

Presidential Preferences

Marine Chamber Orchestra Narration, Feb. 17, 2008

Dr. Elise K. Kirk, author of “Musical Highlights from the White House”

After Candide:

Washington:

Good Afternoon. What sparkling music we just heard. The overture to Bernstein’s Candide was played in the White House by the National Symphony Orchestra for the President of China in 1997, but it has also been played often by the US Marine Chamber Orchestra. It’s always so impressive to come up the stairway to strains of music at a White House reception or dinner and see the orchestra in their bright red coats playing in the elegant foyer. I can’t imagine any other musical experience quite like it. But the Marine Band is not only America’s oldest performing arts organization; it is also the oldest tradition of the White House. The versatile band has been playing there since John Adams first reception on New Year’s Day, 1801. Thomas Jefferson, in fact, was so fond of the band that he enlarged it with musicians from Italy, and it’s been called “The President’s Own,” ever since. Today, President Bush calls the Marine Band “our nation’s treasure.”

Our concert this afternoon is called “Presidential Preferences.” When I think of this, a little comment Jimmy Carter once made comes to mind. President Carter actually loved classical music and attended performances at the Kennedy Center whenever he could. Martin Feinstein once asked him, “Mr. President, what opera do you especially like?” “Oh,” the president answered. “I guess it’s Salome, because, sometimes when I work with Congress I feel a special affinity with John the Baptist.” ---who as we all know—was beheaded.

But the music that our nation’s presidents enjoyed involves far more than mere tales. Music humanizes the presidency. It brings our leaders closer to us—because we know that anyone, great or humble, can be moved by the joys and powers of music. We can see this as far back as our nation’s first president, George Washington, who was an avid theater and concertgoer. He often attended the concerts of Alexander Reinagle, who introduced the music of Haydn and Mozart to Philadelphia audiences in the 1790s.

Washington, however, was also aware of music’s importance in the life of the young, especially for his musically gifted adopted granddaughter, Nelly Custis. The president made certain Nelly had everything she needed for her musical education. He bought her not only a fine harpsichord and guitar from London, but also a Dodds pianoforte, one of the first pianos made in America. It was undoubtedly on this instrument that Nelly played duets with Alexander Reinagle, the distinguished teacher Washington had engaged for her.

And what did she play? Among Nelly's collection of more than ten books of music are several keyboard duets, notably an arrangement of Haydn's Symphony #85 in B-flat, called "La Reine" or "The Queen." Since the symphony was composed in 1785, Nelly was playing the best contemporary music of the day—and we can envision the president smiling at her good taste. We'll hear the first movement now.

Haydn #85, 1st mvt.

Jefferson:

I'm often asked who our most musical president was. Usually I am torn between Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. But while Lincoln was a great music-lover, he was not a performer. Jefferson was both. He regarded music as "the favorite passion of my soul." "It furnishes a delightful recreation for the hours of respite from the cares of the day," he claimed. Jefferson was also a competent violinist, and during his early professional years in Williamsburg, he performed regularly with harpsichordist Robert Carter, and the violinist and cellist, John Tyler, whose musical son (also named John) became our nation's 10th president.

When Jefferson was minister to France from 1785 to 1789 he took advantage of every concert, opera, salon musicale and dramatic spectacle that he possibly could. But to really understand what music meant to him, we must consult his vast collection of family music, housed mainly at the University of Virginia. In the category of instrumental music alone are more than 100 collections of compositions—works of Corelli, Vivaldi, Handel, Boccherini and Carlo Antonio Campioni. Campioni, who was born in 1720 and died in 1788, is little-known today, but he was important in his time. He was maestro di cappella at the Livorno cathedral and at the ducal court in Florence, and he also composed a large amount of chamber music.

Jefferson seemed to be especially fond of Campioni's works. On a hand-written note in his music collection he advises: "On this paper is noted the beginning of the several compositions of Campioni which are in possession of T Jefferson. He would be glad to have everything else he has composed of Solos, Duets, or Trios. Printed copies would be preferred, but if not to be had, he would have them in manuscript." If we wonder what Campioni's music sounded like, we have the opportunity to hear some of it now, as Jefferson himself might have played it.

Campioni Sonata

Lincoln:

Abraham Lincoln could neither sing, read music, nor play an instrument—and yet he had a passionate love of music. He enjoyed the Marine Band's concerts so much, in fact, that he would ask not to be interrupted while he listened to them play. Lincoln also especially loved opera. I discovered in my research at least 30 productions that he attended while he was president—performances of Gounod, Verdi, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Donizetti—

anything that he could. When he was criticized for attending the opera so much during the turbulent years of the Civil War, he said simply: “I must have a change or I will die.” How many of us have felt this way and turned to music as a kind of therapy. We know it can work wonders.

But opera also had an eerie message for Lincoln. Shortly before he was inaugurated, Lincoln saw his first opera—the US premiere in New York of Verdi’s Masked Ball, the story of a Swedish monarch’s brutal murder. And so, as president-elect, Lincoln witnessed the chilling prophecy of his own assassination.

Abraham Lincoln’s love of the vocal arts had happier connotations, however. When he invited the young American opera singer, Meda Blanchard, to sing for his guests, little did he realize that he had inaugurated a long White House tradition that would continue to modern times. In 1878, President Rutherford and Mrs. Hayes invited the first black artist to perform for them in the White House—Marie Selika—and many more great voices followed in the decades to come—legendary singers, such as Sissieretta Jones, Birgit Nilson, Lily Pons, Robert Merrill, Marian Anderson, Lawrence Tibbett, Todd Duncan, Roberta Peters, Richard Tucker, Beverly Sills, Jessye Norman and many, many others. They all entertained at various elegant White House events throughout the changing administrations.

But the songs Lincoln loved most were those linked most closely to the hearts of the people—songs of patriotism, courage, pride and sentiment. According to those who knew him, certain ballads would mist Lincoln’s eyes with tears and throw him into a fit of deep melancholy. Among the president’s favorites was the lyrical Scottish ballad, “Annie Laurie.” Perhaps this beautiful song reminded Lincoln of another “Ann,” his reputed early love, Ann Rutledge, who died tragically at the age of 22. So we turn now to Kevin Bennear and Karen Grimsey, who will recreate for us this lovely old ballad.

Annie Laurie

Cleveland:

Grover Cleveland is the only American president in history to have served two non-consecutive terms in office: from 1885 to 1889 and from 1893 to 1897. President Cleveland may have been a little like Ulysses S. Grant, who once said: “I know only two tunes. One is ‘Yankee Doodle, and the other isn’t.” But while Cleveland knew very little about serious classical music and grand opera, he did enjoy the new Gilbert and Sullivan operettas that were all the rage in America at the time—so much so, in fact, that he asked the conductor of the Marine Band, John Philip Sousa, to play parts of The Mikado at his wedding reception.

Grover Cleveland is the only president to be married in the White House. His bride was the lovely Frances Folsom, who was 21—and he was 49—and the tongues did wag in those days! But Mrs. Cleveland proved to be a charming First Lady and one of our nation’s first arts patronesses.

The Cleveland wedding on June 2, 1886, drew throngs outside the White House. All of Washington, it seemed, craned their necks to see and hear what was going on inside. It was rumored that newspaper reporters even got inside disguised as members of the Marine Band... And as the guests assembled in the East Room, Sousa and the Band played—appropriately, the wedding marches of Mendelssohn and Wagner, and--less appropriately, (at least according to the distinguished groom)--Sousa's "Student of Love" from his operetta, Desirée. This piece seemed to give the president problems. Could the bandmaster merely call this piece "Quartette" and eliminate the reference to "student of love?" he asked." Sousa complied. And to honor the president's wishes, he featured several tunes from The Mikado, including its jaunty, "And He's Going to Marry Yum-Yum."

Mikado overture

Arthur:

When President Garfield died of an assassin's bullet in 1881, his vice-president, Chester Arthur, took over as president. Chester Arthur's musical tastes ranged from playing the banjo to grand opera, but he was also a great fan of the young conductor of the Marine Band, John Philip Sousa. Sousa served the White House from 1880 to 1892--for five presidents, I should add.

One piece that Sousa conducted often was the presidential march that we know today as "Hail to the Chief." The tune did not originate with Sousa, though. It derived from an old Gaelic air, and was adapted by James Sanderson to an elaborate scene in a musical show based on Sir Walter Scott's The Lady of the Lake. During this festive scene, the hero--a Scottish chieftain--arrives by boat, while on the shore a chorus of people sing the words, "Hail to the Chief who in triumph advances..." The show was first performed in New York in 1812, and remained extremely popular well into the middle of the century. By the time of John Tyler, its central tune, "Hail to the Chief," had become a ceremonial White House march to announce the arrival of America's "chief"—and the famous piece has remained a presidential icon ever since.

Not all presidents have been enthralled with the ubiquitous tune, however. Sousa tells the story in his autobiography. "What piece did you play when we went into dinner?" President Arthur once asked the conductor. "Hail to the Chief, Mr. President." "Do you consider it a suitable air?" "No, Sir," Sousa answered. "It was selected long ago because of its name and not because of its character. It is a boat song and lacks modern military character either for receptions or a parade." "Then change it!" said the president, and he walked away.

Sousa took no chances. He wrote not just one, but two presidential pieces--his "Presidential Polonaise" for White House indoor affairs, and the rousing "Semper Fidelis" march for review purposes outdoors. But while "Semper Fidelis" became known as the official march of the Marine Corps, "Presidential Polonaise" never did replace the

enduring “Hail to the Chief.” It did, however, offer merits of its own. It not only contributed to Sousa’s wide variety of dance forms--the gallops, waltzes, schottisches, and gavottes that he composed over the years—but it also shows the great bandmaster’s creative skills and versatility. And so the spirited “Presidential Polonaise” remains in the repertoire of the Marine Chamber Orchestra for concerts and receptions—just as Sousa would have wanted.

Presidential Polonaise

INTERMISSION

Theodore Roosevelt:

When Theodore Roosevelt took office, the musical life of the White House became richer and more diversified than ever before. President Roosevelt and his wife, Edith, were especially aware of the important role that music played in the life of the nation. With their administration—from 1901 to 1909—concerts became a regularly scheduled part of White House social life. The Roosevelts, I should add, brought Pablo Casals to the White House long before the Kennedys. But what really established the great East Room as a focal point for the performing arts was the donation of the first state concert grand piano by Steinway and Sons. Now the world’s greatest pianists came—Busoni, Hofmann, Rachmaninoff, and Paderewski. The President would get so excited hearing the great Polish statesman play that he would jump up from his chair and cry “Bravo, Bully,”—but he never seemed to be able to wait until Paderewski had finished playing.

The Theodore Roosevelt’s also began the important tradition of featuring American music and artists in the White House. This was truly innovative, because our nation’s concert life at this time was so strongly dominated by Europe. And so, in the long musical history of the White House, we see the vital emergence of the American national character. I believe this is very significant.

Jazz in the White House first appeared in concert form under the Kennedys. It was later honored by President Nixon at his birthday party for Duke Ellington, and it was featured several times by Jimmy Carter. But the history of jazz at the White House goes back even further—to a very early form of jazz—ragtime. It seems Teddy Roosevelt’s impetuous daughter, Alice, pleaded with the director of the Marine Band to play Scott Joplin’s celebrated “Maple Leaf Rag” at a diplomatic reception in 1905. Alice, of course, was known for her rebellious ways—such as smoking on the White House roof, eating asparagus with her gloves on, and other improprieties. Teddy Roosevelt once said: “I can be President of the United States or I can attend to Alice. I cannot possibly do both.” Alice’s bold request for the newest American rage may have staggered the band director—but not the president. She got her wish and “The Maple Leaf Rag,” composed only six years earlier, made its way to the White House.

Maple Leaf Rag

Franklin Roosevelt:

Under the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, a new era of White House history began. For during the 12 long years of this administration, more than 300 concerts were held in the White House. The programs were unique, because they reached out to every corner of America. The power and pathos of black voices were a vital part of the Roosevelt White House concerts--so were unknown young artists, important women's musical organizations new in America, and an array of folk singers close to the sea, soil and heart of America. "People can understand each other while making music in a way that would be impossible if they were doing anything else in the world," Eleanor Roosevelt once said. How right she was!

Like Eleanor, Franklin Roosevelt also welcomed the newest musical adventures at the White House. As a young student, he once admitted that he had the choice of declaiming or singing lessons. "I chose the latter," he said," because the study of singing should come before speaking." I've always thought this was an interesting comment, given FDR's strong verbal skills as president.

All his life FDR loved songs that conjured up the images and moods of America—such as the sea, unpaved country roads and the open West. When Martha Graham danced for the Roosevelts in 1937, she brought more than just these images to the mansion--she brought fresh artistic approaches. She was not only the leading dancer of her generation, but also a pioneer in a new, expressive style. At Eleanor Roosevelt's request, she performed Louis Horst's Frontier, the controversial modern dance that had received its premiere in New York just two years earlier. Louis Horst was also Graham's accompanist, but he is perhaps best known as the conductor of the world premiere of Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring, written for Martha Graham in 1944.

Before her White House performance, though, Martha Graham was concerned about the slippery parquet floor of the East Room, because, as she wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt--she danced barefoot. Mrs. Roosevelt assured her that a stage would be put up, and this eased Graham's concerns. She danced several numbers--but for President and Mrs. Roosevelt, Frontier made the top of the list.

Frontier

Truman:

Harry Truman is so well known for his love of classical music that, during his administration, music and the White House became almost synonymous. Truman studied piano from the age of eight to about 16, and from all reports, he never had to be coerced to practice. In the White House it seemed hard for him to pass a piano anywhere without sitting down and playing, even for a minute or two, former chief usher Rex Scouten recalls. When I examined Harry Truman's music in the Truman Library, I was actually impressed with how sophisticated it was. I had to dig through the Chopin, Mozart and

Tchaikovsky to find a single copy of the “Missouri Waltz,” which, contrary to popular opinion, Truman didn’t like at all. He was once asked if he sang tenor or baritone, and he replied. “I never sing. I’m saddest when I sing and so are those who listen to me.”

Although he was not especially fond of opera, Truman supported his daughter, Margaret, during her operatic career.—so vehemently, in fact, that when Paul Hume gave her a less than favorable review, the president dashed off a vitriolic note to Hume calling him “an eight ulcer man on four-ulcer pay.” I think Hume’s piece must be the most talked about review in the annals of music criticism. But President Truman had another run-in with the Post two years later—this time over pianist Gina Bachauer’s recital, which he and Bess had attended at Lisner Auditorium. When Hume criticized Bachauer’s interpretation of Johann Sebastian Bach, Truman wrote to Philip Graham, “Retire this old fuddy-duddy. How does he know?--Bach is dead.” [He had a point!]

George Gershwin’s enduring Rhapsody in Blue composed in 1924 has been played several times in the White House, notably during the administration of Dwight Eisenhower, when Leonard Bernstein and members of the New York Philharmonic performed it in 1960. But the jazzy, lyrical Rhapsody in Blue was an especially beloved musical expression for President Truman. On January 14, 1947, the pianist Oscar Levant played an improvisation of the Rhapsody for Truman’s dinner for the Chief Justice and the Supreme Court, as well as several distinguished guests. When we hear Anna Maria Mottola’s lovely interpretation today, we can understand why Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue became a favorite of President Harry Truman so many years ago.

Rhapsody in Blue

Kennedy and Reagan:

Aaron Copland is one of America’s most distinguished composers. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Lyndon Johnson—but when he was invited to the White House by John F. Kennedy to hear the cellist Pablo Casals play, he was among luminaries from all over the arts world. The famous event, which was held on November 13, 1961, included also as guests, Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Elliott Carter, Gian Carlo Menotti, William Schumann, Roger Sessions, Virgil Thomson, Eugene Ormandy and many others. “It is evident,” wrote Paul Henry Lang in the New York Herald, “that the first family has a true appreciation for the relation of art to life.”

Lang’s words were all too true. The Kennedys totally charmed the nation. Beginning with the celebrated Casals concert, President and Mrs. Kennedy established the White House as a prominent center for America’s artistic achievements, and their dedication and creativity became a model for administrations to come.

Like Ronald and Nancy Reagan two decades later, the Kennedys brought to the White House not only solo artists, but large-scale productions—operas, ballets, symphony orchestras and musical shows. Under the Kennedys, Aaron Copland’s ballet “Billy the Kid” was danced by a costumed cast in the East Room for the president of the Ivory

Coast. And for the Reagans, Copland's "The Red Pony" opened their popular nationally televised concert series, "In Performance at the White House." Begun under President Carter, these televised programs have become a signature of the White House to the present day. They have opened the president's home to everyone--making it a stage for the performing arts like no other in history. As a tribute now to both Presidents Kennedy and Reagan, the orchestra has chosen two selections, "Prairie Night" and "Celebration Dance" from Aaron Copland's legendary ballet, Billy the Kid.

Billy the Kid

Yes, indeed--music is perhaps the greatest language of glory the president will ever know. But while administrations change, tastes shift and new currents explore fresh artistic terrain—in this music the image of America remains, reinforcing our heritage and glorifying our dreams... But now, I'd like to turn over the microphone to our distinguished conductor, Colonel Colburn, who has some wonderful recollections of his own to share about performing for the presidents.

Colonel Colburn:

English Folk Song Suite

Stars and Stripes Forever