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Playing to Win

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Playing to Win

IWU Wind Ensemble hits high note with prestigious American Prize.

Story by CELESTE HUTTES Photos by ROBERT FRANK III

Collaborative. Creative. Capable. Committed. Many words can be used to describe the Illinois Wesleyan University Wind Ensemble. And now a new adjective will forever be tied to this talented team of musicians: "award-winning."

In March 2017, the ensemble was named national winner of the American Prize in Band Performance in the college/university division. In his critique, a member of the American Prize judging panel wrote: "The quality of the ensemble is very sharp, lean and precise. ... They set an example for other wind ensembles to follow their lead."

"We are incredibly honored to receive this award," says conductor and director Lev Ivanov, who is a visiting assistant

professor of music at Illinois Wesleyan. "I hope this award is a point of inspiration for students. It is a testament that if you work hard, practice and become a mindful musician, you can achieve great things."

Founded in 2009, the American Prize is a series of national non-profit performing arts competitions held annually to "recognize and reward great art in this country, wherever and whenever it is found," according to its mission statement. Ensembles and individual artists can compete at the student, community, or professional level. Winners in each category receive cash prizes and award certificates. Judging is based solely on recorded performances.

For its submission, the Illinois Wesleyan Wind Ensemble performed Vincent Persichetti's *Divertimento*, Robert Sheldon's *Metroplex*, Peter Mennin's *Canzona*, Scott Lindroth's *Spin Cycle*, and Milhaud's *Suite Française*, along with other works. "This is a highly prestigious award for collegiate-level music ensembles," says School of Music Director Mario Pelusi. "The widespread recognition that comes with this type of award places both the IWU School of Music and the University in the spotlight — which, of course, enhances our efforts to attract future musically talented students." Beyond the accolades, Ivanov says competitions like the American Prize promote artistic excellence. "It's great for any musician — especially young musicians — to participate in competitions," says Ivanov, who has conducted the Wind Ensemble since the fall of 2014. "Competitions do not define musicians, but they help us strive to be better and achieve results we never thought were possible."

Moods and Passion



As a conductor, Ivanov (below) says "It's very important to understand how music affects people — including those of us who play it."



The Wind Ensemble rehearses its March concert program, including Owen Reed's reflection of Mexican folk culture, "La Fiesta Mexicana," and Eric Whitacre's whimsically surreal "Godzilla Eats Las Vegas!"

Competitions aside, the ensemble itself spurred tuba performance major Jacob Taitel '18 to raise his game. "When I started in the Wind Ensemble in 2014 it pushed me to play at the level of all the other talented musicians," says Taitel, who was the only undergraduate among 10 semi-finalists in the tuba division of the 2016 Leonard Falcone International Tuba and Euphonium Competition.

This past summer Taitel studied abroad in Vienna, Austria, with instructors from the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna; the Vienna Symphony Orchestra; and Wilfried Brandstötter, tubist for Mnozil Brass, a renowned Austrian brass septet.

"Over the years," Taitel says, "I have become the musician I originally strived to be."

Founded in 1979, the Wind Ensemble brings together the University's top wind and percussion students to perform the finest wind band repertoire. Over the years the ensemble has worked with Pulitzer Prize-winning composers such as William Bolcom, John Corigliano, Jennifer Higdon, Karel Husa, and Joseph Schwanter and has also commissioned new compositions.

Currently at about 35 members, the wind ensemble features the full range of wind instruments. Ensemble members meet three times a week for 90-minute practice sessions. Beyond that, members spend hours practicing on their own and with their instrumental sections.

The group performs several concerts throughout the year, and has appeared at the College Band Directors National Association Conference and the Illinois Music Educators Association Conference.

"This ensemble is comprised of highly accomplished music majors and non-music majors, all of whom strive toward achieving excellence in their performances," says Pelusi, who also describes Ivanov as a "highly gifted and inspiring conductor. We are extremely fortunate to have him on our faculty."

This elite group of musicians, selected from auditions at the start of each semester, enters the wind ensemble with advanced technical skills. While honing those skills, the ensemble fosters musical growth by helping students learn to play expressively and with passion. "It's very important to understand how music affects people — including those of us who play it," says Ivanov. "Along with the history of the pieces we play, we learn about the emotional side of music and how to convey different moods."

Those moods range from serious to playful, as evidenced by the ensemble's March 31 concert program, which included Timothy Broege's kaleidoscopic *Sinfonia V: Symphonia Sacra et Profana*; H. Owen Reed's reflection of Mexican folk culture, *La Fiesta Mexicana*; and Eric Whitacre's *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas!*, which is as outlandishly fun as it sounds.

The ensemble specializes in advanced contemporary music, which has flourished in the recent decades. "Today's repertoire is so vast," says Ivanov. "It's very different from even 50 years ago when there were fewer pieces of wind ensemble music." The ensemble's ability to master this challenging repertoire is especially impressive in light of the fact that many of its members are non-music majors.

"I love the mixture of both music majors and non-music majors in the ensemble," says Christopher Cooper '18, a music education major and trombone player. "This support for continuing musicianship, no matter your path of study, is one of the best things about the instrumental program here at Wesleyan."

Taitel agrees. "The fact that an ensemble that is majority non-music majors can win a competition such as this says worlds about how blessed the University is to have Dr. Ivanov."

Behind the Baton

Born in Kyiv, Ukraine, Ivanov has a D.M.A. in orchestral and opera conducting from Arizona State University. He has studied with some of the world's leading conductors and worked with orchestras around the globe, from Romania to Scotland and beyond. "I have an orchestral background, and I also play the flute — which is a woodwind instrument — so I understand how wind musicians think and the technical side of producing sound on wind versus string," says Ivanov, who also conducts the Illinois Wesleyan Symphony Orchestra.

His exacting musical standards even extend to his conducting batons. Ivanov prefers cork-handled batons from Japan and England to wood-handled batons popular in the U.S. because the lighter cork handle makes the baton tip just a hint heavier. "It feels better in my hand. A conductor's baton is a very individual thing," he says. "As a conductor, your baton is your instrument — it's what you operate with to communicate with your ensemble."

And ultimately, that baton helps communicate a universal language.

"Music is a way of communicating — of bringing people together from different backgrounds, both performers and the audience. Music enhances our understanding of the world," says Ivanov, who notes that Illinois Wesleyan's liberal arts curriculum gives students a broader context through which to communicate musically.



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Having grown up in the intensely competitive world of conservatories — where hundreds of musicians might compete for a single spot — Ivanov appreciates the congenial atmosphere fostered by IWU's School of Music. At the same time, he is pleased that music performance is regarded as an essential part of the University's character and traditions.

"Where other schools of this size would only have a department of music, Wesleyan has a full-sized School of Music. And the more full-time faculty we have who are able to invest in the students, the better it is for the students and the better it is for the University," he says. "That's what's great about this school — the great abundance of personalized attention."

IWU's relatively small size makes the American Prize win even sweeter for performers like Cooper.

"For a university of our size to be considered in the same category with top-tier, large universities across the country — and then to win — is absolutely incredible," he says. "All of our hard work has not gone unnoticed."

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[Learn more about Illinois Wesleyan's School of Music.](#)