Remarks from the Chair

ONHB AGM, Nov. 29, 2020

* At last year’s AGM I spoke of how quickly ONHB has grown, from one band in January 2008 to nine bands with plans for a tenth last year, and from about 200 musicians on stage for our concerts in 2013 to almost 350 in 2019.
* I noted that over the years people learned about us simply through word of mouth, joined – and stayed. That we kept adding new bands to accommodate the growing numbers. That there were few other community bands that our members could move to as their musical skills developed. And that growth added to the workload for the volunteers that keep us operating and pointed to the need to focus more attention on attracting and managing our volunteers.
* These issues seem so far away now as the pandemic has completely changed our perspective and our focus.
* When there were just a handful of identified COVID-19 cases in Ottawa last March we struggled with whether rehearsals could continue safely or not. But when Dr. Vera Etches announced on a Sunday in mid-March that there were probably hundreds of undiscovered cases in the community, we quickly decided that rehearsals had to stop. That soon led to decisions to cancel the remainder of the winter session, the April concerts, and, soon after, the entire spring session.
* Then, like everyone else, we waited and we watched as we tried to figure out how completely this pandemic would change our lives. But we knew we wanted to keep ONHB together as much as possible and provide whatever opportunities remained safe for our members to “meet”, to play music, to learn and to socialize.
* So in preparation for the fall we launched a survey to help us determine if there was an interest in some form of joint music-making given that in-person rehearsals would not be possible. Sufficient interest was expressed that we decided to risk a virtual fall session with four bands which quickly became five in response to demand. In this regard we were very pleased to have the assistance of four band leaders who were willing to take on the many challenges of an entirely new format for group rehearsals.
* That fall session has now just ended. From our perspective it was a success as 131 people signed up, 50 more than we had planned for, very few refunds were sought, and almost all who tried it returned week after week despite not being able to hear anyone else play. Participants learned a new video-conferencing technology, adapted to the quirks of the virtual format, and found ways to interact with their band leader and socialize with each other.
* To be sure about how people reacted to our fall experiment and to find out if they wanted to repeat that experience we launched another survey a couple of weeks ago, to which we had a very high response rate. And despite the many and obvious limitations of the virtual rehearsal format, overwhelmingly you told us that you did have a positive experience and would attend a winter session designed along similar lines.
* We also surveyed those who participated in an ONHB band within the last 12 months but who did NOT sign up for the virtual fall session. We wanted to know their thinking and their plans. While responses varied, most respondents indicated a continuing interest in ONHB and a desire to return once in-person rehearsals are possible again. And some said they are interested in joining a virtual winter session.
* Together these results tell us that if we design a winter session that is broadly similar to the session just ended that we will be offering an experience that a significant percentage of our members want, while we all wait for the day when we can get together in the same rehearsal room again. So that’s what we’re currently working on. Cathy will provide a bit more information on this later in the agenda although there are still several decisions on that score that have yet to be taken.
* So let me thank those of you who joined us this fall for helping keep ONHB operating during the pandemic. Let me also re-assure all of you that we will continue to offer a music program that suits the times and that will encourage us to keep picking up our instruments and enjoying making music with others, even when that is more illusory than real. And finally, let me say that we are all buoyed by the recent news of potentially promising vaccines and very much look forward to a return to near normal at least. May that day not be too far off. Thank you.

Brian Carr, Chair of the ONHB board