A Way of Being Together

Gerard Morris, director of bands and associate professor of music, came to Puget Sound in 2009 as an interim conductor after completing his D.M. in conducting at Northwestern University. He quickly fell in love with the people and ideas at Puget Sound, and when presented with the opportunity, chose to stay and can’t imagine being anywhere else.

Gerard describes his interactions with students as really fun and very rewarding, but he says that the connections between people—“their way of being together”—is what makes his work at Puget Sound so valuable. While he witnesses these connections on a daily basis, one recent experience showed him how the spirit of togetherness between students and professors at Puget Sound engages people even beyond campus.

The College Band Directors National Association (CBDNA) holds a conference each year featuring performances from the nation’s top college bands. The selection process is notoriously tough: Bands must anonymously submit a recorded audition of a difficult piece chosen by the CBDNA, which is blindly judged to avoid bias.

One year, the Puget Sound Wind Ensemble had to play a particularly difficult piece by twentieth-century German composer Arnold Schönberg, that Gerard describes as “very intellectual.” They were chosen to perform at the conference, and the evaluators told him that the Puget Sound Wind Ensemble’s audition recording “blew everyone away.” Ultimately, he says, they “stole the conference,” impressing band directors and students from bigger programs with their mastery of the piece. Gerard credits the students’ ambition and drive for their monumental success: “I facilitate the process,” he says, “but they make it a success. They’re all outstanding musicians.”

He adds that Puget Sound’s emphasis on reflection helps students “realize that everything they’re doing here has a purpose.”
For Savannah Schaumburg '20, music was at the core of her decision to apply to and attend Puget Sound. Originally from Salem, Ore., the music education major and French horn player knew that she wanted a small school that would offer her big opportunities in music and academics, but it was the depth of the personal faculty connections that hooked her on Puget Sound’s School of Music in particular.

“One of the things I’ve noticed is the extent to which the faculty is committed to my learning outside the classroom. I would not have had the chance to sit in the pit of the Pacific Northwest Ballet if I didn’t have Rodger Burnett as a teacher,” she says. Savannah found close community from interactions with her professors, as well as the students in the School of Music. She works in the music office and participates in multiple student clubs, including serving on Gerard Morris’ advisory council.

“I’ve not only learned how to be a better musician but have built strong relationships with the people I perform and work with,” she says. “The School of Music has provided me with numerous leadership opportunities outside of the rehearsal room that have enhanced my overall experience on campus.”

Puget Sound has given her the chance to practice, perform, and lead that would only have been available to her elsewhere as a junior or senior. “At a big school, I wouldn’t have gotten the opportunity to be principal horn of both Symphony Orchestra and Wind Ensemble since my first semester at Puget Sound, let alone get the chance to perform major works by composers like Mahler or work with living composers one on one.”

Recently, Puget Sound hosted the national conference of the Society of Composers, Inc., which featured renowned composer Joel Puckett. Savannah credits Professor Gerard Morris’ personal relationship with Joel for bringing him to campus, which allowed the Wind Ensemble to collaborate with him on his new piece, That Secret from the River.

“It was so valuable to work with Joel, and it transformed the ensemble’s performance because we knew so much more about the piece from having the living composer here,” she said. “It’s so inspiring to be at a place that offers these kinds of hands-on learning opportunities.”

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