

{ BY HEIDI WALESON }

# No Ordinary Music Career

Military ensembles can offer a stable career for classical musicians, and to some, they're a viable alternative to civilian orchestras. But they also mean boot camp—and culture shock.







**WHEN TRUMPET PLAYER** Karl Sweedy ('01) finished his bachelor's degree at Curtis, he went to the New World Symphony. In the second year of his three-year contract, he was taking auditions without success when he talked to a friend who had just won a spot in the Air Force Band. Mr. Sweedy spotted an upcoming audition with the ensemble and decided to go for it. When the personnel director at New World asked him, "Do you really want to do that?" Mr. Sweedy's response was, "What kind of question is that?" He won the post in the Ceremonial Brass, an Air Force Band ensemble. Today, he is the senior enlisted leader for the band and a chief master sergeant, the highest non-commissioned officer (NCO) rank of E-9.

The premier Washington, D.C.-based service bands—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines—represent a serious career opportunity for conservatory-trained musicians. They attract rigorously trained applicants, perform at a high level, and can provide a stable, decently paid, creatively satisfying life. Each is an umbrella organization for multiple musical ensembles: For example, the 180 musicians in the U.S. Air Force Band make up the Concert Band, Ceremonial Brass, Air Force Strings,

Singing Sergeants, Airmen of Note (big band and jazz), and Max Impact (a rock band). The other services have similarly varied components; only the Navy has no string ensemble. The auditions are highly competitive (other service bands and choirs, based elsewhere in the U.S. and overseas, have different standards and job expectations).

But there are, naturally, tradeoffs to this stability, from enduring boot camp to understanding military culture. Other challenges can seem magnified amid shifting political winds.

Trombonist Chris Clark ('95) joined the Marine Band in 1999 after several years of freelancing and taking auditions in New York. "I needed a job," he says. Marine Band members are exempted from basic recruit training (this is not the case in the other services) and are given instruction in military behavior and customs. He found that his musical background was surprisingly compatible with life in the military. "Practicing an instrument takes the same sort of discipline the military requires," he says. "High expectations are nothing new. I had great leadership, and older, more experienced people to lean on."

The different entities of the Marine Band play about 500 performances a year, whether it's "strolling strings"

The Air Force Strings.





in the White House or a month-long tour in the Midwest. Flutist Kristan Cybriwsky ('90), who joined the Marine Band in 1998, found a variety of music-making. "It can feel like being a freelance musician on retainer," she says. "Every week is different. You might have a parade on a Friday evening, then two events at the White House, a funeral at Arlington, and a chamber music concert at the Library of Congress. There are opportunities to be entrepreneurial." Mr. Clark and some friends formed a brass quintet that did work for the band as well as concerts and tours on their own, even recording an album. Some members freelance for other D.C.-area musical organizations as their schedules permit.

Although Curtis has no band program per se, the education is still a good preparation. Mr. Clark says, "I did a lot of orchestral playing in the Marine Band, including things I played at Curtis. A lot of the older band repertoire is orchestral transcriptions, and the brass ensemble classes were applicable." The biggest difference? "As a trombone player in an orchestra, you sit around for a long time and then have to sound your best. In a band, it's the opposite. There's very little rest in a band."

Performing conditions are not always ideal. "We play outside a lot; there's lots of marching and outdoor ceremonies," says Mr. Clark. "In bad weather, when it's

cold and raining—as a brass player, you're the one that goes out to do that no matter what. And D.C. is hot in summer."

Diana Fish ('87) a cellist in the Marine Band from 2004 to 2014, says, "Union rules don't apply; you can't say it's too hot or too cold. And there's no option to say, 'I don't want to play that job, I think I'll take a day off.'" Since the Marine Band, known as the "President's Own," plays regularly in the White House, its members have the highest security clearance; as a result, there is no system for hiring substitutes. When the bands go on tour, they often travel on school buses and play in high school gyms.



Left: Karl Sweedy  
(Trumpet '01)  
performing in the  
Ceremonial Brass.

Below: The Air Force  
ensemble Max Impact.

## FIRST COMES BOOT CAMP

For the non-Marine bands, getting through the weeks of basic training has its challenges, too. Mr. Sweedy says, "It's basically about breaking you down, removing the ego to learn about team dynamics." Matthew Vaughn, co-principal trombone of the Philadelphia Orchestra and a Curtis faculty member, has "vivid" memories of his Air Force Band recruit

training in 1993. “The daily physical training at 5 a.m. is all about mental and emotional strain; they put you under stress and see if you can still function. It happens in San Antonio, Texas, outside in the brutal heat.” There was also an obstacle course and weapons training, as well as a lot of classroom time. He adds drily, “I did learn to fold clothes well.”

There are thrills as well. Highlights for Ms. Fish included playing Ronald Reagan’s funeral (“you feel that the world is watching”), a state dinner for Nelson Mandela, and an event when Yo-Yo Ma, who was a guest, sat in with the Marine Chamber Orchestra. For Ms. Cybriwsky, some of those high school gym shows in the middle of nowhere “reminded me of the power of music. Band kids would rush up to ask us to autograph their programs; we were a big deal to them. Veterans would come in uniform, in wheelchairs. We’d play the Armed Forces medley, and these guys who could barely stand up would stand when they heard their service song. It was humbling.”

Military service also has perks. Today, members of the premier bands, who join at the E-6 level, have starting salaries of about \$80,000, including a housing allowance that is not taxed, plus full medical coverage. The post-9/11 GI Bill allows service members to use education benefits for family members. Mr. Vaughn describes the pay as “mid-level ICSOM orchestra, but better and more stable. I went from there to the San Antonio Symphony, which was very unstable and stressful.” After 20 years,

band members can retire on a military pension with medical coverage for life.

Mr. Clark took full advantage of being in the military. He enjoyed the work and the life and got a doctorate partially paid for by the Marine Corps. Midway through his service, he got interested in audio recording and took courses. When he retired in 2024 after nearly 25 years, his military pension gave him the security to start an entirely new career. Ms. Fish, who retired after 20 years, says the pension is much better than the musicians’ union payout (though she gets that too, since she freelanced). She, too, has embarked on a new career as an interfaith/Buddhist chaplain in a Florida hospital.

Five years ago, Mr. Sweedy was promoted to a non-playing role as chief master sergeant in the Air Force Band, managing the work, people, and mission, which he finds enormously rewarding. “I would never have guessed that I would be in charge of 180 people, finding out where they can best add value to the unit,” he says. The band manages itself and its \$4 million budget—everything from IT and emergency management to supplies and deciding where, when, and why the musicians will play. “It’s a legacy thing, paid forward as we move up the ranks,” Mr. Sweedy says. “Up front, we ID people in the unit who have particular skills.”

He cites a new horn player, formerly with the Montreal Symphony and a published author, who is now working on tasks including social media and a new



Clockwise from top left: The Marine Chamber Orchestra, Diana Fish (Cello '87) with the Obamas, Chris Clark (Trombone '95) performing in the Marine Band, Kristan Cybriwsky (Flute '90) in the Marine Band.



The Singing Sergeants is one of six ensembles from the United States Air Force Band.

coding system. “She comes to work with a smile, not just because of her playing but the four other things she’s doing to add value to the unit and being in charge of seven other people,” Mr. Sweedy says. “You can apply the skills that you learn as an orchestra musician—active listening, adaptability, building teams—outside of the orchestra silo. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.” Mr. Sweedy can’t quite bring himself to hang up his trumpet, however—he plays the occasional outside gig. As an E-9, he will have to retire after 30 years, in 2033.

After the initial four-year enlistment period, band members can opt to re-up, but they must serve out their enlistment terms, even if they win an audition elsewhere. Mr. Vaughn took some orchestra auditions during his four years and made the finals for a few. “It gave me confidence that if I left the band, I would find something. Still, you have to decide about reenlistment after three years, and it was the hardest decision of my life to decide not to.” Mr. Vaughn was unemployed for a summer before winning the San Antonio job; two years later, he joined the Philadelphia Orchestra. Back then, he says, some elite orchestras looked down on the military band experience. He knows better, and when he reviews resumes today, those applicants are usually invited.

Ms. Cybriwsky also decided that four years in the band was enough. “It’s physically demanding, and you’re giving up a certain amount of control over your life. It was a great job for the time I was there, but I wanted to try something else.” In 2002, there was a boom in post-9/11 national security jobs, and her high security clearance opened doors for her—her first job was as a personal assistant for a defense intelligence contractor. “It was a paid classroom for me to learn about consulting, and I was seeing behind headlines in a classified environment.” She subbed in the Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra while working and getting an MBA and eventually shifted full time into management consulting.

#### NAVIGATING MILITARY CULTURE

For these Curtis musicians, the military trappings can be positive and negative. For Mr. Clark, the *esprit de corps* was real. “Marines love the organization,

the tradition, what we are all trying to do—there’s a lot of pride, and people are excited to be there. When we’re playing something really difficult, maybe because of the weather, you have that to lean on.” By contrast, Ms. Cybriwsky was sometimes made to feel that, as a musician who had not gone through recruit training, she was “not a real Marine.”

There are also some non-negotiables, like maintaining military decorum and weighing in twice a year. (“The New York Philharmonic doesn’t ask you to hop on the scale,” Ms. Cybriwsky notes.) Prospective enlistees may face difficulties over their medical histories, such as medications for mental health conditions; things like excessive debt may prevent them getting the necessary security clearances.

Current and former band members also acknowledge the current administration’s efforts to undermine the military’s historically apolitical stance could be a deterrent for new applicants. However, they see positive signs in the culture of the organization. Mr. Vaughn’s service was in the era of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” “I grew up in a conservative family, clueless about homosexuality,” he says. “There were closeted gay people in the band, and there was a culture of acceptance. In my experience, the military is more progressive than the country as a whole; that’s what serves their mission.” Mr. Clark says, “I can guarantee that over 20 years, you will play for things you don’t agree with. In the end, people want to be in a professional, world-class organization. Will they still come? I bet they will. We’ll see.”

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*Heidi Waleson is the opera critic of the Wall Street Journal and the author of Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America (Metropolitan/Picador).*