

UW-Madison's Mark Hetzler takes the trombone in new directions



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Trombonist Mark Hetzler performs a lot, both in the Madison area and on the road.

But the concerts he'll do this week stand out.

On Monday, Hetzler and his experimental band Sinister Resonance — whose members often push their instruments in unconventional directions — will perform at High Noon Saloon. The music is part of a release concert for Sinister Resonance's new CD, produced by Hetzler and titled "They Said..."

On Wednesday, Hetzler, an associate professor of trombone at UW-Madison, also will lead a benefit concert intended to raise morale and money for Brittany Sperberg, an outstanding university student whose music studies have been sidelined by a severe and yet-to-be diagnosed illness.

On Friday and Saturday, Hetzler will be performing in more free concerts, this time with his fellow members of the UW Brass Quintet.

The week's lineup reflects the vast range of musical styles Hetzler regularly ventures into. A classically trained trombonist who earned his master's from the New England Conservatory of Music, Hetzler is known for commissioning new music and has recorded eight CDs.

He and the other members of Sinister Resonance — Vincent Fuh on piano, Nick Moran on acoustic and electric bass, and Todd Hammes on drum set, frame drum, kalimba and percussion — started playing together in 2007.

“As we got involved with more and more non-classical pieces, this group sort of emerged, slowly, over time,” said Hetzler, who came to UW-Madison in 2004. “We’re all still doing our individual projects, but we’ll come together to do these Sinister events.”

The band’s name comes from the piece “Sinister Resonance,” written by the early 20th-century experimental composer Henry Cowell. Hetzler was drawn to the name “because it sounds a little edgy, like we’re a rock band,” he said, “but it also has this connection to Western experimental classical music.”

Cowell was known for playing the piano in alternative ways, such as plucking the strings or using harmonics to get unusual sounds. The musicians in Sinister Resonance are similarly adventurous. Hetzler, for example, frequently hooks up his trombone to a guitar effects rig to electronically distort its sound as an electric guitarist might.

“They Said...” contains two pieces by Hetzler: “Murmurations,” named for the way starlings swoop up together in flight, and “Fear of Dust,” based on a line from T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland.”

In Sinister Resonance, “I think we’re all coming at it from our own musical backgrounds. What we bring together is everybody’s best or most adventurous spirit — so it sort of forges this voice.”

In Monday’s show, Sinister Resonance will be backed on one tune by the UW-Madison Low Brass Ensemble, a combination trombone choir and tuba euphonium that Hetzler co-directs. The sound, he said, will be “massive.”

“We’re not a dance band, that’s for sure,” he said. “I think coming from a classical contemporary background, I’m interested in that kind of experimentation, so having rock influences in it — playing loud, having some edgy hooks, maybe getting a huge energy that you may not get in acoustic music — that’s part of it, too.”

On Wednesday, Hetzler, the Low Brass Ensemble and several other groups will gather in Mills Hall for a showcase concert — to benefit Sperberg.

A trombonist who studies with Hetzler, Sperberg is a senior in music education.

“When she came here four years ago, she just lit the place up with her amazing personality (and) her high energy,” Hetzler said. “She’s a leader; she’s formed groups and gone way outside the traditions of just jazz and classical. She’s just a magnet for bringing people together — a real inspiration.”

But last fall, Sperberg developed “a very strange and unidentified illness” centered in her nasal cavity, Hetzler said. The condition forced her to withdraw from classes and undergo several surgeries to remove a recurring mass within her face. She now must make weekly trips from her home in Shawano to Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

“It’s really sad because the second surgery actually caused a form of numbness from her eyes down,” Hetzler said. “So she can’t feel her face. We’re not sure if that’s going to go away. So her trombone playing is in serious doubt right now.”

“I thought — what can we do, not only to help cover her out-of-pocket medical costs, but also to get behind her spiritually, as friends and as people who care about her,” he said. “So I thought let’s put together all the groups she was in and arrange a benefit concert.”

Appearing in Mills Hall Wednesday will be the UW Wind Ensemble, directed by professor Scott Teeple; the UW Jazz Orchestra, directed by professor Johannes Wallmann; the Low Brass Ensemble, directed by Hetzler; the Badger Brass; and the Horn Heads, a funk horn band founded by Sperberg.

Sperberg herself plans to be there, too, Hetzler said.

“The idea is to showcase all these groups playing upbeat music that is in the spirit of Brittany’s spirit, and show our support for her.”

If you go

CD release concert: Sinister Resonance performs at High Noon Saloon, 701A E. Washington Ave., Monday night. The show starts at 8:30 p.m. with performances by Nuggernaut and Fringe Character. \$10 cover.

Benefit concert: Free, one-hour concert featuring a range of UW-Madison music ensembles. Donations accepted to help cover out-of-pocket medical costs for UW-Madison music student Brittany Sperberg. 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in Mills Hall, Humanities Building, 455 N. Park St.

UW Brass Quintet: Free concerts at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Oakwood Retirement Center, 6205 Mineral Point Road; and 8 p.m. Saturday in Mills Hall.

Websites: www.markhetzler.com, sinisterresonance.com, www.music.wisc.edu/wisconsin-brass-quintet/