

Prairie Brass Band gets set for weekend battle; Thirty musicians carve out time to nurture inner 'band geek'

[Near West Edition]

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Document Text

Christopher Karabin was a high school band geek who tried to make a living after college as a drummer in a Chicago-area rock group.

He's now a banker by day, but at night and on weekends, he trades his charts and spreadsheets for a musical score.

Karabin, 39, plays timpani for the Arlington Heights-based Prairie Brass Band, an award-winning, 30-member group whose sound is an updated and more sophisticated version of the music played by brass bands that entertained at parades, political rallies and outdoor concerts in the 19th Century.

Performing for Prairie Brass is a part-time gig for the group's members, who are volunteers willing to endure sometimes long commutes and intense rehearsals for an opportunity to perform music that they describe as fun and challenging.

"Music has always been a part of my life," Karabin said. "I am not about to let my career get in the way of my hobby."

Founded in 1997, Prairie Brass is one of about 120 such bands in the U.S. and one of only two in the Chicago area. It has been based in Arlington Heights since 1999.

On Saturday, the band will host the fifth annual U.S. Open Brass Band Championships at St. Viator High School in Arlington Heights. Prairie Brass will compete against seven other bands from the U.S. and England.

The music is a mix of traditional music and marches, as well as contemporary arrangements of jazz and rock 'n' roll. The instruments typically include cornets -- similar to trumpets -- euphoniums, baritones, flugelhorns, tubas, trombones, tenor horns and drums.

Karabin and the other Prairie Brass members balance full-time jobs and family schedules to feed their interest in music.

"I was the stereotypical band geek in high school and then majored in music at the University of Illinois," Karabin said. "I had hoped to make my millions as a drummer in my rock band."

His band, Radon Impulse, played around the Chicago area for about three years, Karabin said.

"My banking job was moving at a faster pace, he said.

Fellow percussionist Clark Niermeyer, who is Prairie Brass president, commutes to Arlington Heights from Milwaukee for the weekly rehearsals.

"Because the music is challenging, we are very serious at rehearsals," said Niermeyer, whose father, Dallas, is the band's longtime director. "After our full-time jobs and driving through traffic, we don't have a lot of time to waste."

In some contests, bands learn the same music and are judged on how well they play the piece. The U.S. Open is a looser format, with each of the bands playing a 25-minute set with music they chose, which organizers say should appeal to a broader audience.

At stake are bragging rights, trophies and cash prizes of up to \$1,000.

"The most important part of the competition, however, is not coming in first. It's what you and the audience get out of

the performance," Karabin said.

Doors open at 9 a.m. Saturday for the U.S. Open Brass Band Championships at St. Viator High School, 1213 E. Oakton St., Arlington Heights. Performances start at 9:30 a.m. The last set is scheduled to start at 3:45 p.m., and the awards ceremony is scheduled for 4:15 p.m.

Tickets are \$20 for the full day of performances and can be purchased by calling 847-398-1732, or online at <http://www.usopenbrass.org>.

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If you go

WHAT: U.S. Open Brass Band Championships

WHERE: St. Viator High School, 1213 E. Oakton St., Arlington Heights

WHEN: Doors open at 9 a.m. Saturday

TICKETS: \$20. Call 847-398-1732 or visit

www.usopenbrass.org

Credit: By Dennis McSherry, Special to the Tribune

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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