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# Save the date — 100th anniversary of citywide MPS Biennial Music Festival is May 1-2, 2024

Thursday, March 21, 2024



An all-city drumline and world drumming ensemble, orchestras, bands, choirs, modern band, and trumpet fanfare all will be part of the 50th MPS Biennial Music Festival, which takes place on May 1 and 2 downtown at the UWM Panther Arena, 400 W. Kilbourn Ave.

The every-other-year festival now is a 100-year-old tradition — 2024 marks the “Centennial Biennial.” The first citywide student music festival took place in 1924. That year, it was held at the Milwaukee Auditorium, now known as the Miller High Life Theatre. The most recent Biennial Music Festival was held in 2022.

Some 3,500 students of all ages and from all across Milwaukee Public Schools will take part in the festival, or about 1,750 students on each of the two nights. They will be representing 75 schools.

“Every school with a music teacher is participating in some form this year,” said District Music Curriculum Specialist Sharie Garcia. Because of the 2020 referendum approved by voters, the district now has more music teachers than in previous years. Also, for the 2022 festival, a number of schools chose not to participate because of the pandemic’s lingering effects.

Garcia considers this Biennial Music Festival a thank-you to the Milwaukee voters who approved the 2020 referendum, which provided funding to expand education of music, arts, physical education, languages, and more.

“There’s been such a difference made for so many children by that funding, but it’s not really visible on a daily basis” to the public, Garcia said. The Biennial Music Festival is a way for students to say, “Let us show you what we’ve been learning ... and give people a chance to enjoy it along with us,” she said.



That's why the festival is free and held in the evening. It starts at 6:30 both nights and lasts about 90 minutes.

The ensembles that will be performing are in three categories: overture, made up of beginning musicians; honors, the most experienced musicians; and festival, the student musicians in the middle.

Honors ensembles will perform both nights, so that beginning and middle musicians can hear what can happen in a few years if they continue their musical studies, Garcia noted.

The increased access to music education is the reason the school district this year has many beginning musicians who are in high school, she said. "The music expansion funded by the 2020 referendum has allowed us to grow our instrumental and vocal music programs. Some of our students are gaining access to ensemble instruction for the first time as 9th graders. The Overture, Festival, and Honors level groups make it possible for all musicians to participate in the festival," Garcia said.

The Biennial Music Festival will have two nods to its rich history, in the form of harps and heralding trumpets.



"Many, many years ago, we had a huge harp ensemble program at MPS," Garcia noted. Students again are learning harp at MPS, and some of those students will perform in the lobby to welcome festivalgoers. And for the first time in many years, the biennial again will have a celebratory trumpet fanfare.

What's notable about the Biennial Music Festival, Garcia said, is that it celebrates "what can happen when we all come together, even greater than the sum of its parts."

Students come from every corner of Milwaukee for an event that unites the city, Garcia observed. "The buzz at the break time for these groups is tremendous. They don't know there's 500 people who do what they do," she said, since some students might be the only ones to play a particular instrument at their school. To their delight, the student musicians find they have a built-in support network.

"I think that part is one of the best parts of this particular festival," she said.

Students began rehearsing with their ensembles (see images) in mid-March; rehearsals continue through April.



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