

## ENTERTAINMENT

# 'A wonderful gig': Will Sherwood set for musical finale at First Unitarian Church



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WORCESTER — As director of music and organist at First Unitarian Church of Worcester, 90 Main St., since 1985, Will Sherwood has been part of many memorable occasions in the life of the church.

"There have been some great moments of music here," Sherwood, 69, said.

And as the Rev. Sarah C. Stewart, minister of the church has put it, "Music is a key component of our mission here at First Unitarian Church."

In that regard, there will be quite a musical fanfare at the church's 10:30 a.m. Sunday service on May 1. The music will include the last movement ("Ode to Joy") from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony; movements from Requiems by Mozart, Verdi, Berlioz, Faure, Rutter and Lauridsen; the world premiere of "Credo" ("I Believe in One World at Peace)" for orchestra, soloists, choir, and organ with music by Sherwood and text by Jim Scott; and the dedication of a new Portativ organ (small pipe organ) and a performance featuring Widor's Kyrie for two choirs and two organs. There will be a 30-piece orchestra, the Festival Choir, and the featured soloists include Kara Bershada, harp, and Maria Ferrante, soprano vocalist.

Poulenc's Organ Concerto will be performed at 10:10 a.m., prior to the service.

For his own composition, "I wanted a credo for the earth and humanity," Sherwood said.

The service celebrates the retirement of Sherwood after 37 years at First Unitarian, making him the longest serving music director of the church. It is 61 years since Sherwood first played in a church service at the age of 8.

There is a lot more about Sherwood, who has organized world-class concerts, benefits for a number of causes, and run programs to involve youth in music. "He is a superman! With so

many talents it is difficult to count," said Ferrante.

Leonardo Ciampa, composer in residence at Mechanics Hall and director of music at Emanuel Lutheran Church, said of Sherwood, "One couldn't calculate how many people and how many projects he has supported and helped over the decades."

Sherwood has more than lived up to his charge when he first became director of music to put First Unitarian Church of Worcester back on the map musically. He was also dean of the Worcester American Guild of Organists for eight years, and is principal organist at Mechanics Hall and artistic director of the Worcester Organ Concert Series at the hall.

A few years ago he delighted in opening up the hall's historic E. & G.G. Hook Organ for a reporter and photographer/videographer to take a look inside after the instrument had just undergone a renovation. He knew all the working parts. Such knowledge goes back a long way. When the high school he was attending in Tennessee decided to get rid of its organ, he persuaded his aunt to store it in her basement so that he could rebuild it.

With all this, Sherwood never sought music, including being being minister of music and organist at First Unitarian Church, as a full-time job.

"No, because then it may not be as much fun," he said.

Instead, for several years he had a successful career at Digital Equipment Corporation, which later became a part of Intel, managing a group of 70 engineers. He helped produce many of DEC's computer chips, obtained two patents, and mentored many young engineers in developing their own careers. More recently, he has his own business as a day job, Sherwood Hosting LLC: Web Design, Graphic Design, Photography, Web Hosting.

Typically, however, at DEC he founded the original DECarolers, a holiday a cappella vocal group that toured engineering facilities each December, not only for Digital's engineering sites, but also competitors' workplaces at that time: Prime, Data General, Apollo, and others. The caroling group also brought holiday cheer to homeless shelters in Central Mass. and in Boston.

Music is Sherwood's full-time passion, and sitting at First Unitarian Church recently he said he had "always envisioned I'd go 70s or so."

But in a cruel twist over the past couple of years he has been dealing with a condition called diplacusis, which throws off his perception of music.

Sherwood was home one day tuning his piano with a tuning fork when he realized something was wrong.

With diplacusis, one ear perceives a sound normally, but the other hears the pitch differently.

"This ear (his right ear) transposes by a minor third," Sherwood said. As a keyboardist, "the perception is off, I think I'm playing the wrong notes."

There are ways of adjusting to it, but "it drives me crazy. Being a keyboard musician/conductor, it's difficult. It's like being being cross-eyed. (In this case) Cross-eared."

With characteristic thoroughness, Sherwood has researched the condition. "It turns out only musicians and audio engineers know they have it. I'm wondering if people who have difficulty singing have it. One learns to be patient. The last two years have been a challenge. Extra practice to memorize how they (the notes) sound," he said.

"It's not life or death, but I made a decision I can't go on being a musician."

Sherwood lives in Sterling with his partner of over 30 years, Blaine Bershad, and he has plenty of other interests.

The home has an orchard and Sherwood said he's preparing an an outside performance space. "We have outdoor parties. I'm extending that to have a circular platform."

Sherwood has put together many special services and concerts at First Unitarian Church, so his farewell will be another musical highlight.

"As a musician the highlight is to pull together such a thing as this May 1st service. It really is the magnus opus of church services. I have the best musicians that I've collected over the years and then conduct them," he said.

"My only regret is this year I won't be able to hear it completely, but then again Beethoven lost his hearing completely so I'm not going to complain."

First Unitarian Church, Sherwood said, has "been like a gourmet buffet for a musician." The Worcester area is blessed with several churches that have great music programs, and at First Unitarian Sherwood has found "great people who are very supportive. This has been a wonderful gig here."

The musical styles he's been able to employ at the church are "so widespread — jazz, classical, spiritual. I'm very lucky. It keeps it interesting."

Sherwood almost missed the deadline, if not the calling, when the position became vacant over 37 years ago.

"When I found out about the job, it was past the application (deadline). I was told to hand it (his application) in personally. They interviewed me four or five days later."

The church organ needed to be fixed at the time of his interview, and Sherwood obviously made a good first impression. "I fixed it," he said of the organ. Next, "They asked me to play a hymn." Instead, Sherwood played a Bach improv.

Sherwood first played in a church service at the age of 8, was a junior choir accompanist at 10, and became organist at North Johnson City Baptist in Tennessee when he was 12.

He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in computer engineering in four years at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he also took music courses. Meanwhile, during his four years there he was organist and music director at Wilson Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. His first year he took a 90-minute bus ride from campus to the church. Later, he had a car.

On moving to this area after getting a job with DEC, Sherwood held several organist/director of music positions at churches, several of them interim, and was engaged with other musical happenings. He was director of music for multiple productions of Sudbury and Maynard Savoyards and interim director of music for the Nashoba Valley Chorale. He was also a guest organ soloist with the Boston Pops.

Sherwood recalled that people would ask him " 'How do you do it all?' " Now he's found, "You get tired easier. It's part of life's journey."

At First Unitarian Church, having fixed the organ, "they charged me to put First Unitarian back on the music map. Before then there were great music directors, but the program was small."

These days the church has volunteer singers with a core of paid singers that comprise the Festival Choir, which sings a full program including anthems two Sundays a month. A smaller Chamber Choir performs one Sunday a month where the singers and soloists provide choral, vocal and instrumental music that enriches the spiritual theme of the service. A solo vocalist is featured on the other Sunday of the month.

When Sherwood first arrived at First Unitarian there was the pipe organ and a baby grand piano on loan. The organ, a 69-rank Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ, was restored and expanded

in 2004, there are now two 7-foot Steinway pianos, a harpsichord, a new organ console on wheels, the new small chamber pipe organ, four timpani, and music stands. Special "Music Sunday" services at the church can include a 35-piece orchestra and 40-plus member choir. Sherwood's contacts have enabled him to bring in outstanding soloists such as Ferrante.

Meanwhile, Sherwood has produced and directed three choral and instrumental CDs at First Unitarian.

During the ravages of the pandemic, First Unitarian Church evolved from putting on its first service on Facebook via a cellphone camera ("it was awful," Sherwood said), to setting up cameras, microphones and a broadcast booth. Soloists performed between plastic sheets. "But we still had music that touched people," Sherwood said.

The choir came back last fall and still wears masks through May 1. "Everyone's vaccinated," Sherwood said.

"People are attracted to the church not only because of the children's programs and minister's sermons but also the music. You never know what part of the music is going to reach out. The music can reach people in a way that the musician will never know," Sherwood said.

"We just want people to appreciate and be touched by the music. Reach their hearts and help them get through whatever they're going through that week. So hopefully music can help soothe or celebrate depending on where you are."

Sherwood has enjoyed working with the choirs over the years. "The people in the choir are very special and wonderful people. Church choirs seem to attract the nicest group of people," he said.

"Church choir(s) are a welcomed oasis to pause life's stress and turmoil to come together to create those magical moments called music to recharge people's spirits."

"Will is a consummate musician and leader in the church," Stewart said. "He is also an excellent worship partner and fun to plan services with."

At services Stewart said, "I want a musician I can almost communicate with telepathically, and I have that with Will. We are in sync. I am going to miss him."

Besides acknowledging his prodigious musical talents, people who speak about Sherwood invariably talk about him being a nice person and a good friend.

"When I think of Will, the first word that comes to mind is 'creative,' " said Ciampa. "He has an innate musicality and a tremendous versatility. This versatility served him well at First Unitarian Church, where he built a huge music program and regularly wore innumerable hats."

"Actually, 'creative' is the second word I think of. The first word is 'friend.' From the moment I arrived in Worcester, he did so many things to help me and sent so many opportunities in my direction. He never expected a thing in return. Almost everything I have been able to do in Worcester can be traced back to him. He's a great colleague and an even greater friend, whom I can never repay," Ciampa said.

"He is the dearest, most self-effacing and gentle-spirited person you could ever meet, who packs a punch of talent and style in any of his many, many productions, concerts and benefits," said Ferrante. "It has been a deep pleasure and honor to sing with him over the years, with one highlight being a benefit concert at First Unitarian for the Worcester Animal League, where one of the performers was a little doggie looking out at the audience from the stage! He gave his whole heart to music not only for the First Unitarian Church, AGO, but for the entire greater good of Worcester."

Stewart said Sherwood's retirement is well earned.

First Unitarian Church plans to first seek an interim music director for a year before naming a permanent replacement.

After May 1, James Haupt, assistant director of music who Sherwood said isn't interested in the director position, and Ilana Cady will lead the music at the church until the interim music director comes on board.

Sherwood said he's excited that the reputation of the music program will attract top-quality candidates.

"Hopefully they keep the music going."

A common practice in churches is for a retiring ministers to stay away for a certain period of time so that the new ministers aren't looking over their shoulder and the congregation isn't making ongoing comparisons.

Sherwood will be doing that after May 1 when he has retired from First Unitarian Church.

"The agreement is to stay away for a year and a half. We'll socialize — we won't talk church. That's very standard practice for ministers. I think it's the best thing. A break," he said.

"I'll continue my businesses. I'm big on gardening. I'm a runner. I like to cook (vegetarian). We'll entertain more."

Sherwood and Bershad's house is designed around two pipe organs, a 9-foot Steinway grand piano, a neon fabrication shop, and offices.

The pipe organs should be a reminder to Sherwood of his multifaceted musical life.

"There are two balconies and pipes everywhere," he said.