

Music in the Military

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ABSTRACT

Numerous iconographic and material traces bear witness to the use of horns and other wind instruments on battlefields dating back to Antiquity. Music was part of the sound experience of soldiers and took on various functions which evolved according to different eras in Europe. While percussion instruments, horns and trumpets initially served to convey signals, the birth of a specific repertory of “martial music” in France during the reign of Louis XIV, and later in Europe, fulfilled a need to affirm the prestige of the armed forces. Beginning with the First World War, music was increasingly used to entertain and mobilize combatants and soldiers, in an effort to maintain their morale at the front.



Infantry Music, Imagerie Pellern, Épinal, Second Empire.

Calls, signals, and “sounds of war”

Due to the visual nature of the sources that have passed down to us since Antiquity, for a long time there was confusion between military and celestic music, which is to say the “art of transmitting orders using musical instruments” (*Littre*). The first use of instruments on the battlefield was actually to transmit sound signals conveying regulated orders—in the French army “entry,” “charge” (on horse or foot), and “*chamade*” (intention to surrender)—a function that continued until the modern era, as the first “cease fire” of 1918 was sounded by clarion on November 7.

These signals were called “*batteries d’ordonnance*” (drum calls) when they were played by drums or kettledrums and sometimes accompanied by small flutes (*fifes*), or “*sonneries*” (calls) when they were sounded by trumpets, cornets, clarions, and even whistles. They were very simple, built on two to four notes, and executed by soldiers who were most often not musicians, who learned them and transmitted them through imitation. These were joined by “regiment calls” for gathering the soldiers of the same regiment, or for addressing specific orders to them. Under the reigns of Louis XIV and his successors, these signals were rendered uniform and scored, with various regulations governing, from 1754 to 1831, the “calls” used in all French regiments.

Improved techniques for producing instruments, in addition to the modernization of transmission over the centuries, nevertheless led to a gradual restriction of calls that conveyed orders to ceremonies, and a transition of these “sounds of war,” as they were designated in the Middle Ages, towards martial music.

Martial music and prestige

It was under Louis XIV that music, as such, truly entered the military domain. To increase his prestige, the monarch wanted to provide sound for the exercise of his regiments, notably those of the dragoons and musketeers. An entire corpus of military marches emerged, from the pen of the musketeer and composer André Danican Philidor. It was no longer celestic, but instead intended to accompany ceremonies and affirm the cohesion of the military through a unified repertory, while sparking popular enthusiasm along the way. “High instruments” were mobilized, which is to say those that sound the loudest, such as drums, kettledrums, oboes and trumpets. The model of Louis XIV was quickly followed by numerous European sovereigns. A few decades later, military orchestras expanded with instruments that were more resistant to the rough climate conditions they could be exposed to, for instance clarions, cornets and other bugles. With the reorganization of military music in 1845, the instruments invented by Adolphe Sax, especially saxhorns and saxophones, in turn became a part of military orchestras and were sometimes played at the front.

As ensembles expanded, an entire repertory of martial music developed during the nineteenth century within the Germanic world, inspiring great music composers such as Franz Schubert and Johann Strauss the Elder (*Radetzky March*). Schools for martial music opened in Great Britain and the United States, as part of the nationalization and professionalization of the military. During the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Mahmud II dissolved the Order of Janissaries in 1826 in order to create a new army on the European model, and the task of reorganizing its musical repertory and introducing Western instruments fell to Giuseppe Donizetti, brother of the famous Italian composer. This type of cultural transfer in the field of martial music was also promoted by the Universal Exhibitions organized from 1855 onward.

At the same time, technological innovations related to the conveying of orders led to an even greater decline of celestic music, and an even rarer presence of orchestras at the front, although on certain occasions they played national anthems to encourage troops in combat. The military repertory gradually spread to concert halls, and sometimes contributed to the normalization and even exaltation of war. Jazz appeared for the first time in France with the orchestra of the American lieutenant James Reese Europe and his “Harlem Hellfighters” regiment, who performed throughout the country in 1918. Martial music became involved in the field of entertainment, especially

the entertainment of combatants.

Entertaining combatants

The recreational use of music was particularly pronounced during the First World War, with songs printed in newspapers that were diffused in the trenches in an effort to improve the daily life of combatants. Among the troops themselves, certain soldiers wrote their own songs, a practice that already existed during the Ancien Régime and the nineteenth century, for instance during revolutionary and imperial times. Lacking paper and often skills in musical composition, they chiefly repeated existing melodies and modified the lyrics, thereby ensuring very rapid diffusion and memorization across regiments. Their songs evoked solidarity, hope for the end of the war, and women, and more rarely called for mutiny, such as the “Chanson de Craonne” (Craonne’s Song) (1917).

It was Philippe Pétain, appointed commander-in-chief of French forces, who generalized the use of music to raise troop morale and channel the soldiers’ anger. Orchestras were created within battalions, which catered for their comrades as well as for the neighbouring population. Artists were also sent to perform at the front, which is how the song “Quand Madelon” (When Madelon) experienced unexpected success, thanks to the tour by the music hall performer Charles-Joseph Pasquier, known as Bach. The subjects of the songs performed by these artists at the front exalted patriotism, criticized the enemy, and allusively evoked the situation of soldiers far from their families.

During the Second World War, prisoners’ songs such as the “Chant des marais” (Peat Bog Soldiers) written in the Börgermoor concentration camp by communist inmates, became part of the repertory of regular armies, demonstrating the porous nature between the civilian and military world in the field of music. At the same time, initiatives promoting the entertainment of troops increased in all camps: song evenings were encouraged, and internationally renowned artists performed for troops, notably Marlene Dietrich on the American side, or the Red Army Choir on the Soviet side. The German song “Lili Marleen” spread on the radio and enjoyed unanimous success, even among the ranks of the enemy.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the military repertory was distorted by composers such as Kurt Weill or Hanns Eisler to denounce the atrocity of combat or to call for various forms of antimilitarism and pacifism. However, it was also rehabilitated to emerge from the battlefield and become a part of commemorations, such as the taps bugle call borrowed by the French army from the American army during the interwar period.

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