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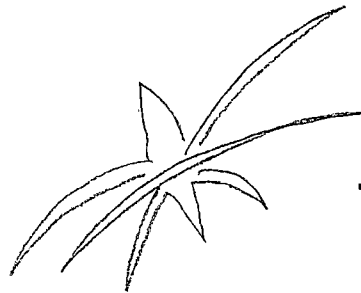
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**Folder Title:**  
In Performance at the White House - "A President's Day Party" 2/4/90 [OA 8310 ]

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# MUSIC AT THE WHITE HOUSE



A HISTORY OF  
THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Elise K. Kirk



*A Barra Foundation Book*

1986

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS  
Urbana and Chicago

*Music at the White House*



The first President's Palace at Number 3 Cherry Street, New York, as it appeared in the 1850s, shortly before it was demolished. Ironically, Nelly Custis practiced the piano several hours a day in the building that later housed one of the nation's most flourishing piano manufacturers and music publishers, Firth, Pond and Company (formerly Firth, Hall and Pond). *Leslie's Weekly*, 1856.

Philadelphia became the temporary capital, and there the Washingtons occupied the home of Robert Morris, financier of the Revolutionary War, until the president retired from office in 1797. Washington lived on his beloved plantation at Mt. Vernon, Virginia, for slightly more than two years before his death in 1799 at the age of sixty-seven.

Music at the president's home in those early days was an intimate amusement. If a "concert artist" performed for the Washington family, it would have been one of Nelly's teachers, such as Alexander Reinagle, a long-time acquaintance of Washington. Perhaps this gifted immigrant composer ran through some of the tunes from his latest comic opera for the president or tried out one of the fine new piano sonatas he composed in the 1790s. Reinagle was often at the president's home instructing Nelly. Another early "White House artist" was Nelly herself, who was expected to perform for the ambassadors, foreign dignitaries, and members of Congress who came to visit. Once she played for over an hour in an attempt to "attune the souls" of "two homely Spaniards," one of whom she described as "a crazy count."<sup>3</sup>

was familiar with the bands attached to the army regiments that often provided music for social functions during the Revolution. When he brought Charles Lee to Valley Forge, for example, both generals were entertained "with an Elcgant Dinner and the Music Playing the whole time." "An elegant band of music" also played André Grétry's quartet *Ou peut on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille!*, most likely a transcription from one of the popular French composer's operas. The piece was played during dinner when Washington met with the Marquis de Lafayette and Comte de Claude Saint-Simon in 1781.<sup>5</sup> The year after Washington left the presidency, the U.S. Marine Band was officially formed on July 11, 1798, but it probably did not function as a social ensemble until it was engaged by John Adams for the White House on New Year's Day, 1801.<sup>6</sup> The musical life of the pre-White House era, however, was linked with the informal joy and ambience of the art in many ways, and its graceful shadow permeated every aspect of the president's spirit and that of his family.

Washington enjoyed music and the theater and was especially fond of dancing. George Washington Parke Custis's *Recollections* noted that the general was conspicuous for his graceful execution of the minuet, a dance associated with European aristocracy and considered old-fashioned by the turn of the century. At a time when some churches called dancing "a pollution of the body," Washington's diaries are filled with accounts of the various balls he attended. During his brilliant inaugural ball on May 7, 1789, he danced with nearly every lady—except Mrs. Washington who could not make the long journey from Mt. Vernon to New York in time to attend. Dancing was also an important recreation at Mt. Vernon where Washington and his family spent two to three months of the year during his presidency. Both Nelly and Tub had dancing lessons, their teacher being the illustrious James Robardet, "lately from Europe" who had "met with the general patronage and applause of the first characters in America."<sup>7</sup>

Whenever he could, Washington attended plays (usually interspersed with music), English ballad operas, or concerts sometimes five or six times a season while he was president and a special box was reserved for him at several of the theaters. In Williamsburg during 1771-72 he often attended the satirical productions of the Virginia Company, whose repertory included John Gay's famous *Beggar's Opera*. With its dialogue and familiar songs, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) was one of the earliest important examples of the ballad opera, a style of British stage entertainment that flourished in the colonies. On July 10, 1787,

### Washington

in Philadelphia Washington enjoyed James Townley's "sensational" *High Life below the Stairs*, which was billed as a "concert" to circumvent Pennsylvania laws forbidding theatrical performances. Washington was known to have opposed what he felt were narrow-minded restrictions against drama. In 1789 the bans were lifted in Philadelphia and four years later in Boston.

One of the first musical events the president attended after taking office was a bawdy little ballad opera called *The Clandestine Marriage*, presented in New York City by the Old American Company on June 13, 1789. The president also lightened his cumbrous duties periodically with renditions of *Beau Strategem*, *The Lock and Key* (called "a comic opera in 2 acts"), *The Way to Get Married*, and *Animal Magnetism*, all of which he saw in Philadelphia. The last two works were staged on February 27, 1797, by the Reinagle-Wignell Company at the spacious, elegant New Theater on Chestnut Street. But the general's favorite was William Shield's little comic opera *Poor Soldier*, first performed in London in 1783. Seated in an "elegantly fitted up" presidential box, he watched this production at the John Street Theater off Broadway in May 1789, shortly after taking office. Accounts of the event emphasized that a good time was had by all—with the exception of Pennsylvania Senator William Maclay, "an exceedingly straight-laced Republican, who recorded in his diary that he thought the play was 'an indecent representation before ladies of character and virtue,' and wished it had been one 'that inculcated more prudential manners.'"<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes President and Mrs. Washington would enjoy a fashionable early dinner at 3:00 in the afternoon and then attend a long show beginning at 5:00. On December 4, 1796, they saw such a production at the South Street Theater. The Old American Company presented a comedy called *The Young Quaker or The Fair Philadelphian* by O'Keefe, "after which there was a 'pantomimic ballet' of the Two Philosophers, a Musical Piece called *The Children in the Wood*, a recitation of Dr. Goldsmith's celebrated Epilogue in the character of Harlequin—the whole performance concluding with a Leap through a Barrel of Fire."<sup>9</sup> However unsophisticated these presidential artistic tastes may seem, they reflected what was available to Americans during the colonial and early national period. Long after their decline in popularity in England, ballad operas continued to thrive in the United States as truncated "afterpieces," and their catchy tunes were performed separately in concerts or played on the pianoforte at home.

As more and more skilled European musicians migrated to the United States after the Revolutionary War, concert life began to flourish in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities as never before. One of the most important immigrant musicians of this period was English-born Alexander Reinagle, a composer, performer, and impresario who dominated the musical life of Philadelphia for over twenty years. Washington, who enjoyed concerts almost as much as theatrical events, attended several of Reinagle's "City Concerts" while in Philadelphia for the 1787 Constitutional Convention. On May 29, for example, he heard works by Haydn and Sarti as well as by the local composers



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Music at the White House

### Conclusion

a degree of proficiency. With the possible exception of Adams's and Jefferson's administrations, the White House was never without at least two pianos, often three or four. And while George Washington was one of the first Americans to purchase an American-made piano (from Thomas Dodds in 1789), after 1830 all the pianos acquired by the White House were American-made. For as the century progressed, ingenious Yankee mass-marketing techniques brought top-quality, domestically made instruments into thousands of American homes.

The collections of music owned by presidential families—notably those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, Rutherford Hayes, and Benjamin Harrison—are fine examples of the urban secular styles enjoyed by the amateur American pianist of the time. Every variety of music is among these pages: opera airs, patriotic music, marches, dances, variations, ballads, and rousing battle pieces. To Oliver Wendell Holmes the piano was a "wondrous box," and another quotation from his poem "The Opening of the Piano" expresses the feelings of many Americans: "For the dear soul knew that music was a very sovereign balm / She had sprinkled it over Sorrow, and seen its brow grow calm."

Few presidents in history have been as sensitive and receptive to music as Abraham Lincoln. But Lincoln lived in an era during which music was a powerful art that sang presidents into office, marched men to war, serenaded the lonely, and protested society's ills with greater intensity than ever before. From the 1840s through the period of the Civil War, America's propensity for self-expression through song seemed to forecast the nation's moods of more than a century later. Sensitive, ingenuous, and urgent, these musical messages took many forms. Lincoln, often moved to tears by the ballads of Stephen Foster and the Hutchinson Family, was equally affected by patriotic songs, such as Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Grand opera was also a special pleasure for this president, who attended nineteen productions while he was in office, claiming that "I must have a change or I will die."

Opera in nineteenth-century America was more significant and widespread than some historians have asserted. English light operas with spoken dialogue, known as ballad operas, had been popular especially during the colonial period, just as the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan captured the American stage in the 1880s and 1890s. But as early as 1810, New Orleans had a permanent grand opera company, and New Yorkers heard their first foreign-language opera in 1825. While grand opera was expensive to produce, many of the latest French, Italian, and German operas were staged in American theaters only months after they received their premieres in Europe. And although opera was enjoyed as a fine social affair, it entertained Americans outside the theater in countless piano arrangements and transcriptions for concert bands that, from about 1840 into the early twentieth century, drew thousands to the community bandstands. The U.S. Marine Band, the White House "court ensemble" since 1801,

Music At The  
White House:

A History of the  
American Spirit

Elise K. Kirk

Univ. of Illinois  
Press,  
1986

In Performance

Feb. 4

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

closing remarks

? minutes

? Teleprompted

approx. 150 guests

Ameritech + guests  
(sponsor)

performers' guests

Bush's guests

WETA/WNET + guests

①

(Lange/Cawley)  
January 29, 1989  
12:00 P.M.  
[PERFORM.DOC]

PRESIDENTIAL REMARKS: IN PERFORMANCE AT THE WHITE HOUSE  
STATE FLOOR  
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1990  
[TIME] 5:00 p.m. (remarks @: approx 6:00)

Thank you all. I know Barbara shares my gratitude for the wonderful music you've brought to the homes of millions of Americans listening tonight -- and to the house we live in. A house Barbara and I like to think of as "the people's house."

Tammy Robinson  
WETA  
998-2609

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln -- two presidents whose birthdays we celebrate this month -- both would have loved this concert.

Musilli memo

"Music At The W.H."  
by Elise Kirk

Washington, though he never lived in this house, made sure there was music and dancing wherever he lived. And Lincoln so loved music that some of his friends recalled seeing him "in tears" as he listened to a powerful passage.

Stephen Chabon  
203) 661-7500

Tonight, Miss LuPone's rendition of "Anything Goes" proves what Americans have known since the 1930s: Cole Porter was a national treasure.

Musilli memo  
Robinson

(( And I personally liked that opening number -- with the line from Cole Porter: "What a Swell Party This Is." You did mean Republican, didn't you? ))

Musilli memo  
Robinson

But I have to say, Miss Horne, that your singing "Make a Rainbow" touched a very special chord with me -- about the many children of the world, and the future all of them deserve to

Musilli memo  
Robinson

inherit. It should be a future bright with possibility -- for all of them. And it's up to all of us, to make it so.

We can only imagine the effect that ~~last~~ ~~song~~, "America the Beautiful," would have had on men like Washington and Lincoln. But we can know in our hearts -- and see in the very spirit and character of the country we love -- that they are still with us.

So still stands the house they built on this continent. A republic built on the enduring foundations of democracy. Liberty. And the power of the individual.

It has endured for two centuries: Powerful, because of its plurality. Empowering, because it respects individual liberty. Compassionate, because it is inclusive -- and demands respect for the dignity of all people.

You know, 1989 was a remarkable year for freedom, around the world. We are fortunate to be living in this time of great change -- and great promise.

So if freedom builds a house that endures, we must see that it reaches widely, to all who would dwell there. So, too, the earth is a home we must preserve and protect. And most of all, we must look to the education, care, and direction of the coming generation.

It is they who will see that democracy's house grows larger with every passing year. May their voices sing the praises of freedom in every corner of the world.

Thank you all. God bless you. And God bless the United States of America.

# # #

Tammy  
Robinson  
998-  
2609

To: Laurie Firestone  
From: John Musilli

In performances at the White House "A Presidents Day Party"

This concert is the last in the series "The House I Live In" (the others in the series were presented at the time of Independence Day 1988 and Columbus Day 1989).

"A President's Day Party", which will take place on February 4 and be broadcast nationally on the facilities of the Public Broadcasting Service on February 14, celebrates Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

The "house I live in" is of course, the White House, and by extension, the United States, the home to us all. Mention will be made of the fact that George Washington was the only president who did not live in the White House--but all in all the concert is much more of a party than a history lesson.

*frederick  
bujals  
abase  
not grow  
ever  
frederick  
house*

"Well, Did you Evah"--by Cole Porter gets us off to a rousing start, with its theme "What A Swell Party This Is." (Most members of the audience of the White House and the television audience will remember it from the musical film "High Society" starring Grace Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby.

It will be sung here by all the participants--Marilyn Horne, Jeffrey Osborne, Patti LuPone, Gary Morris and the members of the Dick Hyman trio--backed up by the President's own Marine Corps Band.

The performances bring to this concert songs close to their heart, songs that mean something special to them, and each is introduced to make that connection.

The internationally renowned opera diva Marilyn Horne has long admired the toasting song from "Lucrezia Borgia", and the art song possibilities in Simon and Garfunkel's popular hit "Bridge Over Troubled Waters". "Make a Rainbow" was written especially for her by Portia Nelson; it is about the many types and races of children in the world--and our responsibility to them.

Patti LuPone sang "Anything Goes" to standing ovations for months as the lead in the great Cole Porter musical when it was revived in 1988-89 in New York City. This star of theater, film and television has chosen a set of three American theater standards that promises to bring any party to its feet.

Jeffrey Osmond has been praised as having the "emotionalism of a soul singer with the control of a jazz man." His songs are love songs and songs of happiness.

Gary Morris, with the big open-headed voice of a country music singer, performs on stage and television as well as in concert. His song "Wind Beneath My Wings" has become a national hit. "Bring Him Home" is from "Les Miserables", in which Mr. Morris replaced the show's lead in 1987. Dick Hyman's trio includes Bob Haggart (double bass) and Gus Johnson (drums). They perform two up-beat jazz favorites from the mid-30's: "South Rampart Street Parade" and "Big Noise From Winnetka."

This "Presidents' Day Party" ends with the entire cast singing "America the Beautiful"

January 24, 1990

Ms. Laurie Firestone  
Serial Secretary  
The White House  
Washington D.C.

Dear Laurie:

Here is the synopsis for the February 4th concert. Series will follow on Monday.

If there are any questions, please call this Camera Three office. I will be calling in from Kansas.

Sincerely,

*John Musilli*

John Musilli  
by Marjorie Williams

CC: Carolyn Cowley - Fiji/speechwriters  
x 6218

IN PERFORMANCE AT THE WHITE HOUSE  
February 4, 1989

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Darcy

