

MARINE BAND HISTORY

Since its founding in 1798, “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band has evolved into a musical organization described by *The Washington Post* as “...not only the best in the land but, very likely, the best in the world.” Yet, this ensemble began simply as a fledgling band of fifes and drums established by an Act of Congress signed by President John Adams on July 11, 1798.

Origins and traditions

The act that established “The President’s Own” recreated the Marine Corps (which had disbanded at the Revolutionary War’s conclusion) and summoned a “drum major, and 32 drums and fifes.” Some of these “Musiks,” as they were called, served aboard war ships, others were sent out on recruiting duty, and some were retained in Philadelphia (then the capital and largest city) to provide music for the nation’s leaders.

When the U.S. capital moved to Washington, D.C., in 1800, the Marine Band moved with it. Soon after, the band presented its first concert in their new hometown near the future site of the Lincoln Memorial.

On New Year’s Day 1801, just two months after President and Mrs. Adams moved into the unfinished White House, the President invited the Marine Band to make its White House debut. This inaugurated the tradition of the band’s performances at the Executive Mansion that continues to the present day.

The Marine Band performed for Thomas Jefferson’s inaugural in March 1801 and has performed for every Presidential inaugural since that time. John Adams gave the band its charter, but Jefferson gave the band its identity. President Jefferson (1801-09) was a cultured man and a fine amateur violinist. He recognized the unique relationship between the band and the chief executive by giving the Marine Band the title, “The President’s Own.”

In 1801, President Jefferson and Marine Corps Commandant Lieutenant Colonel William Ward Burrows established the band’s permanent residence, Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., the “Oldest Post of the Corps.”

“Hail to the Chief”

In 1828, at the groundbreaking for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, President John Quincy Adams (1825-29) became the first President for whom the Marine Band performed the now familiar music, “Hail to the Chief.” The music’s traditional use at Presidential appearances began about a decade later. Two First Ladies—Julia Gardner Tyler and Sarah Polk—are both credited with initiating the custom.

Julia Tyler, the vivacious young second wife of 10th President John Tyler, was an amateur musician and composer. The Tylers entertained frequently, and she reportedly first instructed the Marine Band to announce the President’s arrival with “Hail to the Chief” at one of their parties.

Sara Polk, wife of 11th President James Polk, an unassuming man of slight stature, reportedly made the music official because her husband’s arrival at large functions frequently went unnoticed. She asked the Marine Band to perform the music to herald the President’s arrival.

Regular public concerts on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol began during the 1840s, initiating a tradition that continues to the present day. The band also began weekly public concerts on the White House grounds, a custom that lasted for almost a century. An 1891 account of the popular summer and fall concerts reported, “Administrations come and go, but the band plays on forever.”

President Abraham Lincoln (1861-65) greatly admired “The President’s Own,” and the band accompanied him on a special train to Pennsylvania for the delivery of his immortal Gettysburg Address. It was reported by Second Lieutenant Henry Clay Cochrane, an officer assigned to Marine Barracks, that President Lincoln purposely switched cars, leaving behind the politicians and dignitaries in the first car in order to travel with the band in the last car.

On December 12, 1874, “The President’s Own” performed for the first official visit of a head of state to our nation with the visit of King Kalakaua of Hawaii.

America’s “March King”

John Philip Sousa, America’s “March King,” joined the Marine Band at age 13 as an apprentice musician. From 1880-92, he served as the band’s 17th director. During his tenure, Sousa began to write the marches that would make him famous, including “The Gladiator” (1886), “The Thunderer” (1889), the “Washington Post” (1889), and “Semper Fidelis” (1888), which he dedicated to the officers and men of the United States Marine Corps. He said later in life that he felt it to be his finest composition.

The band made its first sound recordings under Sousa’s direction. As early as 1889, the Marine Band began recording for the Columbia Phonograph Company of Washington, D.C., one of the first and most significant of the early recording manufacturers. 60 cylinders were released in the fall of 1890. By 1897, 400 different titles were available for sale, placing Sousa’s marches among the first and most popular pieces ever recorded, and the Marine Band one of the world’s first “recording stars.”

The band’s immense popularity made Sousa anxious to take his Marine Band on tour. The first national concert tour took place in 1891. After the second tour in 1892, which was even more successful, Sousa decided to leave “The President’s Own” to organize his own civilian concert band.

“The Dream Hour”

From the turn of the century, the Marine Band grew in size and reputation. Radio was still in its infancy in 1922 when the nation became more familiar with the band through its radio broadcasts. In 1931, the Marine Band began the popular radio series, “The Dream Hour,” which aired weekly on NBC until 1960. By the time it discontinued, it was the longest continuing series on network radio.

“A national treasure”

On a visit to Marine Barracks in 1962, President John F. Kennedy (1961-63) expressed his personal affection for the Marine Band when he said, “The Marine Band is the only force that cannot be transferred from the Washington area without my express permission and, let it be hereby announced that we, the Marine Band and I, intend to hold the White House against all odds.” A little more than a year later, as the nation mourned, Mrs. Kennedy asked the Marine Band to lead President Kennedy’s funeral procession.

Over the years the band has been conducted by or performed with some of the world’s most renowned musicians, including Leonard Bernstein, Sir Georg Solti, Mstislav Rostropovich, Itzhak Perlman, and Yo-Yo Ma.

In 1985, “The President’s Own” presented its first overseas concert in the Netherlands. Subsequent overseas tours included Ireland, Norway, and England. In 1990, the Marine Band participated in an historic 18-day concert tour of the Soviet Union as part of the first U.S.-U.S.S.R. Armed Forces Band Exchange.

President Ronald Reagan (1981-89) and Mrs. Reagan were guests of honor at the Marine Band’s 185th birthday concert in 1983 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In remarks recorded for radio broadcast, President Reagan said, “Whether serenading Adams or Jefferson, accompanying Lincoln to Gettysburg, or performing here at the White House, the Marine Band has become a national institution and a national treasure.”

President George Bush (1989-93) later echoed President Reagan when he said, “Your music inspired me and often made me shed a tear of gratitude for those who serve our nation in uniform.”

For the band’s 195th anniversary in 1993, President Bill Clinton wrote, “The band’s precision and discipline, which prompted a proud Thomas Jefferson to refer to it as ‘The President’s Own,’ serve as a standard for aspiring musicians throughout the nation.” Four years later, the President added, “When I have to leave this job I’ll miss a lot of things about Washington and the White House—a few things I won’t. But I’ll really miss the Marine Band. It’s a great honor to be around them every day.”

On July 11, 1998, “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band marked 200 years as an integral part of our nation’s cultural heritage. The year-long bicentennial celebration included a gala concert conducted by Leonard Slatkin, internationally acclaimed Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra; an exhibit at the White House Visitors Center of the band’s rare historical artifacts, documents, and photographs, sponsored by the White House Historical Association; and the band’s induction into the inaugural class of the American Classical Music Hall of Fame. The Marine Band was inducted along with a legendary group of distinguished composers, musicians, and educators, and was the only organization to be honored at that time.

In July 2001, the Marine Band traveled to Switzerland to perform in conjunction with the 10th International Conference of the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles (WASBE). The band’s performance schedule included two live concerts in Luzern, one in Bern, and a short program for radio broadcast on the band’s 203rd birthday, July 11. In addition to being guest conducted by Dr. Frederick Fennell, the band also presented the world première of David Rakowski’s *Ten of a Kind*, a work commissioned by “The President’s Own.” The composition was named one of two finalists for the 86th annual Pulitzer Prize for music in April 2002.

Into a third century

Today's United States Marine Band is far different from the small ensemble ordered up by President John Adams. Yet he would recognize a spirit of performance that has not changed over two centuries. From a small band of fifes and drums, the organization has grown to 143 of the nation's finest musicians who support the various needs of the modern Presidency. Handwritten messages delivered on horseback from the White House have been replaced with faxes and e-mail. Modern travel takes the band across the United States and over oceans and continents.

The band's mission endures in this simple statement: to provide music for the President of the United States and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. As the only musical organization with that charge, "The President's Own" views its rich history as a foundation for an even greater century of music yet to be played.