

METRO DETROIT

BIG-TIME PERFORMERS: Student bands to play in Miami, even France

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The New Year's Day parade in Paris. The Orange Bowl in Miami Gardens. The U.S. Army All-American Bowl in San Antonio. The Motor City Bowl right here in Detroit.

These are just a few of the places you can find some talented teens from metro Detroit during the holidays. Dedicated to their craft, they are forgoing some of their Christmas vacations to represent their schools on national and international stages.

For them, it was an easy choice. After all, not many teens are like the 50 members of the band at Sterling Heights High School, who will perform at several locations in and around Paris for the New Year's holiday. "I'm still in a state of disbelief that I'm actually going to Paris," said Sean Lechkun, a 17-year-old senior who plays tenor sax and is the senior drum major. "To be playing in front of the Eiffel Tower is even bigger. It's one of those things where I'll believe it when I'm there doing it."

The reality will set in Dec. 27, when the students -- and more than 30 adults -- set off for France.

Jeremy Duby, director of bands at the high school, said the band has about 100 students.

A day before the Sterling Heights band leaves, the Mid-American Pompon All-Star Team -- which includes students from metro Detroit schools -- is to perform during the Motor City Bowl.

About a week later, on Jan. 3, the Cass Tech Marching Band is to hit the field at Dolphin Stadium in Miami Gardens, performing during the Orange Bowl.

On Jan. 5, Ryan Fleisher, Eric Washington and Michael Wells -- members of the top-notch Plymouth-Canton Educational Park marching band -- are to perform at the All-American Bowl at the Alamodome in San Antonio.

The three had to undergo a rigorous audition process to be selected for the first-ever U.S. Army All-American Marching Band.

"The music was difficult," Marc Whitlock, director of bands for the Plymouth-Canton Educational Park, said of what the students had to learn and perform for the audition tapes. "It was definitely meant to separate excellent achievement from average achievement."

Whitlock was selected as a staff member for the band, so he'll accompany the teens to San Antonio.

Fleisher, a senior, said he feels lucky to have been chosen.

"There are so many people in our marching band who work just as hard as I do, even harder," the 17-year-old said.

"I really am thankful ... and grateful that I got the opportunity to do this."

He's particularly thankful because he had to learn a different style of playing the snare drum to audition. Most bands, he said, use the traditional method, with the left hand turned palm up and the right hand palm down. The drum is usually tilted. In the Plymouth-Canton band, the snare drum is played with both hands straight, palms down and with the drum straight.

"I practiced at least four hours every day," to perfect it, Fleisher said.

While it took auditions to get to San Antonio, it took a strong reputation to get the Sterling Heights group invited to Paris.

Duby, director of bands at Sterling Heights High, said a judge at a state competition was impressed with the group. The band is one of seven from the United States that is to perform at the annual parade in Paris. In addition to the New Year's Day parade, the band will perform in Chantilly, France, and during an indoor concert at a Paris church.

Sherry Ann Reyes, a senior trumpet player, said the band has "worked really hard over the past four or five years. We're really dedicated." Still, she says, "It's kind of a shock that we were picked over other bands in the state."

It's been more than two years since the band got the invitation -- plenty of time to hold fund-raisers to help defray the cost of going, which is about \$2,500 per student.

Amy Szczepanski, a senior French horn player, said she initially thought the trip would never happen. "A lot can happen in two years. Things can fall through. People could drop out of band."

Now, the 17-year-old couldn't be more excited. Going to Paris is amazing enough, she said, but she may major in music in college, and "if I could put that I played in Paris on a résumé, that's going to be awesome."

Tom Jurkiw, a 17-year-old trumpet player, had to convince his mother to let him go. The high school senior agreed to get a job to help pay for some of the expenses. And he had a simple message he kept repeating. "I told her I'm never going to get this chance again."