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Court Musician: Four-year Starter Sam Willson is Composed on the Basketball Court - and at the Keyboard

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STUDENTS



Court Musician

Four-year starter Sam Willson is composed on the basketball court—and at the keyboard

By Charles Eichacker '08

On a crisp Sunday morning in late January, much of Mayflower Hill slept as Sam Willson '16 rolled out of bed shortly after 8 a.m. He made his way downtown to take his seat at the organ for the 10 a.m. services at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Waterville—less than 24 hours after helping the men's basketball team beat Amherst.

“ I love this church. They're awesome. They've been very, very good to me.”

—Sam Willson '16
organist at the Unitarian
Universalist Church of
Waterville

If he was tired from the win—Willson contributed eight points and five rebounds in the 66-64 upset—he didn't show it. He expertly accompanied each hymn and played pieces of his choosing before and after the service. “I love this church,” he said of his four-year gig. “They've been very, very good to me.”

It's a position that Willson, a music major studying piano and organ, took

on as a first-year after hearing of the job from Colby music instructor Anna Beth Rynders. Willson also plays organ at Sunday evening services in Lorimer Chapel, where he's familiar to his fellow Mules as a 6-foot-5 starting forward on the basketball team.

After the service, he reflected on the previous night's win, which followed a string of injuries to his teammates that contributed to four losses to NESCAC teams. “It wasn't pretty,” Willson said. “But it was a huge, huge win.”

Willson admits that as a music major he's an outlier on a team stacked with economics and government majors. “I've taken a lot of jokes from my teammates about it,” he added.

But he takes both music and basketball seriously. A native of Watertown, Conn., he averaged 11 points, six rebounds, and two assists per game.

He has played piano almost as long as he's dribbled a basketball, and, after taking up organ at 15, he was soon playing at local churches for both the income and experience. His academic work often informs his choices for the church audience, adding a classical flavor to preludes and recessionals. “He says,

‘I hope you don't mind, but I've been practicing this,’” said Sue Conant Cook '75, a church member.

As graduation loomed Willson was looking for schools around the country that need both a music teacher and a basketball coach. He was also preparing pieces for his senior recital, including ones by contemporary American composer Gilbert Martin and French composer Louis Vierne.

Willson also planned to play an original piece for his senior recital. “That would be very unusual,” Rynders said, “Most students will stick with pieces they've learned over four years.”

Wherever Willson ends up, it seems clear he'll miss, and be missed at, the Waterville church.

Church members appreciate his keyboarding as well as his free throw skills. “I watch his basketball games and say, ‘Don't hurt your fingers!’” said Cook, one of dozens of churchgoers who went to a home game in February to cheer him on.

As Willson sat down for an interview after the January service, another woman volunteered, “We love him!”