

Best of the West Musical Festival at Colorado Mesa University - Grand Junction, Colorado

Best of the West began in 2000 as a one-day select band event called Colorado Senior Band Day. 40 enthusiastic high school seniors joined the Colorado Mesa University Wind Symphony for rehearsals culminating in an exciting concert. The second year, 60 students attended allowing the event to form its own high school band with Dr. Calvin Hofer conducting. In 2002, with the financial support of Stephen Boelter and Karen Combs, the first guest conductor, Eugene Corporon, was invited to conduct and CSBD became a two-day event. James Houlik, tenor saxophone, was featured in a Colorado premiere of Joseph Wilcox Jenkin's new concerto composed for Mr. Houlik.

In 2004, to include participation of all high school students, the name was changed to Best of the West Select Band. Eighty students participated, and the event featured the Memphis Brass as guest soloists with the CMU Wind Symphony in a performance of Eric Ewazen's *Shadowcatcher*. The guest conductor, John Tuinstra also performed a tuba recital on our Guest Artist Recital Series, at which time this component of the festival was added. All of our BOTW guest artists now open the festival with a recital on the Guest Artist Recital Series.

A milestone was achieved in 2005 with the participation of over 140 students, necessitating the formation of two bands, equal in ability. With the continued financial support of Stephen and Karen, BOTW invited guest conductor Dr. Paula Holcomb and commissioned a new work from Dr. Karl Boelter, premiered by the Colorado Mesa University Wind Symphony. Our featured guest soloist was Bob Spring (clarinet) from Arizona State University performing *Black Dog* by Scott McAllister with the CMU Wind Symphony as well as a recital on the Music Department's Guest Artist Recital Series.

In 2006, the format moved to auditioning students to be placed in bands of like ability forming the BOTW Wind Symphony and Symphonic Band, with the more experienced students placed in the Wind Symphony. Jason Nitsch composed a new work, and a second guest conductor was added to conduct the Symphonic Band with Mark Wurst from Mountain Vista High School joining the growing BOTW family.

A special component of this event is the Best of the West Commissioning Project. Each year a composer is commissioned to write a new piece for band, and the Colorado Mesa University Wind Symphony gives the world premiere. The two high school bands perform works of the guest composer if possible, and the composer works with the high school students and conductor in rehearsal. This unique opportunity allows the students and conductor to gain artistic insight from the composer.

The conductor of the BOTW Wind Symphony is a well-respected conductor from a top university music school in North America. The conductor of the Symphonic Band is a successful, well-respected conductor from a high school program in Colorado.

Another important element of BOTW that has transpired is the continuing education aspect for high school and middle school band directors. Band directors can register for continuing education/graduate credit regardless of whether they bring students. The guest composer, conductors and artist(s) present sessions for the teachers, and the guest artists present a master class to the high school students. The guest composer-in-residence also gives a composition master class to aspiring young composers.

This vision and format continues today, seeking excellent conductors and soloists and commissioning outstanding composers. BOTW has evolved into a premiere event in Colorado and the western United States for high school students, teachers, and the students and faculty of Colorado Mesa University.

After another inspiring and emotionally charged event in December of 2008 with over 180 high school students, we realized that this event is so much more than a select band. It is a Festival of Music that includes inspiring rehearsals, master classes, sectionals, performances, a world premiere, guest soloists, educational sessions, and a banquet. To more closely represent this special experience, "Music Festival" has been added to "Best of the West". However, to those who experience this event, it has become affectionately referred to simply as "Best of the West".

2010 marked the 10th Anniversary and BOTW was pleased to bring back the first guest conductor, Eugene Corporon who was given the opportunity to choose the composer. He chose John Mackey, and John's commission, *Hymn to a Blue Hour* is being performed around the world. 2012 was another exciting year as we "Celebrate Colorado"! All of our guest artists were from Colorado and represent the talent that abounds in this great state!

2013 marked another milestone in the history of BOTW when the festival moved to three bands and over 220 students attending. 2015 brought another landmark with 280 students participating and a third guest conductor not on the CMU faculty. The festival was unfortunately not able to take place in 2020 due to COVID-19. In 2021, Jonathan Hinkle, in his first year as the new Director of Bands, brought his 'PRISM Concert' idea to the festival, which through some skeptics and logistical struggles, was very successful. This new element to the festival was continued in 2022, even with plans considered for this specific style of concert in the new CMU Performing Arts Center complex that should break ground in 2023.

We are ever so thankful to Karen Combs for her continued support of the Best of the West Music Festival!