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NEWS FEATURE

CASTINE

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Castine Town Band, keeping the beat for 18 years

by Anne Berleant

“There’s not a more Norman Rockwell setting. Really. To be sitting in the band and looking out on the Green and seeing people enjoy the music. The light that comes through the American flag and rests on the Union soldier. And you’ve got the church steeple...It’s a very emotional thing.”

Castine Town Band member Barbara Cooper described the feeling of performing on the town common in summertime during a recent interview.

Cooper married into the band, after her husband Justin Cooper took on the presidency, with Richard Starke as conductor and musical director, in 1998 when the Castine Town Band’s present incarnation began. The last town band had ended in 1915.

“Tom Miller played the trombone. He was 85 at the time. But they needed more people,” she said.

“Dick said, ‘we need another French horn.’ I had signed on to carry chairs,” she said. “I had never played anything more than a ukulele.”

Eighteen years later, Cooper still takes her seat, adjusts her music stand, and lifts the French horn to her lips, as does Miller’s wife Jean—members of a band where everyone is welcome.

“We’d never played a note on anything and we were in the band,” Cooper said. “Dick used to say, ‘If you can walk and breathe, you can play in our band.’”

Starke died in 2011, but not before he was honored by the band with a Proclamation of Appreciation. In 2002, he handed the job of conducting to Silas Yates, so he could concentrate on just playing in the band.

The band performs four summer concerts, a Christmas concert, and, with a much-shortened program, for Memorial Day.

In fact, it was Memorial Day when Yates heard his first notes of the town band, with his wife Diane.

“We’re in Maine, right? And it’s Memorial Day. And we’re walking up the hill to the cemetery. And the band is playing. And I say to Diane, ‘We better stop.’ She says, ‘Why?’ And I say, ‘Because they’re playing the Star Spangled Banner.’”

The point being, he said, that they didn’t quite recognize the song being performed.

In a band where members range from age 13 to age 87, the skill level runs the gamut. But Yates, whose life, as he describes it, is music, wanted to raise the band’s repertoire to a more advanced level.

“I’ve been conducting bands since I was 16,” he said. “I was program coordinator for the jazz program at the University of Miami. I had a lot of experience with conducting bands and with volunteer bands.”



Castine Town Band Conductor and Musical Director Silas Yates conducts on the town common.
Penobscot Bay Press file photo

And the players followed, and new members joined, including skilled amateurs and professionals who made Castine their summer home, and musicians from across the Peninsula.

“That’s one of the beauties of the band,” Yates said. “Professionals against amateurs. Where else are they going to get that kind of experience? A high school student in the town band will play more music in one summer than in their entire high school career.”

The Castine Town Band regularly draws 150 to 200 people to its summer concerts.

“The band’s activity is really hot and heavy in the summer,” Yates said. “We start rehearsing every Wednesday the second week after Memorial Day.”

That gives the band two rehearsals to learn new material. Yates keeps track of the repertoire through a spreadsheet, by program, date played, and composition.

“I don’t want to repeat stuff,” he said, although “Star Spangled Banner” and “America the Beautiful” close every concert.

The band has from 30 to 40 members at any given time, and for the Christmas concert, Maine Maritime Academy students balance the absence of summer-only musicians.

For Cooper, her playing “has definitely improved” since she first picked up the French horn 18 years ago. “But I’m still worried that the first French horn won’t show up one day,” she said.

The band is funded through donations at concerts, from private individuals, local banks and, for the July 4 concert, the town.

“It’s a wonderful community thing,” she said. “You always hear negative things about Castine. But the fact that Castine and the town got behind and has supported the idea of their own town band is exceptional. It really is. And that everyone is welcome.”

The band’s last summer performance for 2016 was on August 12 on the town common.

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[GALLERY — The Castine Town Band plays on](#)



Members of the horn section perform.
Photo by Anne Berleant



Castine Town Band Conductor and Musical Director Silas Yates conducts on the town common.
Penobscot Bay Press file photo



On a rainy summer afternoon, the Castine Town Band performs in Emerson Hall.



David Unger plays the trumpet and introduces the band and its program before each concert. Above, he plays in a July 4 concert on

Photo by Anne Berleant

the town common.
Penobscot Bay Press file photo

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