

How low can they go?



Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo guest conducted the Tuba Christmas program in 2008. This year, New Hanover County Commissioner Jonathan Barfield will guest conduct. Photo courtesy of UNCW

At Tuba Christmas, the low-pitched instruments will be booming

If any instrument is the workman of the orchestra it's the tuba, which is usually asked to hold up the low end of the music without much recognition.

And while there's plenty to be said for the window pane-rattling power of the large, low-pitched brass instrument, it can be beautiful as well.



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That's kind of the idea behind Tuba Christmas, a worldwide musical tradition that began in 1974.

Daniel Johnson, an associate music professor in UNCW's Department of Music, brought it to Wilmington in 2004, and the sixth annual local installment of Tuba Christmas will play out twice on Saturday, at Independence Mall and Brightmore of Wilmington.

Basically, it involves three dozen or so tuba and euphonium players joining together to play such holiday standards as "Jingle Bells," "Silent Night," and "Deck

the Halls." The first Tuba Christmas was in New York and it has since spread to more than 120 cities worldwide.

"I think I first did Tuba Christmas when I was in Florida, where I'm from, or maybe in Atlanta when I was in college," Johnson said.

A tuba and euphonium specialist who can play about a dozen instruments, Johnson said he was attracted to the opportunity to "highlight an instrument that is usually misunderstood."

Players include UNCW music students as well as high school students, retirees, military musicians from Jacksonville and at least one player who's driving down from the Triangle.

"Usually there's only one tuba player in an orchestra, so sometimes we feel lonely," Johnson said. Tuba Christmas allows tubaists "to get together (in) the holiday spirit and give a musical gift to the community."

Certainly, there's something viscerally appealing about that mass of low brass cranking out

the holiday classics. It scratches an itch that Flute Christmas or Clarinet Christmas couldn't get down low enough to reach.

And this whole tuba thing might be catching on. Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo will be on hand at Independence Mall to proclaim Dec. 5 Tuba Christmas Day, and the tuba-heavy orchestra will be guest conducted by New Hanover County Commissioner Jonathan Barfield.

But it won't be over when Boxing Day arrives. Johnson has celebrated Octuba Fest – a time for marches, polkas and a few pop tunes – five times at UNCW, and April will bring something new: Tubazalea, a concert of tunes appropriate for springtime played, of course, on the tuba.

Details: The Tuba Christmas program will be performed at noon Dec. 5, in Independence Mall, 3500 Oleander Drive. and at 2 p.m. Dec. 5 at Brightmore of Wilmington, 2124 41st St. Free. 962-7416 or UNCW.edu/music.

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