



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

WHITE HOUSE HISTORY | *Timelines : Music*

1790s

Before the White House was completed in 1800, President George Washington and his wife Martha lived first in New York City, then Philadelphia. Washington enjoyed the theater and liked to dance, especially the minuet, which he danced with great pleasure at his inaugural ball. Music in the president's home was an intimate amusement and young Nelly Custis, the president's musical stepgranddaughter, entertained guests by playing the instruments the president purchased for her. These included a fine five-octave, two manual harpsichord from London and a Dodds pianoforte, one of the first pianos built in America. Musical instruments were among the earliest items purchased for The President's House and illustrate the importance music played in early American home life.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 3-8.

1800s

President and Mrs. John Adams were the first occupants of the White House in the nation's new capital, the City of Washington. Shortly after moving into the mansion in November 1800, the Adams's invited the young United States Marine Band, consisting of only eight or ten musicians, to play at their first reception on New Years Day, 1801. This event established the tradition of the Marine Band's performances at the White House that exists to the present day and has earned the organization the title, "The President's Own." On July 4, 1806, the band performed also for President Thomas Jefferson, a fine amateur violinist and music lover, rendering the song "To Anacreon in Heaven" (or "The Anacreontic Song"). Eight years later this popular tune received new lyrics by Francis Scott Key, becoming immortalized as "The Star-Spangled Banner," and in 1931, President Hoover made the song America's official national anthem.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 13-14.



1810s

Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison, was one of early America's most gracious hostesses. Through Benjamin Latrobe, she purchased a piano for the White House for \$450 that was of "superior tone in strength and sweetness." She also purchased the earliest collection of music for the White House. Printed in Philadelphia in 1810, Madame Le Pelletier's elegantly engraved *Journal of Musick* is an important reflection of French influence in an American culture still dominated by English practices. Along with Italian and English songs and piano works, the collection contains many pieces by French composers, such as Isouard, Berton, Catel, Mehul and Boieldieu with representative arias from their operas virtually unknown in America at this time. Illustrating the rare efforts of a woman composer in early America, several of the selections are composed by Mme. Pelletier herself, including an interesting set of variations, "Fantaisie sur un Air Russe." Both the piano and the original White House edition of the music were destroyed when the British set fire to the mansion on August 24, 1814.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 17-18.

1820s

Both John Quincy Adams and his wife, Louisa Catherine, were great devotees of music, and often sang ballads and arias together, while Louisa played the White House American-made Babcock piano, now housed in the Smithsonian Institution. At one of the decade's most important historic events-- the ground-breaking ceremony for the excavation of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in 1828-- the Marine Band played, among other selections, the lilting boat song, "Hail to the Chief," from the popular musical play, *The Lady of the Lake* after Sir Walter Scott. Because John Quincy Adams was present at the ceremony, the occasion marked the first time "Hail to the Chief" was played for a president. The tune has become an important American ceremonial tradition and regularly heralds the appearance of the president at formal events of state today.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 21.

1830s

The White House under Andrew Jackson was simpler in its customs, ambience and attitudes than it had been under Adams or Monroe. It was the people's house with public receptions that opened its doors to one and all. At one of President Jackson's receptions, the Marine Band played one of the president's favorite tunes, "Auld Lang Syne," as his hungry guests devoured a 1,400 pound "Mammoth Cheese." In American culture during this decade, ballet dancers were beginning to capture the attention of audiences, as well as the interests of presidents Jackson and Van Buren. A caricature of the popular ballerina Celeste Keppler, appearing before President Jackson and his cabinet, also shows Vice-President Martin van Buren, who later when president invited the famous Fanny Elssler to the White House. With her voluptuous hip-swaying dance, known as the cachucha complete with Spanish castanets, Elssler took all of Washington by storm at the time. So popular was the provocative Fanny, that it was decided Congress would only meet on the days she was not dancing.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 26-27.



1840s

During the administrations of John Tyler, James Knox Polk and Zachary Taylor, guest performers entertained at the White House with increasing frequency. Most often they were folk singers, whose music reflected the growing political and social unrest of the era. Tyler was the first of seven presidents who would hear the famous Hutchinson Family Singers in the decades ensuing. A stirring symbol of the Yankee spirit in music, the Hutchinsons expressed their genuine concern for human misery and social reform in subjects involving woman's suffrage, alcohol, war, prisons, and especially slavery. A similar group, the Baker Family, sang songs with a more sentimental than social message for President Zachary Taylor and his family in 1849. But perhaps the most moving musical expression at the White House during these years was the program given by thirty blind and deaf-mute children for President Polk in 1846, proving that music as a mystical language could fortify the spirits of those who knew no other means of communication.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 30-33.

1850s

President Millard Fillmore and his family were particularly musical. Mrs. Fillmore, the former Abigail Powers, made certain the White House had not only a music room, but also three pianos. For relaxation Mrs. Fillmore enjoyed playing duets with her talented daughter, Mary Abigail, a fine amateur musician, proficient on the piano, harp and guitar. During the Fillmore administration, the famous diva, Jenny Lind, visited the White House, and later, during the administration of James Buchanan, a complete opera troupe came to call on the president. The most amazing performer to entertain at the White House during this era, however, was the young black concert pianist, Thomas Greene Bethune, called "Blind Tom," who entertained on the beautiful Chickering grand piano, purchased for the White House in 1857.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 34-37.

1860s

Abraham Lincoln could neither sing nor read music, but he loved music with a passion. He attended the opera at least thirty times while he was president, and when once criticized for these diversions during the turbulent Civil War years, he said frankly, "I must have a change or I will die." Inside the White House, music reflected America's eclectic tastes in music: the nine-year-old piano prodigy, Tereas Carreno; the singing midget, Commodore Nutt; and the American Indian songstress, Larooqua, all performed on various occasions. Outside the White House, far into the night, masses sang George F. Root's immortal "Battle Cry of Freedom," Dan Emmett's "Dixie" and other tunes that revealed the soul of a people, who knew the powers of both tragedy and joy, defeat and victory. After the war, when Andrew Johnson took office in 1865, the tone of musical expression in the mansion changed through the lighthearted interests of the Johnson children and grandchildren. Described by some as "an old-fashioned, hospitable, home-like farm house," the White House under Andrew Johnson rang with children's voices, games, good spirits, music--and especially dancing.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 38-48.



1870s

President Ulysses S. Grant was once said to have known “only two tunes. One is ‘Yankee Doodle,’ and the other isn’t.” But the great military hero of the Civil War, General Grant did, in fact, enjoy the music of the Marine Band, which gave concerts regularly on the White House grounds every Saturday during summer and early fall. As America’s musical life escalated throughout the nation, Grant’s successor, Rutherford B. Hayes, brought to the White House at least twenty-five different opera singers, instrumentalists, and choral groups that represented the finest in American cultural tastes of the latter part of the century. One of the most outstanding programs of the Hayes period was the performance in the Green Room of the brilliant young coloratura soprano, Marie Selika, who appears to be the earliest black artist to have presented a program at the White House. Selika had toured Europe and had sung for several crowned heads of state. With such fine programs as this, President and Mrs. Rutherford Hayes inaugurated the musicale tradition that exists in the White House today.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 52-59.

1880s

During the administration of President Chester Arthur, the first East Room concert for specially invited guests took place, when the famous Canadian soprano, Emma Albani, sang in 1883. A great enthusiast of opera and song, President Arthur was also deeply moved by the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ colorful melding of blues, minstrel song and European-like hymns later during his term. The most famous White House musical personality of the Hayes through Harrison era, however, was John Philip Sousa, who served five presidents as leader of the Marine Band in the White House from 1880 to 1892. A formidable showman, Sousa was the first American-born leader of the Marine Band. He was also a composer of operettas, songs, suites and more than 100 marches represented by his immortal “Semper Fidelis” (1888) and “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1897). During his White House tenure, John Philip Sousa not only raised the Marine Band’s level of musicianship and modernized its instrumentation, but he developed a concert band repertory of almost symphonic proportions.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 62-67.

1890s

Social dancing was especially enjoyed during the terms of Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley and its popularity within the White House reflected the changing times. While President Harrison enjoyed a form of waltz, known as “The German,” McKinley at his Valentine’s Day Dance preferred the new two-step, such as “Goo-Goo Eyes,” which illustrated the merging of ragtime and social dance as the century turned. But many distinguished performers appeared at the White House at this time, too. They included the great soprano “Black Patti” (Sissieretta Jones); the violinist, Joseph Douglass, grandson of orator and statesman, Frederick Douglass; and the composer and cellist, Ernest Lent, whose Piano Trio in B Major was probably the earliest serious chamber music performed at the White House. ...



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... The Lent ensemble played for President and Mrs. McKinley and seventy guests after a dinner for the Supreme Court in 1898, thus setting the stage for the state dinner/musical pattern that would become the focal point for modern entertaining at the White House.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 81-83.

1900s

During the terms of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), White House musical events became a major, regularly scheduled feature of the mansion's social life. Many innovations took place: the first program by a famous concert pianist; the first musicale devoted to a single opera; the first performance on a clavichord; and the first East Room piano—a fine concert grand from Steinway & Sons presented to the White House in 1903. The world's greatest pianists from Josef Hofmann to the legendary Ignacy Paderewski were invited to perform for the Roosevelts, and instrumental music reached further heights with the Kneisel Quartet, the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, and the new Washington Symphony Orchestra. One of the most distinctive programs of the era, however, was that of the twenty-eight-year-old Spanish cellist, Pablo Casals, who played on January 15, 1904. More than a half century later, Casals would perform again in the White House for President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 88-93.

1910s

The abundance of fine artists, who performed during the Theodore Roosevelt era, continued to appear during succeeding administrations, and President and Mrs. William Howard Taft and the Woodrow Wilsons molded the popular White House musicale into a well-established tradition. Beginning with the Roosevelts and continuing through the Eisenhowers, Steinway & Sons assisted the First Lady with the selection of the artists and helped with their travel and hotel arrangements. Helen Taft was a fine amateur pianist, who practiced almost every day on her Baldwin piano, which was trimmed in gold to match motifs in the Blue Room (called "Mrs. Taft's Music Room"), where it stood. While Mrs. Taft preferred concert pianists, President Taft's tastes in music are illustrated in the Tin Pan Alley songs and arias from Puccini's *La Boheme* coming from his graphanola at this time. President Wilson, too, enjoyed a novel "performer" in the White House—his Victrola, a new American "voice" that entertained him in the evenings as he and Edith Wilson relaxed by the fire.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 95-99.



1920s

Tin Pan Alley and the American musical theater were in a great state of verve and vitality in the period between the two world wars, and White House guests lists of the time reflected this. In 1924 President Coolidge invited legendary showman, Al Jolson to help him launch an election campaign at a White House pancake breakfast. After the breakfast, forty stars from stage and screen, including John Drew, the Dolly Sisters, Charlotte Greenwood and Ray Miller's Jazz Band, staged impromptu entertainment on the White House lawns. Both first ladies, Florence Harding and Grace Coolidge, were especially interested in classical music. Mrs. Harding showed her encouragement of music in young people by inviting eleven-year-old concert pianist, Shura Cherkassy, to present a recital, and through the invitation of Grace Coolidge, Sergei Rachmaninoff played in the White House on three separate occasions.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 100-108.

1930s

The roster of prominent artists who performed for President Herbert Hoover at the end of the 1920s and into the early 1930s includes Grace Moore, Rosa Ponselle, Jascha Heifetz, Vladimir Horowitz, and many others. President and Mrs. Hoover were the first to invite an artist to play for a head of state (a tradition that continues today) when on April 29, 1931, harpist Mildred Dilling played for King Phra Pok Klao Prajadhipok of Siam. With the performance of the Hampton and Tuskegee choirs, the Hoovers also became the first to bring black choirs to the White House since the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang for President Arthur. During the long administration of Franklin Roosevelt, from March 4, 1933 to April 13, 1945, more than 300 concerts in the White House reached out to every corner of America. They included women's musical organizations, black performers (notably Todd Duncan and Marian Anderson), ballet and modern dance (Martha Graham), and children's opera (Hansel and Gretel). In 1938 Steinway & Sons replaced the 1903 concert grand with a new 9'7" instrument, which is used often in the White House today.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 112-118.

1940s

As the war in Europe cast its shadow over the capital's social life, White House entertaining diminished. But one event in particular stands out: "A Program of American Songs for American Soldiers," presented by Burl Ives, Wade Mainer and other folk, spiritual and ballad singers in 1941. It was a new concept, a conscientious effort to relate American traditional music to the armed services at a critical period in the nation's history. ...



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... After President Roosevelt's death in 1945, his vice president, Harry S Truman, succeeded him. A passionate music lover, who played Chopin, Mozart, and Bach with modest proficiency, Truman had studied piano from age eight to sixteen, and the love of music remained with him all his life. Because of extensive White House renovations, the Trumans held only one season of concerts in the mansion, from November 1946 to February 1947. These programs, however, included several prominent artists, such as Lawrence Tibbett, Oscar Levant, Carroll Glenn, Eugene List, and Helen Traubel, the esteemed vocal teacher of Truman's musical daughter, Margaret.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 119-127.

1950s

While neither President nor Mrs. Eisenhower was especially knowledgeable in European classical music, they recognized the value of the music of their own nation and placed more emphasis than any of their predecessors on White House programs that reflected its colorful variety. The Eisenhowers were the first to bring Broadway musical theater to the White House in an after-dinner program for Chief Justice Earl Warren in 1958. They were also especially proud of the nation's military ensembles, and brought to the White House choral and instrumental groups from the Army, Navy and Air Force, as well as the United States Marine Band, which had been performing at the White House from the time of John Adams. President Eisenhower also initiated the current concept of roving musicians, notably the Air Force Strolling Strings, who performed at the state dinner for the king of Saudi Arabia in 1957. Guest artists under the Eisenhowers also included Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians, Guy Lombardo, and the world-renowned pianist Artur Schnabel in his only White House concert.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 130-134.

1960s

Although guest artists had been entertaining at the White House for more than a century, President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy made the White House a true showcase for the performing arts and their creativity and dedication provided a model for succeeding administrations to the present day. By inviting the media to White House cultural events, they placed a spotlight on the White House and demonstrated that the Executive Mansion could indeed be an influence in encouraging public acceptance of the arts. Reflecting Jacqueline Kennedy's assertion that she wanted "only the best," America's finest performing arts organizations were featured: The Metropolitan Opera Studio, Jerome Robbins Ballet, American Ballet Theater, American Shakespeare Festival, New York City Center Light Opera Company and many others. When Lyndon Johnson became president upon John Kennedy's tragic death in 1963, many White House performances comprised such a large cast that they were held outdoors on a special stage or indoors in the East Room on a portable stage donated by the Harkness Ballet in 1965.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 135-145.



1970s

Music in the White House during the administrations of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter reflected a wider segment of American culture than ever before, with the appearance of jazz, gospel, ragtime, and popular song, as well as classical concert and vocal forms. Following various official state dinners, Pearl Bailey, with Richard Nixon at the piano, sang for President Pompidou of France; The Captain and Tennille performed for the Queen of England, President and Mrs. Ford and their guests; and Sarah Vaughn, Dizzy Gillespie and Earl Hines entertained Shah Reza Pahlevi of Iran under Jimmy Carter. But the most important musical event of this period was the inauguration of the first PBS series of five hour-long programs broadcast nationally and throughout Europe from the East Room. Initiated by President and Mrs. Carter in 1978, the first series comprised Vladimir Horowitz, Leontyne Price, Mikhail Baryshnikov with Patricia McBride, Mstislav Rostropovich and Andres Segovia.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 146-158.

1980s

Called "In Performance from the White House," the PBS programs from the White House during the two administrations of Ronald Reagan broadened to include not only classical styles as seen under the Carters, but Broadway, country, jazz and gospel, always with creative theatrical flair. One of the Reagans' most successful televised series, "A Tribute to American Music," took place from fall 1986 to summer 1988 on the White House lawn. The series featured the music of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Rodgers and Hart with the final evening showcasing scenes from various current Broadway musicals in festive costumes and dance. Other outdoor concerts celebrated distinguished American symphony orchestras, such as the Boston Pops Orchestra and New York's Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra. Whether to enliven parties for children, holiday fetes, or Congressional picnics, music was vital to the Reagan White House. Not only the nostalgic Beach Boys performed their spirited rock music on the South Lawn, but artists, such as Pinchas Zuckerman (1982), Frank Sinatra (1982), Jessye Norman (1986), Lionel Hampton (1987), and many others continued the long tradition of after-dinner concerts held in the East Room to honor important heads of state.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 160-164.

1990s

President and Mrs. George Bush recognized music as a supreme American gesture, a vital symbol of American life as it underscored every important national event, social cause and ceremonial mood in the White House. Today, the United States Marine Band, America's oldest musical organization, numbers 140 musicians and plays at the White House more than 150 times a year. From early 1993 to late 1998 under the Clintons, nearly 100 musical events featuring guest artists appeared at the White House. ...



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... President and Mrs. Clinton's enjoyment of traditional and popular American music was reflected especially in their WETA "In Performance at the White House" series that included a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Newport Jazz Festival; Aretha Franklin; "Women of Country"; and seventeen dancers illustrating varied styles of dance during the telecast of March 1998. Concert and opera stars, Irish music, rhythm and blues are only a few more of the kaleidoscopic musical moods of the White House as the millennium rapidly approaches.

Elise Kirk, *Musical Highlights from the White House*, 164-170.

2000S

In 2001, President Bush proclaimed the month of June, "Black Music Month," encouraging "all Americans to learn more about the contributions of black artists to America's musical heritage and to celebrate their remarkable role in shaping our history and culture." Performers Lionel Hampton, Shirley Caesar, Bobby Jones, James Brown, the Blind Boys of Alabama, and the Harlem Jazz Museum Artists attended the ceremony in the East Room. Take 6 and Regina Belle performed at the event at which the president honored jazz legend Lionel Hampton.

During their first year in the White House, President and Mrs. Obama hosted a celebration of the music of Stevie Wonder on February 25, 2009, and welcomed Festiva Latina on October 14, 2009. Both events were part of the PBS series *In Performance at the White House*, which dates to 1978.

In the East Room, President Obama presented to Mr. Wonder the second annual Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song, an award that honors artists "whose creative output transcends distinctions . . . , brings diverse listeners together, and fosters mutual understanding and appreciation." In addition to Stevie Wonder, performers included India. Arie; Tony Bennett; Wayne Brady; Anita Johnson; Diana Krall; Mary Mary; Martina McBride; Rickey Minor; Paul Simon; Esperanza Spalding; and Will.i.am.

Festiva Latina, a concert dedicated to Hispanic musical heritage, took place on the South Lawn of the White House. Performers included Marc Anthony, Jimmy Smits, Eva Longoria Parker, Pete Escovedo, Gloria Estefan, José Feliciano, George Lopez, Thalía, Tito "El Bambino", Aventura, and Los Lobos. Sheila E. was musical director.

