

German Gonzalez, the maestro of Golden Gate Park, has spread music and joy for more than 50 years

Description

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He was in the sixth grade and really wanted to be in the school band. But his parents told him there was no money to buy or rent an instrument. His older sister was dating a guy whose brother had a trumpet in his closet. The horn soon made its way to the wannabe musician and the young man joined the band.

And thatâ??s how German Gonzalezâ??s musical career began, a 50-year journey that culminated in April when he was appointed the 11th Music Director and Principal Conductor of San Franciscoâ??s Golden Gate Park Band.

On this 4th of July, he mounts the parkâ??s bandshell and leads the red-coated band with joyful exuberance. His blue jacket open over a white shirt and red tie, he jokes with the audience as he introduces each piece, recognizes the clarinetist for her talents and years of service, and greets well-wishers warmly afterward. He conducts with no wasted gestures, moving easily, and gracefully, between the podium and the microphone.



German Gonzalez conducting in Golden Gate Park (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

His Beethoven-esque mane of hair gleams in the sunshine. His expressions change fleetingly with the music, and occasionally he flashes a radiant smile at the musicians. â??I get pretty excited when the band plays something really well I go â??yeah!â??â?• he said. (Hereâ??s a video of Gonzalez and the band in action.)

Established in 1882, the band is the oldest musical organization in San Francisco. It comprises 30 unionized, professional musicians who perform over 25 concerts a year onstage in the park. For free.

Young man with a horn

Gonzalez was familiar with the bandshell â?? formally called the Spreckels Temple of Music â?? and the band, long before he became the director. As a kid, he attended the bandâ??s concerts with his family. By the time he was 12, he was spending time practicing the trumpet, a pastime that had the side benefit of getting him out of some household chores. â??After school, my mom would say â??What are you doing?â?? and if I answered, â??Nothing,â?? sheâ??d say, â??Then help me clean up all the dog

poop,â?? but if I said, â??Iâ??m practicing,â?? she left me alone.â?•



German Gonzalez practicing in 11th grade (Photo courtesy of German Gonzalez)

Over the years, Gonzalez has taught music and led musical groups from Minnesota to Arizona and Oregon. Now 71, he no longer teaches but works multiple professional gigs.

On Sundays, from May to October, he conducts the Golden Gate Park Band, which means he gets busy on Fridays and Saturdays. â??I do the final score study, and then I write the script to introduce each piece we will perform. I also prepare a note-by-note for the bandâ??s rehearsal before the concert. Itâ??s only an hour of rehearsal, and I plan it minute by minute.â?•

He and the bandâ??s librarian choose the program for each concert based on various themes, including baseball, spooky October, Irish, Ukrainian, and more. Thereâ??s another criterion as well. â??I can only pick three difficult pieces; otherwise they (the musicians) get pretty pissed off. You can see it in their faces.â?•

That means complicated classical pieces like â??Beethovenâ??s 5th Symphonyâ?• are not in the repertoire, but the band approves of military tunes like the â??Holst Suites,â?• which are easier and fun to conduct, Gonzalez said. â??The better I know the piece, the better they play it! Of course, they play

the â??Stars and Stripes Foreverâ?• with great precision and expression!â?•

So many gigs; so little time

Additionally, he is the music director and conductor of the Swingmasters Big Band on Wednesdays in Sacramento, and the fill-in conductor for the Peninsula Symphonic Band during the summer in Palo Alto. His professional obligations keep him traveling so much, he calls Sacramento his home base but spends weekends in San Francisco and Pacifica for half the year.

His expressive face creases into a deep smile as he remarks: â??Thatâ??s what all musicians do: the better you are, the more gigs you have. Everyone does the best they can to fill their time with as much music-making as they can. Thatâ??s how I see it. â??

Gonzalez was born in South San Francisco and raised in Pacifica, the fourth of six siblings. His parents were born in the U.S. but raised in Camargo, Chihuahua, Mexico. His father worked two jobs: a sausage maker at the Swift sausage factory, and in maintenance at the Olympic Club. His mother was a homemaker. They worked hard raising six kids, Gonzalez said, but music lessons were a luxury the family couldnâ??t afford.

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His parents never pushed him toward a music career, but music was in the background. They listened to Mexican love songs and rancheros on the radio and kept Louis Armstrong, Herb Alpert, and swing band records stacked on the turntable. His dad played the bugle in the San Francisco Mexican Revolution Drum and Bugle Corps, led by Germanâ??s uncle.



German Gonzalez greets the audience (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

Until he was a senior in high school, Gonzalez never had private music lessons, but his talent and interests developed and like his father, he grew to love marching bands. He became the drum major in the Oceana (Pacifica) High School Marching Band and became the brass instructor of a drum and bugle corps in college, a gig that involved extensive travel. â??Oh, I slept on many gym floors up and down the state; so much travel, but I was young.â?•

He attended San Jose State as a music major, sweating out the first two years on probation.

â??My grades were fine, but they said my playing was not up to par. I used to lurk outside the practice rooms and listen to how other trumpet players rehearsed and practiced.â?•

Living cheaply with five guys off-campus, he played in multiple student ensembles: trumpet with the San Jose State Marching Band and Concert Band, a brass quintet, the pit orchestra (for musicals like

â??West Side Storyâ?•), and the concert band.

He graduated in 1976 with a bachelorâ??s degree in music and a K-12 teaching credential. In 1979 he took a job with the San Juan Unified School District near Sacramento, where he taught music and was director of bands for 20 years. And he fell in love with conducting.

â??When I was leading the bands, I noticed the kids played a lot better, the better I conducted. So, I started to focus more on my conducting. And the kids paid much better attention, especially when I didnâ??t say anything, when I conducted in total silence, using facial expressions, body movement, and postures.â?•

Overcoming illness

In 1988 he began a masterâ??s program in conducting at Sacramento State but fell ill, losing 40 pounds and his energy.[7]

â??That was a low point. I thought I was going to die.â?• He recovered from Gravesâ?? thyroid disease, completed his masterâ??s while still teaching kids music and working as a grad assistant, and bought a house in Sacramento.

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Applying for college jobs all over, he found it was impossible without a doctorate. â??Itâ??s a small pool, and there are a whole lot of people out there. There are folders and folders on my hard drive of all my applications.â?• In his mid-40s, he moved to Arizona to get a graduate degree at Arizona State University, but being the oldest student wasnâ??t easy. â??Twenty-year-olds donâ??t want to hang with 40-year-olds.â?• He finished his coursework in two years and was â??ready to move anywhere â?? except the south.â?•

He landed a one-year position as interim director of bands at St. Cloud State University, in St. Cloud, Minnesota, where, he found, â??there were no tacos and not very many brown people.â?•



Practice makes perfect; German Gonzalez and the band rehearsing. (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

He still had a thesis to write: a biography of the conductor and musical historian David Whitwell, but by his own admission Gonzalez is not a words guy.

Luckily, he fell in love with a writer and editor in St. Cloud, â??so I moved in with her, quit my job, and wrote and wrote and read and read and read. Iâ??d thought it was impossible for me to write a thesis, but she helped me so much: â??Just write what you think and I will edit it for you.â?? She was wonderful.â?•

After two years in Minnesota, he moved to Oregon with his girlfriend, taking jobs in Portland and then Corvallis, to become the assistant conductor of the Corvallis Youth Symphony.

My son the conductor

His parents came up from Pacifica to see him perform. â??At an outdoor concert in Eugene, Mom was in line for the bathroom when she turned to the lady behind her â?? who happened to be the wife of my best friend in the band â?? and declared loudly: â??My son is the conductor!â??â?• Her pride moved him. Though he hadnâ??t followed his siblings into traditional lives: 9 to 5 jobs and marriage and kids,

his parents â??gotâ?• him.

When his relationship ended â?? Gonzalez has never married â?? and his parentsâ?? health began to fail, he came home to the Bay Area to care for them.

â??It takes a certain amount of courage to keep putting yourself out there when your family and friends are not, to keep taking classes and applying for jobs. Every year I applied for up to 25 college positions. Finally, I decided to give myself a break and come home.â?•

His father was sick when Gonzalez moved into his Pacifica childhood home to be their sole caregiver.

â??I cared for my parents, and their house, which was in bad shape, while teaching music in Millbrae and playing in a couple of community bands and orchestras.â?• His father died in 2011; his mother in 2017.

He found conducting work with the San Francisco Civic Symphony â?? a community-based band â?? and led it for five years. He saw a job opening with the Golden Gate Park Band in 2017.

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German Gonzalez conducting a performance of the Peninsula Symphonic Band (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

He didnâ??t get it that time. But in 2022, when the conductor quit, Gonzalez was invited to audition again as part of a nationwide search. He nailed it, first being named associate musical director and later, last April, conductor.

Itâ??s a casual and festive atmosphere on the Golden Gate Park music concourse when the band takes the stage. San Franciscans of all glorious stripes are settling in: children spin and dance in anticipation, picnickers spread blankets, lovers embrace, elderly listeners tap their walkers and canes, and Gonzalez turns to welcome the crowd with his trademark warmth, and brief, witty introductions to the music. This day the program features music by George Gershwin, Morton Gould, and Frank Ticheli.

â??I always keep in mind where we are playing â?? itâ??s a Park Band experience. Anything too heavy falls on deaf ears. So, major symphonies are not part of the repertoire. Itâ??s important to balance the program between familiar pieces and the unknown. And giving a good description with pieces that are unfamiliar is key!â?•

He puts out tremendous energy during the two-hour concert, as is clear by the sweat on his brow. But he replenishes quickly with beers and tamales. He steps off the stage, his jacket slung over his shoulder. â??I plan on doing this till Iâ??m 81, at least!â?•

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naomi-marcus