

Music—A Proud Naval Tradition



William Shakespeare said it first and probably best: “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.” Music has an unquestionable power to evoke emotions in us as nothing else can. It’s no wonder, then, that it plays such an enormous role in our history and cultural landscape. It helps connect the past to the present in ways far beyond our conscious perception. It is an indelible part of maritime tradition in general and naval tradition in particular.

Most of us have heard and are familiar with the stirring marches and rousing anthems played by brass bands. Many were made popular by the “March King” himself: American composer/conductor John Philip Sousa (1854-1932). Sousa was a Naval officer and former conductor of the Marine Corps Band. Each of the individual U.S. military services has its own anthem or hymn: the Navy’s *Anchors Aweigh*, the *Marine Corps Hymn* (“From the Halls of Montezuma”), *The US Air Force*, *The Army Goes Rolling Along*, and the Coast Guard’s *Semper Paratus*. All share and are characterized by a strong, brisk, regular rhythm that instills an infectious sense of pride, stateliness, order, and power in the listener.

Military marches are thought to be one of America’s original indigenous art forms. In fact, they find their origins in the slow, stately compositions of European classical composers of the 19th Century’s Romantic Era: masters such as Richard Wagner, Frederic Chopin, Franz Schubert, and Ludwig van Beethoven. Some even find their origins in the rich textures of traditional folk music of the British Isles. Most notable among these is our national anthem, *The Star Spangled Banner*, which borrows the melody from John Stafford Smith’s *The Anacreontic Song*, an 18th-Century English tavern song.

Traditional English and Celtic music boasts an even deeper connection to naval tradition than the formal stateliness of band and orchestral music. A genre of music based on these traditional styles, “sea shanties” (from the French verb *chanter*, to sing) grew to become an enormous part of sailors’ everyday lives. Much like the call-and-response work chants of road gangs and African American slaves, sea shanties provided a way to coordinate physically

difficult tasks into a focused, unified effort. It offered a means to establish an easeful breathing rhythm for workers and a timely grunt-like vocalization at the moment of maximum effort.

Though beginning life as a strictly vocal form, sea shanties evolved into a style that incorporated the humble instrumentation of Anglo-Celtic reels and hornpipes: concertinas (small accordions), pennywhistles (a primitive relative of the flute), fiddles, and eventually guitars and banjos. The music became a form of entertainment while at sea or in port, and was even used in the earliest “cardio class” – sailors would dance on ship as a form of exercise! Now widely popular among folk singers and folk music fans, sea shanties speak to us of a bygone era. Foreign to most of us in 21st Century life, these songs evoke an atmosphere of romance and give us a taste of what sailors’ lives were like.

Both brass bands and traditional sea shanties have an emotional power that helps fill listeners—both military and civilian alike—with a sense of national pride and collective power. They give a feeling of being part of something greater than one’s self. They also lend an air of order and dignity to a way of life that is often anything BUT orderly or pretty. Hard work, long hours, loneliness, despair, fear, physical suffering, danger, and death were the constant companions of sailors, soldiers, airmen, and marines everywhere. Then, as it does today, music provided both a way to celebrate a shared experience and a means to escape it.

You can find examples of the anthems of the five U.S. military branches on the internet at the following locations:

U.S. Army: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CBHzWPQpc>

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U.S. Marine Corps: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jh5OIT-csIQ>

U.S. Air Force: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C95Cb2ByHNA>

U.S. Coast Guard: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayYZg-JpMqE>