

Paper Mache for 9-25-26 by David Read

I first became aware of the extent to which our armed forces support musicians during my 20 years in the Washington, D.C., area. There were free outdoor concerts nearly every summer evening and indoor performances throughout the year. We could hear the U.S. Navy Band on the Capitol steps on Mondays, the U.S. Air Force Band on Tuesdays, and the U.S. Marine Band and “Pershing’s Own” U.S. Army Band at various times and locations. And they don’t just play marches and patriotic tunes, although those are usually part of the mix. At our concert last Sunday featuring the Sierra Winds Trio, which is part of the Band of the Golden West from Travis Air Force Base, the musicians performed pieces by Mozart, Beethoven, Strauss and P.D.Q. Bach. IYKYK.

Curious about the long legacy of military music, I did some research. Long before military musicians played in concert halls, football stadiums and community celebrations, they had a practical assignment: making enough noise to be heard over the confusion of battle. And American military music didn’t start with the first shots of the Revolutionary War. Its roots reach back to the colonial period, when militia companies used drums and eventually fifes to summon men to muster, direct drills, signal alarms and regulate the day. A drum could carry farther than the human voice, making the drummer an essential military communicator. Militia musters were also community gatherings, so music added ceremony, excitement and perhaps a little encouragement for farmers, shopkeepers and tradesmen attempting to march in formation.

During the American Revolution, different rhythms told soldiers when to wake, assemble, eat, march, retreat or call it a day. The nation’s earliest military musicians were part performers, part communications department and part alarm clock. As the country grew, so did its military music. The United States Marine Band was established by Congress in 1798 and became known as “The President’s Own” after performing at the White House for President John Adams in 1801. It remains the nation’s oldest continuously active professional musical organization.

Military bands became especially important during the Civil War. Regimental ensembles accompanied troops in camp and sometimes near the battlefield. Their music maintained morale, provided entertainment during long periods of waiting and offered comfort after devastating losses. Familiar melodies reminded soldiers of home. No history of American military music would be complete without John Philip Sousa. The son of a Marine Band musician, Sousa directed the band from 1880 to 1892 and helped transform it into one of the country’s finest musical organizations. He later composed “Semper Fidelis,” “The Washington Post” and “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” which became our national march in 1987.

During the 20th century, military music expanded beyond marches to classical music, jazz, swing, popular standards, rock and country. During World War II, bands entertained troops, promoted war-bond campaigns and sustained public morale. Glenn Miller’s Army Air Force Band proved military music could swing with the best of them.

Today, each branch of the Armed Forces maintains professional ensembles whose members perform at ceremonies, memorials, diplomatic functions and public concerts. Many are graduates of leading conservatories. Their uniforms may be military, but their musicianship is world-class. Northern California’s own Band of the Golden West performs as a concert band, jazz ensemble, chamber groups, popular-music units and ceremonial ensembles throughout the western United States. Its musicians honor veterans, inspire young people and connect the Air Force with the communities it serves. Military technology has changed dramatically since the days of fifes and drums. Music, however, continues to do what it has always done: communicate, encourage, comfort and unite. And it can really attract a great crowd like it did on Sunday.