

River City celebrates with 'Happy Birthday'

By **Bob Karlovitz**

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Nancy Galbraith has written her own version of the "Happy Birthday" song for the River City Brass Band.

And the band's music director, Denis Colwell, is certain the piece will take the cake at the series of "Birthday Bash" concerts that begins this evening.

"It's a modern piece that will make the band stretch, and that is good," Colwell says. "It's the kind of music that will make us better as a band."

Galbraith, a professor of music at Carnegie Mellon University, Oakland, says she tried to give "'Washington's Landing' a real city feel" to help the band celebrate its 25th.

"I first called it 'River City,' but I thought that was sort of dumb, so I switched it to a part of the city that I like." she says.

She also says the renewal of Washington's Landing, which once was called Herr's Island, in a way represents changes in the face of Pittsburgh. The island, just down the Allegheny River from Millvale where Galbraith lives, once was a smelly, dirty stockyard area.

Now, it is the location of sophisticated homes, a rowing club and some light industry that doesn't interfere with the area's green renewal.

It almost is like the band itself, she suggests, which is a traditional type of ensemble that is trying to bear a new image.

"It's a really nice collection of music, personnel and the director," she says.

That gave her the opportunity to put together a piece that she says has some jazz influences, using a drum set in its percussive nature. The middle section, she says, is melodic, but the opening and close are more "urban" and busy like a city.

Colwell says it is the most "angular" piece the band probably will play all year. But the "Birthday Bash" program will have more than a small homage to the band's history and the legacy of brass bands.

For instance, the band will open with the Welsh favorite, "Men of Harlech," and close with "Seventy-Six Trombones," pieces that played the same roles in the ensemble's first concerts in 1981.

It also will feature "Pastime With Good Company" and "Chester Overture," two classics of brass band repertoire, but pieces the River City group has not played before.

Photo Gallery



Denis Colwell
Michael Henninger/For the
Tribune-Review

River City Brass Band

When and where:

- 8 p.m. today, Gateway High School, 4450 Old William Penn Highway, Monroeville
- 8 p.m. Friday, Carson Middle School, 200 Hillvue Lane, McCandless
- 8 p.m. Saturday, Palace Theatre, 21 W. Otterman St., Greensburg
- 3 p.m. Sunday, Pasquerilla Performing Arts Center, 450 Schoolhouse Road (University of Pittsburgh), Johnstown
- 8 p.m. Tuesday, Upper St. Clair High School, McLaughlin Run Road
- 7:30 p.m. Nov. 9, Heinz Hall, Sixth Street and Penn Avenue, Downtown
- 3 p.m. Nov. 12, Baldwin High School, 4653 Clairton Blvd. (Route 51)

Details: 412-434-7222

They will be offered in a section in which Colwell plans to offer some brief observations on the history and present of brass bands.

The concert also will feature other River City highlights, such as a tribute to its popular big band concerts and Aaron Copland's "A Lincoln Portrait." The latter is being done, with Pittsburgh Pirates announcer Lanny Frattare as narrator, because November concerts generally pay tribute to the Veterans' Day holiday.

In a little hoping-for-the-best move, Colwell also is planning an encore: the band's rousing version of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever."

"I just can't think of how you could end this concert without Sousa," he says.

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