

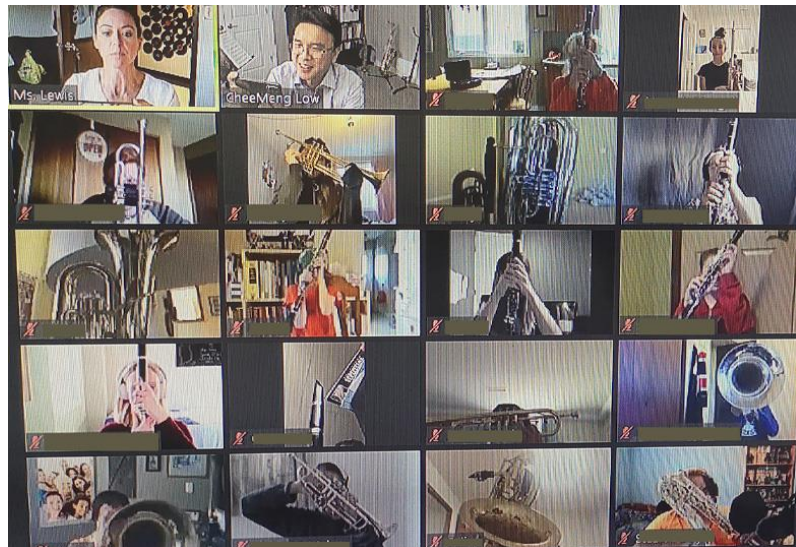


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## University of Lethbridge musicians mentor middle school band in rare virtual partnership

What is an ensemble musician to do when they can no longer do what they love most? The University of Lethbridge Wind Orchestra and Gilbert Paterson Middle School band program turned to each other when faced with a common predicament, and it has resulted in a rare virtual partnership.

When COVID restrictions meant the U of L's Wind Orchestra would no longer be able to practice together in-person, director Dr. Chee Meng Low reached out to colleague Karly Lewis (BMus '97), band director at Gilbert Paterson Middle School.



“When COVID hit, my whole band program was thrown online and there’s no platform where we can do ensemble training online,” explains Lewis. “With no fault to our district, there was this anxiety to collect all the instruments back for fear that they would never be returned. I said, I will not do that.

“I started receiving emails from parents grateful to the school that the kids were able to keep playing because of their mental wellness. They were able to turn to something that allowed them to escape, because when you play an instrument, you’re allowed to escape to wherever you want to go.”

Lewis and Low knew both their ensembles needed an outlet to practice. This fall, university-level musicians enrolled in the Wind Orchestra ensemble began partnering, virtually, with grade 7 and 8 band students for weekly rehearsals over Zoom. By pairing

beginners with university-level musicians, the students and the advanced players, who are challenged to think in a different way, are advancing their skills.

“That one-on-one time at this stage of a musician’s development is so valuable,” says Gerald Rogers (BMus ’20), a recent graduate and member of the Wind Orchestra. “In the long run, it’s only going to help them because they’re getting focused sessions with other musicians, and it’s a good experience for the university students because learning to teach is completely different than learning to play music.”

Bandmate Claire McMahon agrees.

“I have to really think about the fundamentals of the instrument again, so my technique has been improving a lot just from having to think about how to teach technique” she says. “The kids struggle with the same stuff I still struggle with, so it has been forcing me to practice those things so I can demonstrate in the lessons.”

Each Wednesday evening, 47 middle school students join the University Wind Orchestra online and break out into 23 rooms where Low and Lewis can move between to see how the lessons are progressing.

Rogers and McMahon, ironically, both started their ensemble careers in the Gilbert Paterson band program, under the direction of Lewis. They identify with her current students and recall the high expectations she has for her classes.

“I remember there was an expectation, and if you knew what was good for you, you were going to meet it,” says Rogers with a laugh. “It taught me the benefit of working hard at something. Having gone through her program, it gives me a good idea of how much I can ask of her students.”

McMahon is thrilled to be part of this mentorship program, recalling the influence senior students had on her decision to attend the University when they visited her high school and worked directly with her and her classmates.

“The Wind Orchestra has always done a lot of events in the community, high school outreach, recruitment activities – and it works,” says McMahon. “I definitely felt more comfortable going into the program because I knew these three clinicians I’d been working with were going to be upperclassmen.”

Lewis is a self-proclaimed University of Lethbridge lifer – starting with the Conservatory of Music as a child, then attending the U of L to study music and, today, continuing to partner with faculty and students in her role as band director.

“I started taking horn lessons with Tom Staples (former Wind Orchestra director and Department of Music professor emeritus) when I was 12, and then continued on until I

was 22,” says Lewis. “I also attended Gilbert Paterson, where Susie Staples, Tom’s wife, was my band teacher. So, the web that has been woven for me musically in Lethbridge has been pretty incredible.”

Lewis has been teaching band for 20 years, 14 of those at Gilbert Paterson. She is known in the music community for the strong young players who come out of her program. She is grateful to Low and the University Wind Orchestra for their willingness to mentor her students.

“Hopefully we will be able to partner again in the future.”

Both ensembles can’t wait to get back to practicing in person, and in the meantime, this rare virtual partnership is benefiting the skills, and well-being, of everyone involved.

To view online: <https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/university-lethbridge-musicians-mentor-middle-school-band-rare-virtual-partnership>

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