



THE EXPERIENCES OF A BANDMASTER

~ By John Philip Sousa ~



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During eighteen years spent in playing music for the masses, twelve years in the service of the United States and six in that of the general public, many curious and interesting incidents have come under my observation.

While conductor of the Marine Band, which plays at all the state functions given by the President at the Executive Mansion, I saw much of the social life of the White House and was brought into more or less direct contact with all the executives under whom I had the honor of successively serving—Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland and Harrison.

They were all very appreciative of music, and in this respect were quite unlike General Grant, of whom it is said that he knew only two tunes, one of which was “Yankee Doodle” and the other wasn't!



The President's Embarrassing Demand

I think I may say that more than one President, relieved from the onerous duties of a great reception, has found rest by sitting quietly in the corner of a convenient room and listening to the music.

Once, on the occasion of a state dinner, President Arthur came to the door of the main lobby of the White House, where the Marine Band was always stationed, and beckoning me to his side asked me to play the "Cachuca." When I explained that we did not have the music with us but would be glad to include it in the next programme, the President looked surprised and remarked:

"Why, Sousa, I thought you could play anything. I'm sure you can; now give us the 'Cachuca.'"

This placed me in a predicament, as I did not wish the President to believe that the band was not at all times able to respond to his wishes. Fortunately, one of the bandmen remembered the melody and played it over softly to me on his cornet in a corner. I hastily wrote out several parts for the leading instruments, and told the rest of the band to vamp in the key of E flat. Then we played the "Cachuca" to the entire satisfaction of Mr. Arthur, who came again to the door and said: "There, I knew you could play it."

The ladies of the White House were always interested in the music, and frequently suggested selections for the programmes, Mrs. Hayes being particularly fond of American ballads. During the brief Garfield administration there were no state receptions or dinners given by the President, and the band did not play at the White House, except for a few of Mrs. Garfield's receptions immediately after the inauguration. While Mrs. McElroy was mistress of the Executive Mansion for her brother, President Arthur, the lighter music was much in favor, as there were always many young people at the Mansion.

Miss Rose Elizabeth Cleveland was much interested in music, and evinced a partiality for Arthur Sullivan's melodies. Mrs. Harrison's favorite music was Nevin's "Good Night, Beloved" and the Sousa marches. The soundness of Mrs. Cleveland's musical taste was shown by her liking for the "Tannhauser" overture and other music of that character.

The Marine Band played all the music for President Cleveland's wedding, which took place in the Blue Room of the White House. The distance from the room up-stairs to the exact spot where the ceremony was to take place was carefully measured by Colonel Lamont and myself, in order that the music might be timed to the precise number of steps the wedding party would have to take; and the climax of the Mendelssohn "Wedding March" was played by the band just as the bride and groom reached the clergyman.



President Cleveland's Veto

A few days before the ceremony I submitted my musical programme to Colonel Lamont for the President's approval, and among the numbers was a quartet called "The Student of Love," from one of my operas. Even in the anticipation of his happiness Mr. Cleveland was keenly alive to the opportunities for humorous remarks which this title might afford to irreverent newspaper men; and he said to his secretary: "Tell Sousa he can play that quartet, but he had better omit the name of it." Accordingly, "The Student of Love" was conspicuous by its absence.

When North Carolina celebrated its centenary, the Marine Band was ordered to Fayetteville to participate in the ceremonies. The little Southern town was much interested in the advent of the "President's Band," and the prevailing opinion was that "Dixie" would be tabooed music with us. Before the exercises a local committee waited upon me and intimated that "Dixie" was a popular melody in that vicinity.

"Of course," said the spokesman, "we don't want you to play anything you don't want to, but please remember, sir, that we are very fond of 'Dixie' here."

Bowing gravely, I thanked the committee for their interest in my programme, but left them completely in the dark as to whether I intended to play the loved song of the South or not.

"Dixie," by the President's Band.

The ceremonies opened with a patriotic address by Governor Fowle, lauding the glories of the American flag and naturally the only appropriate music to such a sentiment was "The Star-Spangled Banner," which the crowd patriotically cheered.

The tone of the succeeding oration was equally fervid, but the speaker enlarged upon the glories of the Commonwealth whose one hundredth anniversary was being celebrated. The orator sat down, there was a momentary pause, and then as I raised my baton the strains of "Dixie" fell upon the delighted ears of the thousands round the platform.

The unexpected had happened, and such a shout as went up from that throng I have never heard equaled. Hats were tossed in the air, gray-bearded men embraced, and for a few minutes a jubilant pandemonium reigned supreme. During the rest of our stay in Fayetteville the repertoire of the Marine Band was on this order: "Yankee Doodle,"—"Dixie;" "Star-Spangled Banner,"—"Dixie;" "Red, White and Blue,"—"Dixie."

In all my experience the acme of patriotic fervor was reached during a reunion of the Loyal Legion at Philadelphia some years ago. The exercises were held in the Academy of

Music, and the band occupied the orchestra pit in front of the stage, which was crowded with distinguished veterans.

I had strung together for the occasion a number of war-songs, bugle-calls and patriotic airs, and when the band played them the martial spirit began to stir the people. As we broke into "Marching Through Georgia," a distinguished-looking old soldier stepped to the foot-lights and began to sing the familiar words of the famous song in a loud, clear voice. The entire audience joined in, and as the swelling volume of melody rolled through the house, the enthusiasm waxed more intense.

Verse after verse was sung, interrupted with frantic cheers, until it seemed that the very ecstasy of enthusiasm had been reached. It was only when physically exhausted that the audience calmed down and the exercises proceeded.



A Chorus of Ten Thousand

During the World's Fair at Chicago my present band was giving nightly concerts in the Court of Honor surrounding the lagoon. On one beautiful night in June fully ten thousand people were gathered round the bandstand while we were playing a medley of popular songs.

Director Tomlins, of the World's Fair Choral Associations, was on the stand, and exclaiming, "Keep that up, Sousa!" he turned to the crowd and motioned the people to join him in singing. With the background of the stately buildings of the White City, this mighty chorus, led by the band, sang the songs of the people—"Home, Sweet Home," "Suwanee River," "Annie Laurie," "My Old Kentucky Home," etc., and never did the familiar melodies sound so grandly beautiful.

The influence of music to quiet disorder and to allay fear is quite as potent as its power to excite and to stir enthusiasm. A case in point happened at the St. Louis Exposition, where my band was giving a series of concerts. There was an enormous audience in the music hall when, in the middle of the programme, every electric light suddenly went out, leaving the house in complete darkness.

A succession of sharp cries from women, the hasty shuffling of feet, and the nervous tension manifest in every one, gave proof that a panic was probably imminent. I called softly to the band, "Yankee Doodle!" and the men quickly responded by playing the good old tune from memory in the darkness, quickly following it with "Dixie" on my orders. The audience began to quiet down, and some scattering applause gave assurance that the excitement was abating.

“The Star-Spangled Banner” still further restored confidence, and when we played “Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?” and “Wait Till The Clouds Roll By,” every one was laughing and making the best of the gloom. In a short time the gas was turned on, and the concert proceeded with adequate lighting.

In the desire to do especial honor to a certain foreign representative during the World’s Fair, I had a particular piece of music in which he was interested arranged for my band, and agreed to play it at a specified concert. The music was given to a member of the band with instructions to copy the parts and deliver them at the band-stand.

The foreign gentleman was present at the concert with a large party of friends, whom he had invited to hear this particular piece of music. When the librarian asked the musician for the parts, he could not find them, and a search high and low for the missing music was without avail. Much to my chagrin, it was necessary to omit the number and send explanations and regrets to the dignitary whom it was designed to honor.

At the end of the concert, when the men were packing to go home, the player found the missing band parts stuck in the bell of his instrument, where he had placed them for safe-keeping.

In a little Michigan town my band was booked for an afternoon concert, and on our arrival the local manager assured us that we should have a good house, although there was no advance sale. He explained this by saying that the townspeople did not like to buy their tickets until the last minute.

The theatre was on the second floor of the town hall, the ground floor being given over to the fire department, the especial pride of the community. Twenty minutes before the concert a large crowd had gathered round the box-office to buy tickets when the fire-alarm sounded, and the entire population promptly deserted the muse of music and escorted the engine and hose-cart to the scene of action, leaving the band absolutely without an audience.



A Tuneful Locomotive

Once when we were playing during warm weather in a theatre situated near a railroad, the windows were left open for ventilation. The band was rendering a Wagner selection, and at the climax was playing with increasing force. The last note to be played was a unison B flat, and as I gave the sign to the musicians to play as strong as possible the volume of sound that followed fairly astonished me. I had never heard fifty men play with such force before and could not account for it, but the explanation soon became manifest. As the band ceased playing, the same note continued in the blast of a passing locomotive that had opportunely chimed in with us in unison.

The Marine Band was once doing escort duty on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington to a body of citizen soldiery returning from camp. It was at night and the parade was preceded by a wagon-load of fireworks which were to be discharged at appropriate intervals along the line of march.

By some accident or design the entire load of pyrotechnics was simultaneously ignited, and the street immediately filled with a perfect fusillade of rockets and Roman candles.

A stampede followed and the parade faded away. I stood my ground until my eye-glasses were knocked off, and then I groped my way to the sidewalk. When the confusion had subsided, all that could be discovered of my band was the drum-major in front and the bass-drummer in the rear rank. Their comrades had fled, but these men were good soldiers, and having received no orders to disperse had stood their ground manfully.



A Tale of the White House

One more story of the White House. At the time of the unveiling of the statue of Admiral Farragut in Washington, it was suddenly proposed to have a reception at the Executive Mansion in honor of the many distinguished visitors. The informal invitations were issued while I was participating in the parade that was part of the ceremonies.

At seven o'clock in the evening, when I was at home, tired out after the long march, word came to me to report at the Marine Barracks. I went there and was ordered to take the band to the White House at eight o'clock p.m.

The bandmen did not live in barracks, and it was practically impossible to get them together at that time of night, as they were scattered all over the city.

“Well, those are my instructions and those are your orders,” said the commanding officer.

So we sent the band-messengers out to the men’s lodgings, and they found just one musician at home, and he was the bass-drummer.

At eight o'clock, arrayed in all the gorgeousness of my scarlet and gold uniform, I sat in front of the band platform in the White House lobby, and the bass-drummer stationed himself back in the semi-obscurity of his corner. There was a dazzling array of music-stands and empty chairs, but no musicians! The President evidently saw the humorous side of it, and when I explained the situation he said it could not be helped. All the evening we sat there and listened to humorous remarks from the guests. We had “reported for duty,” though, and the drummer and I stayed till the reception was over.

~ The End ~