

## LETTER FROM THE ARMY

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*Fort Ord, Calif., February 24, 1943*

DEAR Miss L,  
You ask me, what of the musician's life in the Army and how are his talents being used? And what sort of audience do soldiers make and what are their reactions to the entertainment we armed musicians give them? A broad swath cut, and one which causes me much hesitation. Three months or even a day might radically change the scene. (As in the case of the Army Specialist Corps, for instance, which existed for a while and then one morning a couple of months ago, by War Department order was no more). Trusting that this will be taken into consideration, however, and hoping that you will forgive omissions that must inevitably occur in a report based on one person's experiences in entertaining the Army, I will try to answer your questions.

In the first year of our actual participation in the war, government printing presses poured out tons of Special Orders and new and revised regulations affecting every man in the ranks, musicians not excluded. The great majority of soldier-musicians are still bandsmen. In garrison the band continues to play for military ceremonies and dances, and to provide concerts just as it always has. By a recent War Department order clarifying the band's combat duties, those in active units are now training to fulfill specific assignments in the battle zone. There has also been an authorization of more non-commissioned ratings and provisions for stringed instruments to encourage the development of orchestras.

The music the band must play for military ceremonies is its first, yet simplest, duty. One of the greatest problems of the band-leader is to organize an adequate dance orchestra from the ranks of his band. Within two years amazingly high standards have been set for such orchestras. Some have already developed so that they play as well as any but a very few of the top swing bands in the country, and they are kept extremely busy by the many organizations set up for the entertainment of the soldier.

Planning programs for band concerts is another problem for the band-leader whose desire is, naturally, the musical satisfaction of the greatest possible number of listeners. I made my first programs with the feeling that, though I could perhaps slightly interest the men with arrangements of better known standard works, I would have to let the dance orchestra give them what they really wanted to hear. Consequently I was amazed to find the response to the *Overture to Euryanthe* as enthusiastic as that for Harry James' *Trumpet Blues and Cantabile*, although the latter was better played and had the advantage of being heard in the medium for which it was originally written. Furthermore the average soldier does not seem to have heard of those two neatly fashioned and detestable pigeonholes of "classical" and "popular" music into which so many musicians and laymen place everything they hear. The sort of class distinctions which have all-too-long existed between musicians who make with their instruments from Carnegie Hall and those who swing out down at Café Society, as well as between their respective audiences, break down completely before the typical soldier audience. There is no plush-seat attitude of a certain obligation to politely like "classical" music since it is supposed to be uplifting or the sort of thing the best people want, nor, on the other hand, any inhibition in showing an appreciation for "popular" music which comes from the other side of the tracks. Almost no conceivable audience could include more divergent tastes than those that are blended at the Service Clubs. There is enthusiasm for everyone, from the hill-billy singers and Gene Autry to Glenn Miller and Serge Koussevitzky. This psychological attitude is of course strained and unnatural since the mere presence of most of the audience is the result of loneliness and boredom which haunt one's evenings in the comparative isolation of an Army Camp and drive the men out of the barracks to seek some form of amusement. Many of our concert artists have had sad experiences with the soldier audience because they failed to understand its characteristics. The average soldier will succumb gladly to the appeal of simple and direct music. He very much wants an easy stimulation to either his nostalgia or his feet. What the well-meaning artist as often as not gives him is a Bach unaccompanied sonata or an operatic aria (in a foreign language, of course), or, as in the case of a concert Stokowski led in a western camp, the Shostakovitch *Seventh Symphony*. Jehosaphat! and with Fifi D'Orsay scheduled as the sex attraction later on the same program. Naturally the men became restless and talked, the conductor grew indignant, but perfunctorily finished his part of the program and a bad

time was had by all.

Many with conducting experience ask how one becomes a band-leader. Some few have been commissioned in the past, others were Master Sergeants first, and the rest were Warrant Officers who had completed what has become the standard procedure for making band-leaders today, a course of study in the Army Music School at Fort Myer, Virginia. To enter the school one must fulfill the age requirement, be physically fit, have had three months' previous service, and rank among the highest of those taking a competitive examination covering conducting, theory, arranging, and performance on an instrument. It is a two-month course at present. Many changes have been made in the curriculum in order to meet the needs of the type of student the new Army is sending there. The Dean of the school, Captain Thomas F. Darcy summed up the significance of this new regime in a brief graduation address last October when he said, "The school was originally organized to make musicians of soldiers; now we must make soldiers out of musicians." Up until about a year ago applicants had to have at least three years' experience in an Army band and be non-commissioned officers. Such men were naturally familiar with the ceremonial and administrative procedure of the Army, but in most cases were sadly lacking in theoretical background. With the new drastic changes in requirements, however, many well trained musicians without any band experience whatsoever are more than qualified for the course, but their need is for instruction in the non-musical functions of the band-leader.

Many organists, pianists, and singers have found their talents useful in the capacity of Chaplain's Assistants. Their duties here are secretarial as well as musical and they have a margin of personal freedom beyond that of most soldiers. Also a Hammond Organ to work on while they are in garrison.

I doubt if anyone can give a full picture of the musical activity sponsored by Special Services. Examples of wonderful accomplishment as well as sorry inaction can be cited. The field is so vast and so new that the War Department scarcely knows how to define duties nor how to vest power in the officers in charge. It would take nine lives to acquire the background that every Special Service Officer should rightly possess. Theatricals and movies, athletics of every sort, Post Exchange (Army general store) supervision and library administration are all included in his job. To make things more difficult his staff is primarily an office staff (totally inadequate to do anything more than direct or supervise the entertainment projects). For the

rest of his personnel he must go begging. With a sympathetic Commanding Officer he can work wonders. Without, nothing.

One of the newest phases of Special Services is the development of Overseas Units. Of the hundred and twenty-one men in such units four are music technicians. They must be jacks-of-all-musical-trades, as it were, their duties being to lead group singing, produce theatricals and interest the men in playing anything from the violin and guitar to the harmonica and ocarina, all of which are in their kit.

Of the All-Soldier-Shows one might say there is *This Is The Army* (it should have been called *This Isn't The Army*) and a great many others. It is not surprising that the former still sells out weeks ahead of the opening wherever it goes, having been born with the silver spoon of total support of the War Department and Irving Berlin Inc. in its mouth. For the others, however, the road was rougher. The history of the musical revue which we put on at Fort Riley, *The Life of Riley*, is probably typical of many others produced in Army camps about the same time. First a group of writers got together and turned out lyrics and skits. After they were approved by the Commanding Officer, several composers wrote and arranged the tunes. Then began casting from the talent at hand and sometimes discouraging rehearsals in the evenings and on Sundays. The men were all taking basic training at the time; nothing but the joy they found in the work, and release from details in off-duty hours rewarded their efforts. Because we had virtually no funds we used no scenery or costumes and a minimum of props. (This hardship turned out to be a blessing later when we began to travel with the show and had to be our own stage-hands). By the time we were ready for production the men had completed their basic training and were being kept off the shipping lists till after the first performance when our future would be decided. Fortunately the show took, and within a week we had more requests for additional showings than we could fill. On the road life was fine and worth the headaches of preparation. Civilians were wonderful to us. Eventually however, the enthusiasm wore off and there was a hangover of restlessness, since obviously there was no future in what we were doing. Meanwhile the other men with whom we had trained were going up the ranks. One by one the key men left for Officers' Training Schools and no replacements were to be found.

There was also a more basic reason why the All-Soldier Show days were numbered. Except for original performances in their own camps they played almost completely to civilian audiences which at that time were

avid in their desire to support anything that soldiers produced and to satisfy their curiosity about Army life. Though millions of young Americans were already in training camps, few had gone abroad. Hence the civilian interest centered on the activity in the camp where everyone had a relative or friend, and this was the theme of the scripts. Now, with the maturing of the American war-mind and the vast increase in the participation of our troops in overseas duty, there has come a shift in civilian interest which momentarily is spent on the news and what Hollywood dreams up. For the soldier's story those back home will have to wait till the end of the war.

Many believe that the War will not be short and that even after it is over vast numbers will be kept in military service. Oh, say it won't be so, – but if it is, those musicians who because of ill-considered "artistic" scruples have assumed the veil of martyrs and made no attempt to give their fellows the benefit of their talents will probably increasingly regret their separation from their civilian profession. Those who have had faith that the Army would use their talents to as great a degree as possible – considering, after all, that its business is war – and have at the proper moment asserted their gifts, will probably find themselves happier and better prepared to return to civilian life in the long run.

There is of course a real challenge and much to be learned from trying to please the motley soldier audience. If the ends of this war are worth our lives then certainly they are worth the best our talents can produce. There is also a very simple satisfaction in contributing to our comrades' happiness by playing the music they deeply wish to hear, even when that music is not what would give us the greatest personal satisfaction. This is something for artists to think about in relation to post-war America. Profound social changes seem inevitable. These changes must eventually end the commercial exploitation of the creative and performing artist. But a problem not unlike that of attempting to state the divergent tastes of the soldier audience will be forced upon us. A little realistic forethought along these lines might not be wasted particularly on the part of composers who must create what all may understand. The past twenty years have brought us far but there is still much further to go in this direction. One of the benefits of this war for the millions of soldiers involved will be a realization of their provincialism. This cannot fail to broaden their cultural horizon and even bring them from the opposite direction to meet the composer and his interlocutor, the performing artist, in a better understanding of mutual needs and desires. All of which should mean an American music more by, for and of the people, and more interested people.