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Command Performer

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Command Performer

"The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band trumpeter Amy McCabe '01 returns for one memorial evening.

Story by NANCY STEELE BROKAW '71

Photos by MARC FEATHERLY

On a beautiful April night, the audience at the Bloomington Center for Performing Arts collectively leans forward as Amy McCabe raises a silver trumpet to her lips. She begins the familiar melody of "America the Beautiful," each note ringing with clarity and heartfelt emotion.



"We are the President's personal iPod," says Amy McCabe. She landed a spot in the U.S. Marine Band after rigorous rounds of auditions against 90 competitors.

McCabe's scarlet dress uniform, with gleaming gold buttons and blue trim, stands out among the formal black attire of the 70-plus students and community members who comprise the Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra (IWCO), led by Professor of Music Steven Eggleston. A special guest performer for the orchestra's final concert of the season, McCabe gets a rousing ovation as the patriotic song's finale soars effortlessly from her horn.

She later tells the audience, "Our band occasionally gets to give politicians a reminder of why they're there — to serve this great country in which we are so privileged to live. That's why I chose to play 'America,' a song I get to play a lot."

The band to which McCabe refers is the U.S. Marine Band. Established by an act of Congress in 1798, it is America's first military band and its oldest professional music organization. Because of its long connection to the commander in chief — having performed at every inauguration since Thomas Jefferson's — the band is known as The President's Own.

"We are the President's personal iPod," jokes McCabe, who won a spot on the

band in July 2006. After four rigorous rounds of auditions against 90 other competitors, she was chosen to serve among the 130 musicians, five officers, one drum major and 22 full-time support staff who comprise The President's Own.

Collectively or in ensembles, the U.S. Marine Band performs at the White House more than 300 times each year at South Lawn arrival ceremonies, state dinners and receptions. Additionally, the band offers more than 500 public and official concerts annually, including a tour of a different region of the country each fall — a tradition launched by legendary composer and conductor John Philip Sousa, who led The President's Own from 1880 to 1892.

Among McCabe's memorable performances in the band were a state visit honoring Queen Elizabeth and a private concert on the steps of Capitol Hill for senators on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama was another highlight — though her position under the stage meant she "couldn't see what was going on at all," McCabe recalls with a sigh. "But the flutes could."

Band members come from the best music schools and conservatories in the nation. All must maintain top security clearance as well as what she calls "a slim- and-trim," Marine level of fitness. "That's not so hard for me," says McCabe, who also has to stay in shape to maintain the wind level required for her instrument. "But for some of the guys in their 50s, maintaining the weight they were at age 18 is pretty tough."

McCabe — who holds the rank of staff sergeant and works on a regular Marine enlistment schedule — is finishing the last of her four-year stint and says she will probably re-enlist. Many of the band members play for 20 years and then retire; some continue playing even longer.

"We are considered 'non-deployable' Marines," McCabe says. "It's not in the taxpayers' best interest to send us to boot camp." Instead, band members go through a monthlong training where they learn, among other things, how and when to salute. They also learn The President's Own rich history — including what year women were allowed to join (1973) and why their dress uniforms are red rather than traditional Marine Corps blue. It goes back to the Revolutionary War, McCabe explains, when Continental soldiers marched to the cadence of battle drums and fifes. "The musicians wore red so they wouldn't be shot at."



Now in its third century, the Marine Band (above) received the title The President's Own from Thomas Jefferson. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Marine Band)

Marine bands such as the Drum and Bugle Corps continue that tradition (though not in combat), while The President's Own maintains its own strong military links, participating in full-honors Marine funerals at Arlington National Cemetery. However, the band's primary duties continue to revolve around the Office of the President.

Asked how many times she's played "Hail to the Chief," McCabe laughs and shakes her head. "A lot!" Still, the band's repertoire is surprisingly varied. McCabe notes that different presidents prefer different musical styles. President and Mrs. George W. Bush were fond of classical quartets, while the Obamas frequently request ensembles that play jazz or country. The President's Own also plays Top 40 hits for White House dances and weddings.

Performing contemporary music is not a problem for McCabe, who spent two years after college graduation as a featured soloist, touring with the Tony and Emmy award-winning show Blast! "It was the perfect thing to do right out of school," she says.



McCabe gave a virtuoso performance for the concluding concert of the Civic Orchestra's 25th season.

A college internship as a performer at Disney World opened her eyes to the possibility of a career in music. Streeter and Eggleston encouraged her, but also warned her that the life of a performer could be a tough way to earn a decent living.

After her tour with Blast!, McCabe earned a master's degree in trumpet performance from Northwestern University. At the same time, she worked with MusicianCorps Chicago, an

McCabe comes from a family of brass players. Her parents, Don and Brenda of Bonfield, Ill., play the trombone and French horn, respectively. Older sister Amanda '99 plays trumpet, but McCabe insists that her own switch from piano to trumpet at age 10 was not to compete with her big sister. "The trumpet carries the melody," she explains, "plus the trumpet is loud, and back then I liked loud."

At IWU, McCabe studied trumpet with Eggleston, who she first met as a high school student. "You could spot the talent back then," says Eggleston, who also directed McCabe in the IWCO.

As a member of the IWU Jazz Band, McCabe also impressed Professor of Music Tom Streeter, who leads the band (see sidebar). "Amy was an elementary education major who also was doing music back then," Streeter recalls. "She just got better and better and became one of the better lead trumpet players I've ever had."

education and advocacy program designed to promote music awareness and training in Chicago Public Schools.

Now a resident of Washington, D.C., McCabe teaches private lessons and also takes the occasional outside gig, such as a recent opera. But, she quickly adds, “The Marine Corps always comes first.”

Streeter, who played with a U.S. Air Force jazz group for four years, says he knows the life McCabe lives. “It’s still military.”

Eggleston, who founded and conducts the IWCO, thought McCabe’s Wesleyan musical roots made her the perfect choice to perform as featured soloist for the April 16 concert, which was the last concert of the orchestra’s 25th season. In addition to her “America the Beautiful” solo, McCabe performed Alexander Arutunian’s “Trumpet Concerto,” a virtuoso showpiece of lyricism and harmonic textures.

When the concerto concluded, her listeners leapt to their feet. “That was a great piece for her,” Streeter says. “She’s bravura where she needs to be, constrained when she needs to be. That’s her style.”

McCabe was clearly moved by the warm reception. “I’ve been a lot of places touring around the country for nine years,” she told the audience, “and you can be very proud of the feeling of community you have here.”

After the concert, Eggleston, wiping sweat from his brow, described McCabe’s performance as “heaven itself.” He praised her “velvet sound,” adding, “‘America’ was just amazing. When you are out there, all alone, the easiest songs are the easiest to mess up. But there she was, the consummate professional.”

With the concert over and family and fans gathered around her in the auditorium foyer, McCabe was asked to rate her own performance. “Pretty good,” she answered. “I was comfortable. I mean, you’re home, right? There’s nothing to prove to anyone when you’re home.”

That may be so, but it is also likely true that for some of the young musicians at the concert who are pondering their own musical futures, McCabe proved a great deal about what happens when talent is combined with hard work — and a red uniform



The Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra is led by Professor of Music Steven Eggleston.