

Musicians buckle down with Borealis Big Band



By Brock Weir

When Gord Shephard picked up the baton with the Aurora Community Band, he began fostering a sound where anyone with an interest in music ? and an instrument ? could come out and lend their talents in creating a unifying sound.

It's as much about the music as it is about community camaraderie, but some members were left looking for more, and a renewed focus that was set squarely on the music.

The seeds of an idea were planted and the fruits of their labour took a bow on Friday with the first performance of the Borealis Big Band.

?[Founding Aurora Community Band Member Gord, a bass player] said to me he enjoys the fact I take music seriously and he wanted a band where the music would be the focus of what the group was all about,? says Shephard. ?After that initial discussion, we reached out to other people of like mind ? Phil, Laurel and Susan, and they reached out to other people and that is how the band was created.

?It was really about collecting a group of musicians for whom the quality of the music was the most important aspect, the performance quality of the ensemble. If there is a significant difference between the two bands, the [Borealis Big Band] has members who have been invited but in the community band, anyone who sends an email can join.?

Knowing that each of the members were guided by the same philosophy, the initial team members set to work assembling a band, taking on the role of section leaders, and crafting a group that fit the bill. Then it was a matter of developing a repertoire. A collection of music accessible for musicians of all levels of ability was the starting point and, after the first rehearsal, this selection became more specialized according to what the musicians had to offer.

?After the first six rehearsals, I pretty much zoned in on what the band would be able to do and picked two hours of music I thought would work with them,? says Gord of the program that debuted at the Aurora Cultural Centre on February 16.

The name ?Big Band? often connotes the huge, swinging sounds of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman, but that is a style that was developed in the 1940s. Instead, Shephard describes Borealis as a ?contemporary big band? that shies away from the ?typical swing band music.?

?We're not playing things like Little Brown Jug or those typical swing band charts. We tend to play more contemporary arrangements, some of those original charts, possibly, but we really play a lot of funk and fusion pieces.?

A former music educator, Gord Shephard says he has an equal passion for concert band music, such as that offered by the Aurora Community Band, as well as an equal passion for jazz music, which is more of Borealis' fare. When they started developing the band, he relished the opportunity but didn't think it would hit the level of performance it has already.

Now that their debut at the Aurora Cultural Centre is in the books, Borealis is very much focused on the future, which includes a number of concert dates in the months ahead, including a Wednesday evening this summer as part of the Town of Aurora's popular Concerts in the Park series.

?The most important thing is picking the repertoire the band will be successful with and audiences will like,? he says. ?The second most important thing is band members have an understanding what the goals of the band are. There are some bands where the

number one priority might be social opportunities, and that's not to say our bands are not social, but some people want to be in a band where the music is not the number one cause of the band. I would say with both of these bands, but more so this band, music is at the forefront.

?People just naturally want to get better at whatever they are doing. That is human intuition, whether you are doing sport or any other kind of activity. I think humans just want to get better. I appreciate the time and effort members have put into creating their music and I hope audiences are as excited about the performance as band members are.?