



The Russian Horn Capella at the Grand Cascade and the Grand Peterhof Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia.

50 concerts over 4 days all in 1 city

The Vintage Band Music Festival
in Northfield is no annual affair

STORY BY AMY ACHESON

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BANDS

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PRIOR TO THE ELECTRONIC AGE, not so long ago, a common pastime in many towns was a concert in the park on a summer evening. A liveliness filled the air. There was a sense of community, a common place to gather, listen and enjoy life for a while.

In the river town of Northfield, known for its love of music and history, Paul Niemisto, a professor of music and director of the Norseman Band at St. Olaf College, envisioned hosting a festival of vintage bands. He felt the quaint, picturesque Southern Minnesota town would be the perfect host for such an event. It was important to hold onto this pastime.

In 2006, the first Vintage Band Music Festival was held and there was such a synergy among the participants that the festival practically ran itself, taking on a life of its own as notes seemingly popped off the pages while musicians recreated old music “new to the modern ear.” Participants and audience members raved about the multicultural experience and looked forward to the next time.

The next time is this summer.

The second Vintage Band Musical Festival will be held in Northfield on Aug. 5-8. The festival now boasts 20-plus European and American vintage bands, with 50 concerts over four days. The whole town will become the venue.

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The 1st Brigade Band participates in a historical re-creation at a Decoration Day ceremony.

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“The pedestrian-friendly atmosphere in Northfield makes it easy to stroll or bike to various parks and historically interesting places to hear a variety of concerts,” Niemisto said.

Niemisto’s interest in both music and history led to this creation.

“I think there is a curiosity about old things and people want to know what it was like ... and how important it is for communities to engage in cultural events of this nature,” he said.

Prior to the recording age there was nothing but documents and instruments left behind; no sound was captured to hear what it was really like. By reconstructing with the pieces that remain, “people are able to experience life in a different time,” said Dan Woolpert, bandmaster emeritus and instrument curator for the 1st Brigade Band of Wisconsin.

The 1st Brigade Band is among the bands attending this year’s festival. Originally enlisted in the Union Army, the band of the 1st Brigade, 3rd Division, 15th Army Corps led the way for the Union soldiers during the Civil War. One hundred years passed before the antique instruments and yellowed, torn music of that wartime period were put to use again. In 1964, a revived 1st Brigade Band began

VINTAGE BAND MUSIC FESTIVAL

What: 18th and 19th century band music (and earlier) depicted in period dress using vintage instruments, a collection of 20 professional bands from Europe and the U.S., a total of 50 concerts over four days! Free admission.

When: Aug 5-8, 2010

Where: Northfield and surrounding communities.

Time: Concerts start at noon each day and run into the evening

Online: www.vintagebandfestival.org and www.visitingnorthfield.com

to breathe new life into the old wind instruments and awaken an era of days gone by.

Similar stories have unfolded around the world as modern-day “vintage” bands recreate important eras not to be forgotten in music history.

Both in times of struggle and strife as well as times of prosperity and celebration, music has been with us — an integral part of our society. This year’s festival

experience represents those diversities and promises to be “absolutely unique,” Niemisto said.

Brass bands are slated to come together from around the world. Not only do they play hand-made original instruments of their chosen era, they also dress head to toe in vintage garb, many portraying an ethnic background from which the music originated.

The Russian Horn Capella from St. Petersburg, whose music dates back to the mid-1700s, is truly one of a kind. These professional musicians play instruments that sound only one note each. (It’s like a bell choir but using horns.) Collectively, and with precise timing, the sounds merge to create captivating arrangements that are orchestrated like no other.

The Rocky Mountain Swiss Alphorn Trio plays long wooden instruments that were used to send signals across the Alps by shepherders. The alphorn carries a mellow, reverberant sound. This style of music takes you away to those distant mountains.

A few highlights of auxiliary events that are connected to the festival are the annual conference of the Historic Brass Society, a Riverwalk Market Fair of locally produced fine art, organic produce and artisan foods, and a community dance with vintage music and period dress.

Another sight to be seen and heard is

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Rocky Mountain Swiss Alphorn Trio plays in Northfield's 2006 Vintage Band Music Festival. That was the first occurrence of the event. This summer is the second.

when the 26th North Carolina Regimental Band (the Rebels) challenges the 1st Brigade Band (the Yankees) in a "Battle of the Bands" across Northfield's picturesque Cannon River.

A vintage "base ball" game will take place at Old Memorial Field. There you will find men playing ball using the original Knickerbocker Rules from the 1860s — this game is played with no gloves! And there'll be no spitting, betting or cursing. A band will be playing at the game, of course.

At the end of the festival will be a Vaudeville performance starring the Northstar Cinema Orchestra. This type of variety entertainment dates back to the early 20th Century and includes a silent film with musical accompaniment and singing and dancing acts.

The festival music starts at noon each day and carries well into the evening at many downtown pub and restaurant establishments. Several neighboring towns are also participating through band performances.

Come for the weekend and experience centuries of rich musical history. ✦

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