UL wind ensemble to perform compositions inspired by New Orleans' heritage, culture during tricentennial

Vermilion staff report

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Wind Ensemble will explore music inspired by New Orleans' heritage and history next month for a performance in honor of the city's tricentennial at the University of New Orleans.

"Congo Square" and "Storyville" will be the inspiration for UL Lafayette's ensemble pieces. Composed by James Syler, a music instructor from the University of Texas at San Antonio, the pieces have yet to be performed in the place of their inspiration.

"There's no place where they deserve to be played more," UL Lafayette Director of Bands William Hochkeppel, Ph.D., said in a university press release. "We are telling history with music."

UL Lafayette's Wind Ensemble takes the stage at 1 p.m. March 11, the closing day of "Making New Orleans Home: A Tricentennial Symposium."

Syler and author Freddi Williams Evans will provide commentary to accompany the musical performance. Evans' "Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans" was published by the University of Louisiana Press in 2011.

The history that inspired these numbers dates back to 1718, the birth year of New Orleans, originally called a "fine crescent" of the Mississippi River. New Orleans became an easy port for the slave trade and by 1724, regulations were placed to further control their slaves. Congo Square was made and became the go-to location for slaves on Sundays, their day of rest.

In her 2011 book, Evans wrote, "In Congo Square on Sunday afternoons, African descendants spoke and sang in their native languages, practiced their religious beliefs, danced according to their traditions, and played African-derived rhythmic patterns on instruments modeled after African prototypes."

Storyville was New Orleans' red-light district and had a heavy hand in inspiring musical heritage in the city. Infamous names such as Jelly Roll Morton, "Bunk" Johnson, "King" Oliver and Louis Armstrong are products of the red-light district brothels and saloons and got their start performing in those establishments.

Storyville, Syler said, "produced one of the great ironies in the history of American music — that out of a pit of human despair, violence and abuse, this place would foster the music and musicians who would have a fundamental influence in the formation of early jazz, a joyful, energetic and hopeful music."

"Storyville" was written in 1996 and "Congo Square" in 2014.

Hochkeppel said the compositions feel tactile, and the music is able to touch audience members. The two compositions entail the use of African drums, creole melodies and is rife with early jazz riffs and the Storyville inspired piece has a ragtime-blues feel to it.

"It makes people think. It makes people feel. It's serious music, but there's a message there," Hochkeppel said.