

Patriotic Performances



Phoenix Symphony // Photo Courtesy of Phoenix Symphony

Writer Joseph J. Airdo

The soundtrack of our lives is filled with many genres of music, but few songs evoke stronger memories and emotions than patriotic tunes.

You probably cannot remember where or when you first heard songs such as “Stars and Stripes Forever” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It could have been that Veterans Day parade you attended with your parents when you were not even old enough to walk or during that Fourth of July fireworks display under which you received your first kiss. Whatever the case, these patriotic tunes seem to have always been there, a consistent and ever-present piece of your life.

Moreover, when you hear them played, you are viscerally transported back in time to those significant moments and events. You can distinctly recall the smell of the popcorn, the feel of the grass and — most importantly — the American pride that poured into your heart as well as the perennial gratitude for the men and women who have fought or continue to fight for our freedoms.

For those who have had first-hand experience defending our country, those memories and emotions are even stronger, symbolizing brotherhood, sacrifice and, sadly, sometimes loss. But, much like these brave men and women, these songs stand for something worth honoring and celebrating.

This month, as we pay tribute to our nation’s veterans, bands, choirs and orchestras across the Valley will perform concerts consisting of some of the songs that help us express the pride and gratitude that words alone could never completely convey.



Julie Desbordes // Photo Courtesy of Salt River Brass



Army Sgt. 1st Class Kevin Gebo

AMERICAN SALUTE

On Sunday, Nov. 13, Salt River Brass will perform its sophomore concert of the season — an armed forces tribute honoring those who serve our country.

“We are calling it American Salute,” says Julie Desbordes, the ensemble’s new music director. “All of the repertoire is going to be very patriotic. It is going to be a celebration.”

The first half of the concert will feature two very special guests — euphonium player Gunnery Sgt. Hiram Diaz

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Salt River Brass // Photo Courtesy of Salt River Brass

from the United States Marine Band and trumpet player Sgt. 1st Class Kevin Gebo from the United States Army Band, both of whom will perform solos as well as a duet with the brass band.

The second half of the concert will feature Northern Arizona University's Wind Symphony, led by Stephen Meyer, who is also president of Salt River Brass's board of directors. Meyer says that many of the symphony's instrumentalists are from the Phoenix area, therefore the concert will provide their family and friends an opportunity to hear them perform.

"Our portion of the concert will feature a version of 'Shenandoah' by Omar Thomas, who is a renowned jazz artist and composer, and has recently composed a number of stellar works for wind ensemble," Meyer says. "We will also be performing a solo with Hiram Diaz on a piece that was written for him by Tom Davoren, who is an English composer.

"We will also close the concert with 'Pines of Rome,' which is a staple in the orchestra repertoire. Its last movement, called 'Pines of the Appian Way,' is one of the most exciting brass pieces to play. There are antiphonal parts with which we will surround the hall to finish the concert. So it will be a wonderful collaboration between student and professional musicians."

Salt River Brass participates in the Vet Tix program, which provides free tickets to all branches of currently-serving military and veterans, making it easy for those very special individuals to attend the concert at Mesa Arts Center.

Noting that she grew up playing in bands, Desbordes says that she vividly remembers collaborating with army members in her hometown on holidays that celebrate and honor those who serve.

"I understand to my core the importance of carrying that through," she explains. "That has always been very important to me. When I hear these songs, I feel honored to be able to value history and humanity in that way. And I love the fact that brass instruments have the possibility to sing and to really touch other people. And, here, you have an entire ensemble full of that sound. So it really feels like a brass choir."



Marine Gunnery Sgt. Hiram Diaz

“I want to help preserve our country’s respect and appreciation for the sacrifices that not just my family but others’ families have gone through to make this country what it is today.”

Carolyn Eynon

Meyer agrees, adding that there is often a certain memory recall involved with patriotic pieces like those that will be played during Salt River Brass's American Salute — such as “Armed Forces Salute” and “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

“Certainly, if you were in the service, they take you back to a time, a reason or an honor of serving our country,” he says. “However, even if you were not, we have all heard these tunes throughout our entire lives. It might be when you were a kid at a parade or a memorial event on TV, but there is a connotation to these pieces and a recall with which we hope to inspire an emotional connection that I think is so important to honor.”

SALUTE OUR VETS

For the past four years, the Carolyn Eynon Singers have devoted their November concert to performing patriotic music designed to honor our country's veterans. The choir will continue that tradition Sunday, Nov. 13 with a concert aptly titled Salute Our Vets at Christ the Lord Lutheran Church in Carefree.

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“I am a respecting veteran’s wife,” says artistic director Carolyn Eynon. “So I have always appreciated what my personal life has been blessed with by the service of my husband, who was a sergeant in the United States Army, and I want to honor all of the veterans who have guaranteed our freedom. I want to help preserve our country’s respect and appreciation for the sacrifices that not just my family but others’ families have gone through to make this country what it is today.”



Carolyn Eynon Singers // Photo by Joanne Casulli

to your eyes,” Eynon says. “It will be sung exclusively by my male singers from the perspective of a young boy who is saying goodbye to his dad as he goes off to fight in the Civil War, but its lyrics could apply to any war.

“We will then close with two songs — the first being ‘Thank You, Soldiers,’ during which my choir will be joined by five children and grandchildren of my singers. It is a multigenerational song with a beautiful text and melody. The other is ‘Let There Be Peace on Earth,’ that very famous folk song from the 50s.”

Eynon adds that there will be visual reinforcement of the music in the form of projected images of soldiers and their families during the concert, which veterans are invited to attend free of charge. All others will be encouraged to make a donation.

“My singers have always been extremely moved during these performances,” the artistic director says. “When you see a veteran stand up from a wheelchair and put his or her hand over their heart

The concert will open with the National Anthem, featuring an honor and color guard, before delving into a number of well-known patriotic tunes — such as “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again,” “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and the official songs of the United States Armed Forces. The Carolyn Eynon Singers will then perform a selection of African American spirituals that carry themes of unity and freedom.

“We will also be performing a song from the musical ‘The Civil War’ called ‘Tell My Father’ that will bring tears



Retired Air Force Col. Leon Ray

or a spouse assist a paraplegic, it is a very emotional moment.”

Retired Air Force Col. Leon Ray, a Scottsdale resident, will be the concert’s master of ceremonies while, members of a local Cub Scouts troop will serve as its ushers.

“I really want our community’s young people to grow up with an awareness of the sacrifices of their grandparents’ generation — and even that of their own parents who may have fought in Afghanistan or Iraq,” Eynon explains. “My mission is and always has been to inspire and educate. It does not matter if we are singing to a five-year-old or to a 95-year-old. Music bridges the gap.

“I truly believe my choir’s motto: singing together connects people. And that has only been enhanced since COVID. After we got done Zooming, wearing masks and having to stand six feet apart, it is like we were reborn in many ways — musically, physically, psychologically and spiritually. Music joins humanity. It brings humanity together.”

DANCERS, DREAMERS AND PRESIDENTS

In 2010, Daniel Bernard Romain — a professor in the composition department at Arizona State University — wrote a piece of music inspired by a very brief dance that then-presidential candidate Barack Obama did with talk show host Ellen DeGeneres three years earlier.

“Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents’ is what they call an orchestral tone poem,” says Christopher Powell, vice president of orchestral operations and artistic administration for The Phoenix Symphony. “It is this really interesting synthesis between commercial music and classical music, which has really become Daniel Bernard Romain’s signature sound.”

Extremely fond of the quintessentially American piece, The Phoenix Symphony programmed it to open a series of concerts, scheduled for Nov. 18–20 at Symphony Hall in Phoenix, designed to project a kaleidoscope of imagery and hope with our nation at the center.

“It starts with nearly a whole minute of drums and percussion, so it feels more like the beginning of a

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rock concert than it does a symphony orchestra,” adds Powell, noting that the catalyst for the composition was Roumain seeing a presidential candidate — who looked like him — demonstrate accessibility, humanness and contemporaneity more so than any that came before him.



Phoenix Symphony // Photo Courtesy of Phoenix Symphony

“Then we go into arguably one of the most profoundly patriotic pieces written in the 20th century — Aaron Copeland's ‘Lincoln Portrait,’ which will be narrated with quotes from Abraham Lincoln's letters and, predominantly, his Gettysburg Address.”

Geoffrey Owens — a noted actor from “The Cosby Show,” “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia” and “The Haves and Have Nots” — will serve as the piece’s narrator.

“He has really got one of those perfect baritone voices,” Powell says. “Plus, his father was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives in New York, so there is this really interesting synergy of real life and music coming together.”

Noting that The Phoenix Symphony participates in the Vet Tix program, Powell adds that the concerts’ final two selections will be a pair of pieces by composer Leonard Bernstein — the first of which is “Slava! A Political Overture.”

“Bernstein wrote that piece in 1977 for the inaugural concerts of Mstislav Rostropovich's first season with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C.,” Powell says. “Its main themes are based on ‘The Grand Old Party’ and ‘Rehearse!’ from Bernstein’s not-so-successful musical ‘1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.’ Right in the middle of the piece, when you least expect them, all of these election and campaign speeches appear from pre-recorded tape. It is just so raucous and fun.”

Bernstein’s other piece that will close out The Phoenix Symphony’s concerts will be “Symphonic Dances” from “West Side Story,” which is arguably the composer’s most successful musical and one that, for many, is distinctly American.



Phoenix Symphony // Photo Courtesy of Phoenix Symphony

“There are so many social undertones in ‘West Side Story’ that are still relevant today,” Powell says. “So it fits really well within the whole package of these concerts.”

“I find it very interesting that some of the pieces that make us feel most American in that musical are sung by its Puerto Rican characters. For example, ‘America’ — a song that has become such a big part of American culture — is sung by the Sharks’ girlfriends, who are all Puerto Rican. It just shows that the diversity of this country has filtered into every aspect of American life.”

Music

American Salute

Sunday, Nov. 13 | 3 p.m.
Mesa Arts Center | One E. Main St., Mesa
\$19+; student and senior discounts available
saltriverbrass.org

Salute Our Vets

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Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents

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Visit anchor.fm/imagesaz or scan this QR code with your phone to hear Salt River Brass’s new music director Julie Desbordes and board of directors president Stephen Meyer discuss what makes the ensemble — and especially this season — so special.

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