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Barristers Big Band plays on

The Chicago Bar Association musicians practice Mondays in a judge's courtroom

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The Barristers Big Band, inspired by the style of the big bands of the 1930s and 1940s, "keeps this music alive because it loves it," said leader John S. Vishneski III of Reed, Smith LLP.

Consisting of 35 members of The Chicago Bar Association, "we play together week in, week out," Vishneski said.

"Even as an amateur group, ... we get a cohesiveness that is reminiscent of what the old big bands were like when they were on the road playing five nights a week."

The band performed Wednesday at its free holiday concert at the Daley Center. The group played songs like "Sleigh Ride" as a homage to Glenn Miller and portions of other famous Miller tunes.

The band also performed songs from the Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn version of the "Nutcracker Suite." Vocalists sang "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm," and other tunes. Drummer Adam J. Grais was featured in "The Little Drummer Boy."

"I've been playing the drums I guess 30 years," said Grais, of Sugar, Felsenthal, Grais & Hammer LLP.

Grais played in the Columbia University marching band and taught drum lessons in San Francisco. He said he joined the Barristers Big Band in 2007 to "get back involved in music."

"It's just a fun, nice outlet, a good group of people," Grais said. "It's been good to learn sort of the standard, jazz repertoire and play through it with a bunch of people who truly love it."



John S. Vishneski III, a partner at Reed, Smith LLP, played the clarinet as a member of the Barristers Big Band during a Wednesday holiday concert at the Daley Center. *Judy Fidkowski*

Founded in 2000, the band practices from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. every Monday U.S. District Judge Blanche M. Manning's courtroom. Some members store their instruments in Manning's chambers.

Manning plays tenor saxophone in the band. Due to scheduling conflicts, about 20 members of the band play at any event and the band plays about 10 events a year, Vishneski said.

"I play clarinet. You'll see me leading the band, grab my clarinet, turn around, walk up to the microphone and play," Vishneski, 49, said.

Originally from Virginia, Vishneski said he's played clarinet for 39 years and once played Mozart's "Clarinet Concerto" for the governor of Virginia.

Joel S. Dalinka, a corporate attorney at McDonald, Hopkins LLC, who plays alto saxophone in the Big Band, said he started playing at age 10 and was a

member of the Marching Illini band for four years.

"I've always been a big fan of the (big band) genre. We cover a pretty broad spectrum of types of music in the big band format," Dalinka said.

The Barristers Big Band fall concert in October at the Harold Washington Library Center was called "A Musical Competition: Cole Porter vs. Soul Music." The band's soul music was represented by tunes from such artists as Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin.

The band's talent "runs the gamut from people who probably could be out there playing professionally to guys just doing it because it's fun to pull out their instrument and play it," Dalinka said.

Stephen P. Thomas, 74, a retired partner from Sidley, Austin LLP plays piano and keyboard.

"There is a sound which comes out of a big band which you cannot find anywhere else," Thomas said. "It's just a wonderful, musical experience when a big band is doing its thing."

The band's biggest events are its annual fall concert and its springtime Barristers Big Band Benefit Ball. The band also does weddings, alumni events and other events. It also features a smaller spinoff group, the Scales of Justice, for cocktail parties.

The Barristers Big Band features three men and three women who sing. The three women sometimes perform in the style of the Andrews Sisters of the swing and Boogie Woogie era.

The band and the smaller combo charge modest fees for gigs.

"No member of our band has ever taken one penny for playing in the band," Thomas said. "Last year we gave \$5,000 to the Chicago Bar Foundation."