Armstrong’s Community Band: A History

In 1965, Armstrong College transitioned from a two-year institution in downtown Savannah, Georgia to a four-year institution on the city’s south side. In the downtown location, students interested in music studied vocal or piano music. As the Abercorn campus developed, the music programs grew in number. One important addition was a stage band comprised of college students.

The first band director was Charles Lawson, who taught there from fall 1970 through spring 1973. Lawson was hired to expand the music offerings at Armstrong to include band and music education. The band played at college and civic events and rehearsed in the Baker Annex, a trailer located in the woods behind Jenkins Auditorium, which is a parking lot today. In 1971, the band had 19 students, and the next year 27 students are pictured in the yearbook.

In fall 1973, Stephen Brandon joined the Armstrong faculty as band director, and later became the music department chair; he was the band director through spring 1984. In 1974, the college’s yearbook cites “A Year of Growth for the Band.” which had about 30 players. The college newspaper, Inkwell, cites May 26, 1974 as the “First Annual Pops Concert.” It was held in the MCC cafeteria. Proceeds went to the music scholarship fund. College players continued to form the band, and they rehearsed in the band room, an addition to the back of Jenkins Hall.

Ten years after the campus moved to the Abercorn location, the Fine Arts Center opened, and the music department moved there in fall 1975. To inaugurate the Center, the large-scale musical George M was performed on December 13-14, 1975, for which an ensemble of college band students, symphony personnel, and other adults played.

The community band got another boost in 1977 when, in an attempt to spur growth, Brandon began inviting good high school musicians to join the band. He also hired some Savannah Symphony Orchestra members, as well as Ft. Stewart band musicians, to complete a standard instrumentation. Gradually over the next couple of years, community members began joining the ensemble. The band continued meeting once a week in the evenings and giving one concert each term.

In fall 1984, Michael Campbell was hired as band director. At first, there was still only one band, comprised of both college students and community members, who rehearsed in the band hall of the new Fine Arts Center. Concerts were held each quarter, often with guest soloists and conductors. Brandon and Campbell began seeing the need to form two bands, one for college students and one for community members.

In the fall of 1985, James Anderson became department head of art and music. He and Campbell began developing a plan to form two bands, which was finalized in fall 1989. The college band met during the day, and the community band rehearsed on Monday evenings. Some college students played in both bands. Until the late 1990s, the two
bands usually shared concerts, with each band playing several numbers, often with a
guest band or guest artist.

In fall 1990, Anderson served as interim director of both the college and the community
bands. December 1990, the first Winterfest, a high school band camp and honor band
concert, was held. This event brought talented regional high school musicians in contact
with Armstrong band students and faculty. Soon there was need for an additional band
director, and in fall 1991, Joel Schultz became assistant band director. The band grew in
size with additional community musicians joining.

The band began a relationship with local German-American organizations, and in
October 1991, the community band played downtown in Orleans Square for German-
American Day festivities and the inauguration of the new fountain.

In January 1992, Ed Caughran joined Armstrong’s music department as associate director
of the community band. For the first time, on Feb. 18, 1992, the community band played
a concert without sharing a program with the Armstrong college band.

Oct. 10, 1992, the community band traveled to River Street for the Savannah
Quincentennial Commemoration. At this concert, the band played At A Ship’s Helm for
Chorus and Band by Jack Jarrett, a work commissioned for this event by the Armstrong
State College Art and Music Department.

July 2, 1992, the first Ed and Friend’s Patriotic Concert was held, one purpose of which
was to build a relationship between the community and the college. It also was an
avenue to raise scholarship money for music students. Ed and Doris Caughran began a
scholarship fund, which continued for many years. The patriotic concerts began an annual
tradition to honor military veterans and those currently-serving in the armed forces. At
the first concert, the house was full, and over one hundred college, community, and
military musicians filled the stage. Ed Caughran was widely known and respected in the
Savannah music world. Anderson remembered, “We thought that using Ed’s name
would attract his many friends who enjoyed band music, especially in the military band
tradition. He was known as ‘Mr. Band Man’ in Savannah for bringing national military
bands to Savannah and giving hundreds of free tickets each year in addition to his fine
work with the public schools of Savannah.”

In fall 1993, William Keith became band director of both college and community bands.
The community band continued to rehearse on Monday nights, with Caughran continuing
as associate director and guest conductor. The second Ed and Friends Patriotic concert
was held on July 1, 1993, with the “Savannah All-Star Band.” This name for the
community band was repeated in a holiday concert Dec. 17, 1993.

In 1996, Anderson returned to serve as interim director of both bands and continued as
department head. He began the Savannah Institute for Education in the Arts (SIEA),
which was comprised of high school students from the Savannah area, South Carolina,
and Batumi, Republic of Georgia. The musicians from the institute joined the
community band in the Olympic Torch ceremony on River Street in the summer of 1996.
The SIEA continued three summers (1995-1997) with the young musicians joining the community band for the Patriotic concert. James Thompson and Benny Ferguson were co-directors. The same year, the group played a concert at the new Tybee Island pier.

In fall 1997, Mark Johnson became the new director of bands at Armstrong. Under his leadership, the community band has become even more widely known and respected in the community. Continuing the band’s traditions, Johnson instituted new ideas, which over the years have become traditions themselves. The July Patriotic Concert is frequently standing room only, and the appearance of a mystery guest conductor is the highlight each year.

Johnson has been instrumental in expanding the tradition of creating a training ground for local band directors by giving them the opportunity to conduct the community band in rehearsal and concerts. Organizationally, the all-volunteer band now has active section leaders, a personnel manager, a percussion manager, an equipment manager, and two student librarians.

A board of directors was established in 2004 at Johnson’s request. Roger Roush was the first chairman. From 2006-2008, Bob Paredi served as chairman, and during that time, the band was officially named The Savannah Winds Symphony. The third chairman, Robert Slagel, requested that Paredi head a team to raise funds for a commissioning project to contract a world-class composer to create an original score for the Savannah Winds. The project succeeded and culminated with the band performing the world premier of A Savannah Symphony on Nov. 30, 2010 under the baton of its British composer, Philip Sparke. He was flown from London for one rehearsal of his work and its performance at the concert. Armstrong President Linda Bleicken hosted a pre-concert reception for the donors of the project and senior staff of Armstrong, and a post-concert reception was held for the band members to meet Mr. Sparke. John Sobke, the fourth chairman, was instrumental in facilitating the bands’ performance at the Lucas Theater in conjunction with the Savannah Music Festival on March 26, 2012. The centerpiece of the evening’s concert was a reprise of A Savannah Symphony.

As of 2012, the community band has grown in size to a packed rehearsal hall of over 100 members on Monday nights. The personnel of the band includes, at last count, a middle school student, many high school students, college students, and adults ranging in age from young to not so young, and with a wide variety of professions or retirement. Mark Johnson stated, “All are volunteer musicians committed to performing high quality repertoire at an artistic level. The band continues to build a loyal fan base of audience members and offer the Coastal Region another fine choice for concert attendance.”

Research compiled by Carol Anderson, Fall 2012, with invaluable help from Armstrong Research Librarian Caroline Hopkinson, Sarah and Bruce Spradley, Mark Johnson, Jim Anderson, Mike Campbell, and Steve Brandon, Bob Paretii, John Sobke, and others.