

INTRODUCTION

The White House is known by most people as the home and office of the President of the United States, but this famous residence also serves as a stage for American culture, particularly music. From John Adams, its first resident, to modern day presidents, musical performance of all kinds have enhanced life in the Executive Mansion. Learn about the connection between the White House and the United States Marine Band, the inspiration for the song “Hail to the Chief,” and more by exploring the history of music at the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Established by a 1798 act from Congress signed by President John Adams, the United States Marine Band is the oldest of the United States military bands, as well as the oldest professional music



Image 2

organization in the United States. Initially formed to play music to assist with recruitment and entertain citizens, the Marine Band would come to be closely associated with the White House and the President of the United States through frequent performances at the White House and other presidential functions. (Images 1 & 2). This earned the band the nickname “The President’s Own” that has stuck to today.

In 1806, Thomas Jefferson invited in the Marine Band to perform at the White House for the July 4th celebrations, and they played the song “To Anacreon in Heaven” (or “The Anacreontic Song”). While this name may be unfamiliar, the music is very recognizable to most Americans today. In 1814, Francis Scott Key had the song in mind when he penned “Defense of Fort McHenry.” Combining his words with the tune from “To Anacreon in Heaven,” this became “The Star-Spangled Banner” (Image 3). In 1931, President Herbert Hoover made the song the United States’ official national anthem.

MUSIC AND THE WHITE HOUSE



During the early nineteenth century, Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison, purchased a piano and the earliest collection of music for the White House. This publication, titled “Journal of Musick,” was created by Charlotte Le Pelletier and reflected the emerging French influences in American culture (**Image 4**). Both the piano and the original White House edition of the music were destroyed when the British set fire to the mansion on August 24, 1814, less than a month before Key penned the lyrics to “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Another song with nineteenth century origins and strong connections to the Executive Mansion is “Hail to the Chief.” Adapted from Sir Walter Scott’s poem *The Lady of the Lake*, “Hail to the Chief” is attributed to English composer James Sanderson who based his melody on an old Gaelic tune. The song was already well known when the Marine Band played it at the laying of the cornerstone for the first lock of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal on May 29, 1829, with President Andrew Jackson in attendance. The marked the first documented performance of the song for a sitting president. Subsequently, First Lady Julia Tyler asked the Marine Band to play the song when her husband President John Tyler made an official entrance. The piece evolved into a presidential entrance tribute during James K. Polk’s administration. “Hail to the Chief” now holds an important place in the ceremonial traditions of the presidency, and in 1954 the Department of Defense created an official policy that made the tune a tribute to the President of the United States.

As the nineteenth century progressed, presidents continued to enjoy music and would often invite performers to the White House. These included famous African American concert pianist Thomas Greene Bethune for James Buchannan, and American Indian songstress Larooqua for Abraham Lincoln. But one of the most famous White House musical personalities of the later part of the century was John Phillip Sousa (**Image 5**). He served five



Image 5

presidents as the leader of the Marine Band from 1880 to 1892. Sousa composed many songs, suites, and marches, including the famed “Semper Fidelis” (1888) and “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1897) (**Image 6**). The Marine Band would become a powerhouse under Sousa’s direction, modernizing its instrumentation, developing a concert band repertory, and increasing the skills of its musicians.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Steinway & Sons presented President Theodore Roosevelt and the White House with a beautiful golden grand piano. This 1903 instrument was the first designated



Image 9

for the East Room, which had been recently redecorated (**Image 7**). The world’s greatest pianists at the time from Josef Hofmann to the legendary Ignacy Paderewski were invited to perform for the Roosevelts. In 1938, Steinway & Sons replaced the 1903 concert grand with a new 9’ 7” piano, which is often used in the White House today (**Images 8 & 9**).

Musical concerts continued at the White House, and the variety of the performances significantly grew in the second half of the twentieth century. Broadway came to the White House during the Eisenhower administration. In 1958, Broadway performers were brought in for an after-dinner program for Chief Justice Earl Warren. To celebrate George Washington’s 238th birthday in 1970, the Nixons invited guests to see a performance of *1776*, a Broadway show about the creation of the Declaration of Independence (**Images 10 & 11**). More recently, President Barrack Obama invited the cast of the popular musical *Hamilton*, a show about the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton.

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Image 12

The Kennedy administration is credited with raising the profile of performances at the White House and encouraging the federal government to focus on the value of the performing arts (**Images 12 & 13**). President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy invited the media to cultural events at the Executive Mansion, attracting the nation's best performing arts organizations including The Metropolitan Opera and American Ballet Theater.

Media attention and public access to White House musical performances further increased with Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). In 1978, the Carter administration worked with PBS to produce a series of five hour-long performing arts programs for television called "In Performance at the White House." The series started with an East Room recital by famed pianist Vladimir Horowitz (**Image 14**). Ronald Reagan continued this PBS series and broadened the music beyond classical to include country, jazz, and gospel. Subsequent presidents have continued to bring in musicians and other performers for this broadcast series and for other events, carrying on the tradition of the deep White House connection to music that began with its first resident John Adams (**Image 15**).

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	U.S. Marine Band Concert	1921	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1112730.tif.info
2	George and Barbara Bush Pose with the U.S. Marine Band in the East Room	1990	Unknown	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/4183.tif.info
3	The Star-Spangled Banner – Autographed Manuscript	1840	Francis Scott Key	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/resource/ibas.100000019.0?st=gallery
4	Journal of Musick	1810	Charlotte Le Pelletier	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/James%20Madison/1113329.tif.info
5	John Phillip Sousa, at White House	1924	Harris & Ewing	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/hec2013014034/

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6	Sheet Music	1887	Harry Coleman Publisher (John Phillip Sousa Composer)	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1112729.tif.info
7	East Room, Calvin Coolidge Administration	1928	Ralph Waldo Magee	White House		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/4014.tif.info
8	Piano and Bench	Unknown	Steinway & Sons	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/836.tif.info
9	Nixon at Piano in East Room	1969	Unknown	Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Richard%20Nixon/4859.tif.info
10	Performance of "1776" in East Room	1970	James E. Russell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1113362.tif.info
11	Performance of "1776" in East Room	1970	James E. Russell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1113358.tif.info

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12	Jacqueline Kennedy Presented with a National Symphony Orchestra Pass	1961	Robert L. Knudsen	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/1112134.tif.info
13	The Kennedys at Pablo Casals Concert	1961	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/1559.jpg.info
14	Vladimir Horowitz After His Afternoon Concert in the East Room	1978	Karl Schumacher	Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/4699.tif.info
15	Stevie Wonder Performs at the White House	Unknown	Unknown	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/4057.tif.info



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Collection: “The President’s Own” from the White House Historical Association. [Explore here.](#)
- Podcast: *The 1600 Sessions*: “The President’s Own – The Marine Band and the White House” from the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)
- Collection: “Music in the White House” from the White House Historical Association. [Explore here.](#)
- Website: “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band unit page on the official website of the United States Marine Corps. [View here.](#)
- Music: Audio Resources from the United States Marine Band unit page. [Listen here.](#)
- Website: Public Broadcasting Channel’s “In Performance at the White House”. [Click here.](#)
- Video: President Obama Opens White House Evening of Classical Music. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

FOR YOUNGER LEARNERS

- Music is a form of art that often gives us very specific feelings and ideas. Sometimes it is fun to use music to inspire other art. Use art to explore the way music from the United States Marine Band makes you feel with the Anywhere Activity, “Musical Art.” Carefully listen to music from the “President’s Own” and bring it to life through with your own creativity!

FOR OLDER LEARNERS

- Choose a president with connections to music (use the Contextual Essay or find other examples such as Nixon and Clinton who respectively played the piano and saxophone). Research your selected president and the styles of music popular during their term(s) in office, and then present your findings to classmates, family, or friends.
- Find examples of music performed at the White House. Then, consider how historical events, wars, or international situations have affected what kind of musical guests the president features at the White House.
- The national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” is over 200 years old. Consider addressing the question: should the United States adopt a new national anthem – why or why not? Write down your thoughts and reasoning and have a discussion with classmates, friends, or family.