Michigan and has appeared at numerous university and professional symposiums. Continuing the band's tradition of marching excellence, this past fall, the Charlotte Oriole

Marching Band earned its twenty-sixth (26th) “Superior” rating at the MSBOA Marching Festival, while receiving all “A’s” and “Superior” ratings from all of the judges.

Members of the Charlotte Symphony Band have earned many individual awards and honors. Participating in the band’s comprehensive chamber music program, over one hundred (100) high school band students perform solos at the Michigan School Band & Orchestra Association’s Solo & Ensemble festivals, yearly, and many advance to the state level. Numerous Charlotte Band students have participated in the State Honors Band, and several have advanced past the state festival to the Michigan Youth Arts Festival Talent Screening. Many others perform in Michigan’s collegiate honors bands. The Charlotte Brass Quintet has been named the “Michigan Honor Brass Group” and performed at the Youth Arts Festival and the Woodwind Quintet was chosen to perform for the Michigan Legislature at the Capitol Building. Charlotte Band students are regular participants in summer music programs and several have participated with international music tours.

For generations, our students have made the mark in instrumental music. The parents are a “driving” and hard-working element in our bands success. It is amazing to note how many hours our parents work behind the scenes. Not only through the many dimensions of the marching band, but during the entire season. Banquets, concessions, band field support, the uniforms detail, equipment assistance before games, chaperones on road trips, etc., find many hard working parents contributing their time. The concert season has as many aspects of parental involvement. Many people assist with the projects—fund-raisers, mailings, logistics, on and on. It would not be possible to operate the current program, if it wasn’t for their help. Their involvement is noticed by their students. The pride in the band is shown by everyone joining together in support of shared goals.

Every “new” member takes their place in an “unending chain of musicians.” Students are aware of the tradition and desire to make their contribution to the band’s unique history. It is not uncommon to have three generations of band members attend concerts to watch and listen as the youngest Charlotte Band member performs. What began in Charlotte as a dream of a few students in the “Symphony Six” of the 1920’s, has grown to be a source of pride for today’s students and the entire Charlotte community.