Lincoln and the Marine Band at Gettysburg

By Ed Pierce

The Gettysburg Address may be the most famous and oft-quoted speech in American history. At the dedication of a new national cemetery on November 19, 1863, Edward Everett delivered the featured speech, which lasted nearly two hours. Then President Lincoln delivered his famous speech, which lasted just two minutes and which began, "Four score and seven years ago..." Nearly every American student has read and studied this speech.

Few people think of the Gettysburg Address as a musical event. But the story and success of that momentous day involved much more than the famous speeches of its historical figures.

A steel gray sky provided a perfect funereal canopy to the ceremonies assembling below. The November air was cool but bore no hint of frost as a slight breeze blew through the barren trees. Nature itself was in mourning.

Francis Scala was the first Marine Band musician to receive the title "Leader of the Band."

Below, while thousands gathered on a barren hilltop, a bandmaster stood ready to provide the downbeat to his musicians. He cut an imposing figure in his scarlet tunic and sky blue trousers. So did the 30 bandsmen seated in front of him. Only the golden aigullette draped across his chest distinguished him as bandmaster. This would be no ordinary performance of music. It would be extraordinary. These were the nation's finest musicians in the country's premier ensemble.

The bandmaster and his players had played many times for the President. In the preceding two and a half years they had performed for White House balls and concerts, Presidential ceremonies and reviews, as well as events hosted by the First Lady. Over that time the President traveled from the Capitol accompanied by only a select few. But Gettysburg was different. For this event, the President took with him many important figures from the government and his cabinet. He also brought his band to be part of the official ceremony. He had never traveled with the band before.

They were to perform the simplest of tunes. For most important ceremonies, Scala would prepare special arrangements. His professionalism and vanity would permit no less. The selections requested for this event seemed almost unimportant and unworthy of his creative talents. An arrangement by someone else was easily at hand and that would do. Besides, his magnificent musicians would not be the center of attention as they usually were. They would merely provide accompaniment to massed singing. The superb musicianship and bright silver instruments of his performers would hardly be noticed.

On that day, however, down came the beat, and the results were anything but trivial. Brass and wind instruments accompanied ten thousand voices. At the time this was the largest accompanied choral singing event in the nation's history. The songs for this event included "The Doxology," "Old Hundred," and "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow." The notes echoing off those hills would now be forever linked to perhaps the greatest words ever spoken by an American President.

The down beat was provided by Francis Maria Scala, the nation's foremost band leader, the music was played by the United States Marine Band, and the words were crafted by Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States.

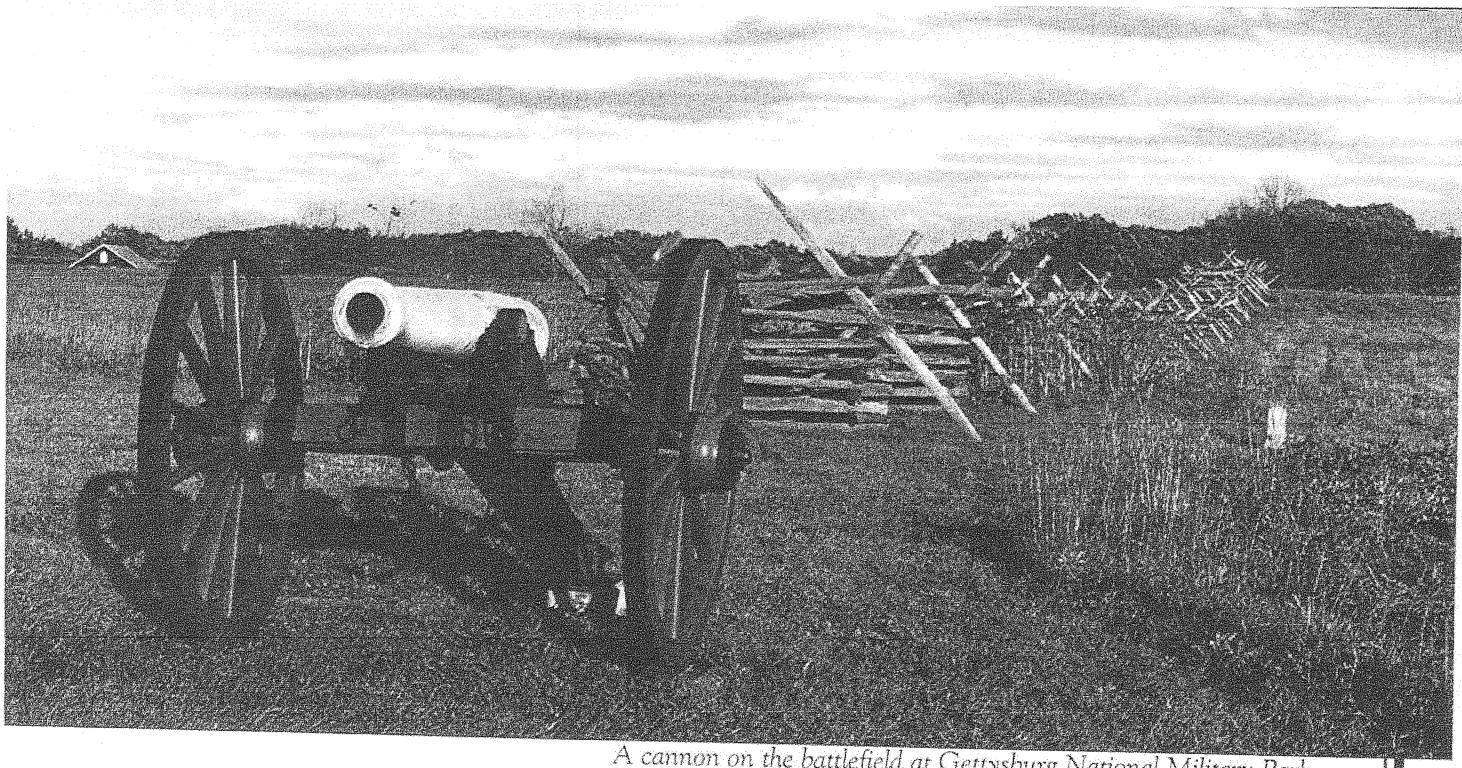
It was an unlikely combination: the Prairie Lawyer who became President, and the Italian clarinet player who became a bandmaster. When the performance of these ancient hymns joined with the delivery of this famous speech, it all came together to give this nation a monumental legacy.

Scala and Lincoln

The two principals began their journey to Pennsylvania half a globe apart. Given their background and their personalities, it would seem almost improbable they would ever meet, let alone work together. Theirs was a professional relationship, not a personal one. Yet they shared two essential characteristics that set the stage for their successes: they each possessed a great ability to promote the issues to which they were dedicated, and they also shared a passion for great music.

Lincoln had no particular talent for music that was known, but he knew what he liked and appreciated the quality that went into producing great music. Scala had his musical training in his native Italy, which was steeped in a rich operatic heritage. Now in America, Scala had become the leader of the Marine Band, the most important ensemble in the nation.

The emotional world of European opera, from which Scala had come, must have appealed to Lincoln's Shakespearian sense of drama and melancholy. Scala's training made him



A cannon on the battlefield at Gettysburg National Military Park.

well suited to meet not only the chief executive's taste but also that of the First Lady, who could be emotionally volatile at times. Lincoln's journey to Washington is well known and is the stuff of legend. Although less well known, Scala's path to Washington was no less remarkable.

Scala's Journey to Washington

In 1841 the 21-year-old Francis Scala was playing clarinet for a local opera pit orchestra in his native Naples, Italy. By chance the captain from the USS Brandywine heard Scala's excellent playing. After the performance the captain approached the clarinetist with an exceptional offer: to come aboard his frigate and serve as a musician with the opportunity for pay and overseas travel. The young Scala thought this was the chance of a lifetime, and he took it.

The pay and travel came as promised, but Scala had not foreseen that he was prone to extreme seasickness. It would be a year before the Brandywine would dock in Norfolk, Virginia and discharge the Navy's most promising musician. Scala wandered briefly through Virginia, picking up odd playing jobs as he went, until he arrived in Washington D.C.

Recalling that he enjoyed the opportunities that a musical life in the military offered, Scala enlisted in the United States Marines as a musician in its Washington band. After getting his first look at the United States Marine Band, Scala concluded there was no way for the band to go but up. To anyone but the optimistic Francis Scala, this band was a hopeless disaster.

At the time the United States Marines carried no provision for a full band. Musicians resided on the rolls officially as fifers and drummers. In fact, the band at that time had this instrumentation: one flute, one French horn, one clarinet, two trombones, one snare drum, one bass drum, and one cymbal set.

The band's musicianship was inept, the arrangements were poor, and the sound was awful. While most people disregarded the band as a public embarrassment, Scala saw opportunity. Sensing that he was at the epicenter of a new and thriving nation full of possibility, Scala could foresee not only the creation of a fine military band, but one that could be at the forefront of every social and political event in the nation's capitol. So he rolled up his sleeves and went to work with this band.

The Marine Band under Scala

Very quickly Scala took on the position of fife major, which essentially made him the group's musical director. Next he recruited better trained musicians. Food, shelter, and pay served as powerful inducements to the vast number of unemployed musicians in the Washington area. Scala also improved the music library by writing new arrangements and original compositions. This music was challenging and the rehearsals rigorous. Scala soon fashioned a rich repertoire for the band, featuring sprightly arrangements of American folk songs, patriotic airs, dance music of all kinds, ceremonial music, and, of course, melodies from his beloved Italian operas.

Scala's concerts greatly appealed to the public. His compositions matched the dignity and pomp required for official government functions, and all of Washington danced to his music. Scala also discovered that his personal gifts were not confined to music. He had the skill of a carnival huckster to persuade and lobby anyone within earshot that what was good for the Marine Band was good for the country. Scala attracted the money needed to make key improvements to the band. Under Scala's direction and promotional efforts, the band's reputation quickly soared.

After Scala had put in eight hard working years, the band had grown to 30 musicians with a greatly expanded instrumentation. Most important, Scala built into his ensemble a full woodwind section. Most bands at this time consisted solely of brass and percussion. Brass and percussion bands may have given the audience a full and rich sound, but they lacked the tonal color and musical balance that a full section of woodwinds could bring. The full wind section Scala added gave his Marine Band a unique sound that made them very popular, putting them in high demand for nearly all official functions.

Presidential enthusiasm for Scala's Marine Band first arose in 1849, when President Zachary Taylor heard the

band perform at his inauguration. President Taylor was so impressed by the band that he ordered it to be expanded. In 1854 President Franklin Pierce authorized additional funds for the Marine Band so it could perform a series of public concerts at the Capitol and the White House.

With increased popularity, other changes took place. Players in the band now could enlist as musicians and no longer had to be hidden on the rolls as "fifers and drummers." Scala's position of fife major also was abolished and replaced by the position of principal musician. By 1860 the Marine Band's duties performing at the White House had become official and permanent. The Marine Corps Commandant issued orders directing the band leader to report to the White House every morning during the week for directions of the President, and the band was required to "be at the disposal of the President for as long as he may want its services."

In July of 1861 Abraham Lincoln signed legislation officially creating The United States Marine Band. No longer would the band be merely a neglected sub-part of the Marine Corps.

The President who signed this legislation truly enjoyed the band and its music. Scala tried to win over the President from the beginning. When Lincoln arrived in Washington, he stayed at the Willard Hotel. Scala had the Marine Band there ready to greet him with "Hail to the Chief" and a musical serenade. Scala made a good first impression and wanted to keep it that way. For the inauguration in May of 1861, Scala wrote a special composition titled "Union March," which proved to be an unqualified success. Composed in the style of an operatic grand march, it featured a moment at which all of the musicians sprang to their feet and shouted, "hurrah for the union!" This was the perfect way to underscore the newly elected President's first message to the nation. Its effect was not lost on the President. Lincoln understood that Scala was paying attention to events and expressing his loyalty through music.

The next few months would be the busiest of Scala's Marine Band career. The band added extra programs to its schedule, beyond the usual south lawn concerts. These programs included special war relief performances for the Soldiers Aid Society as well as public morale boosting concerts at the public park west of the capitol. Lincoln often attended these concerts. The First Couple was fond of opera, and Lincoln thus was able to enjoy the operatic melodies that Scala integrated into his band concerts. Scala's music invoked the emotional world of European grand opera, which must have appealed to Lincoln for its sense of drama and melancholy.

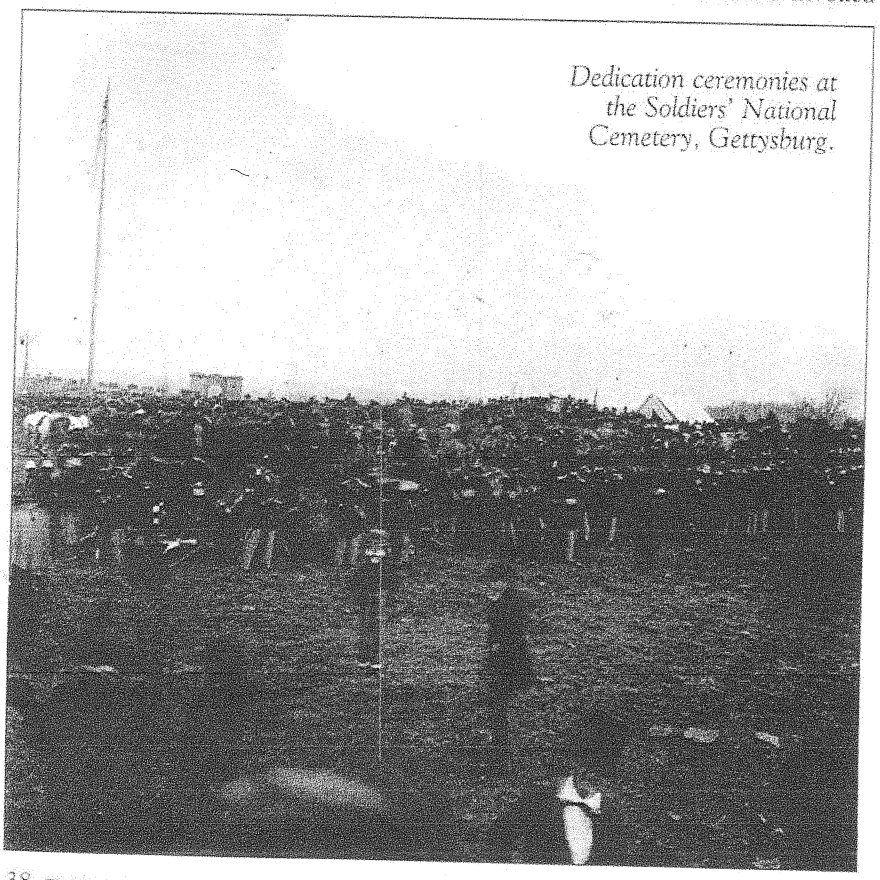
The President's attendance at such concerts did not always go smoothly. When it was revealed that Lincoln was in the audience, the crowd would bring the concert to an abrupt halt as they cheered and clamored for a speech. In these instances, the President would politely bow and retreat indoors to finish listening to the band. "I wish they would let me sit out there quietly" a discouraged Lincoln remarked, "and simply enjoy the music."

The Band and the First Lady

Scala also had to work with the new First Lady. In June of 1861, Mrs. Lincoln issued formal invitations to a "grand entertainment" featuring an East Room performance of "the superb Marine Band directed by Francis Scala." Here the operatic background of Scala could not have better served the needs of the First Lady. He prepared a program that included performances of Donizetti's "Lucia De Lammermoore," Verdi's "Un Ballo un Marschera" and an encore of "The Union March." The evening was an unqualified success.

The following February, the First Lady wished a repeat of this success. Lincoln sent a note to Scala that read: "Will the leader of the Marine Band please call and see Mrs. L today." This event was to be far more grand than the last one. The President knew that planning and executing such social engagements gave his wife great pleasure and happiness. The President was also fully confident that Scala could meet all of the demands of the First Lady. When Mrs. Lincoln requested that some dancing be included, Scala wove together an evening of operatic and ball music the likes of which Washington had never witnessed. Scala added to his repertoire with a new special composition dedicated to the First Lady. "The Mary Lincoln Polka" made its premiere at this great event.

But not all events involving the band and the First Lady were as joyful. On the eve of what was supposed to be the defining social event of the season, Lincoln's son Willie came down with typhoid fever. It was too late to cancel so the First Family put on a brave public face and went ahead with the evening. Throughout the night, as the music of the Marine Band echoed from the East Room, the First Couple took



Dedication ceremonies at the Soldiers' National Cemetery, Gettysburg.

Photo by Alexander Gardner

turns coming and going from Willie's sick room. The music and fun downstairs and the unimaginable suffering in the upper room must have made for a macabre contrast. Two weeks later Willie died. In her extreme emotional grief, Mrs. Lincoln misdirected her anger at Mr. Scala and his band.

She associated the sound of the music with the horrible pain that Willie had endured. So distraught was Mrs. Lincoln that she wanted Francis Scala and the Marine Band dismissed. To assuage his wife and ease her pain, the President agreed to end for a time the band's participation in all White House events.

This exile would last nearly a year. In the blink of an eye the Marine Band had gone from being the darlings of the Capitol to wandering outcasts. Whatever anger Scala may have harbored towards the First Lady for her unjust action to the band, he kept it to himself and soldiered on. There were plenty of other things for he and his talented group of musicians to do.

Scala soon found employment with Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury. Chase's daughter Kate was to be married to Rhode Island Governor William Sprague, and the wedding promised to be far grander in scale than any event held at the White House. Not only did Scala prepare a special composition for the event, but he also chose to feature himself as clarinet soloist. The work he wrote, "Mrs. Sprague's Bridal Polka and Waltz," proved to be a dual triumph of composition and performance. This was just the kind of rebound Scala and his band badly needed.

The White House eventually was prompted to reconsider its exile of the Marine Band. Desiring to end the band's exile, the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Wells, wrote to Lincoln, "the public will not sympathize with sorrows that are obtrusive and are assigned as a reason for depriving (the public)...of their enjoyments...and it is a mistake to persist in it."

The idea to bring back the band was not a tough sell to the President. He pounced on the proposal with alacrity and was personally eager to hear those wonderful sounds renewed. The band's duties at the White House were fully restored. The following Saturday, the Marine Band performed a concert in Lafayette Square, and Gideon Wells wrote in his diary: "We had music from the Marine Band today. The people are pleased!"

The Toll of War

In the meantime, the fortunes of the Union had fallen to an all-time low. 1862 ended with disaster heaped upon defeat. With humiliation in Virginia and endless stalemate in Mississippi, the cause of freedom and the Union appeared to be nearing doom. It seemed to be only a matter of time before there would be two nations between the Canadian border and the Rio Grande.

Then in just four days of July 1863, the fortunes of war completely reversed. July 4, 1863 marked the 87th anniversary of the independence of the United States. After a tremendous battle in and around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for the first time in three days, there would be no fighting.

The great struggle was over. The loss and suffering were beyond imagination: 51,000 casualties, 8,000 dead horses. For soldiers and civilians both, the trauma would be lifelong. Gettysburg, the crossroads market town of 2,400, was overwhelmed by the war. The battle at Gettysburg had sprawled over 25 square miles of rich farmland. It seemed as if every farm, home, shop, and church had become its own field hospital.

One family returned to their farm only to find it had turned into a temporary hospital. After being allowed back into their home, they found that no amount of scrubbing or painting could remove the stench of death. They abandoned the property.

The carnage affected all who witnessed it. Sgt. Thomas Marbaker, 11th New Jersey, wrote in a letter home: "Upon the open fields, they had crept for safety only to die in agony. Some, with faces bloated and blackened which told of the agony of their last moments. All around was the wreck of broken weapons, dropped and scattered by disabled hands. Countless dead and bloated horses, and over all, hugging the earth like a fog, poisoning every breath, stench of decaying humanity."

When Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin inspected the area around Gettysburg he was appalled at what he found. Crude shallow graves seemed to be everywhere without any proper placement. Rain had already washed away many of the early efforts, and soon there would be a great health risk to all.

Curtin commissioned local attorney David Wills to identify a proper location for the Union dead. Soon reinterment began on a selected site of 17 acres, adjacent to the current civilian Evergreen Cemetery. All involved felt that a proper dedication program should be held, even though the reinterment work was not nearly complete. Wills originally set the date for September the 23rd. But the selected speaker for the event, Edward Everett, said he needed more time to prepare his speech, so the date was changed to November 19.

Invitations were sent out, and Lincoln was also to be a part of this solemn occasion. Many harbored some concerns about his invitation. They worried that Lincoln the Jokester or Lincoln the White House Court Jester would show up and diminish the meaning of the proceedings.

Those who feared a lack of seriousness from the President failed to understand how he truly felt. "All the hurt is all inside," he once said. Every fiber of his genius would be required to make this a meaningful event. Lincoln also knew the unmistakable quality of Scala and his musicians, and he recognized that he must have them there at Gettysburg.

When Lincoln arrived in Gettysburg on November 18 he brought along William Seward, John Usher, and Montgomery Blair as well as his secretaries John Hay and John Nicolay. The President's speech was half-finished and in his pocket. Nicolay later said that the President wrote nothing during the trip. He had not been feeling well. On top of that, the President's son Tad had recently come down with a fever. A great combination of challenges attended the President at this moment: declining personal health, an ailing son, an emotionally unstable wife left behind, a cemetery filled with thousands of dead soldiers, and a ceremony with untold numbers waiting to see and hear him speak. With all that burden Abraham Lincoln boarded the train toward Gettysburg. So he chose to relax, to try to ease his mind and engage his fellow riders with the only relief possible: good conversation and humorous stories.

Gathering at Gettysburg

Upon his arrival in Gettysburg the President toured the battlefield. He would be the guest of David Wills whose home was located on the Diamond, in the center of town.

A curious transformation came over the city. They had lived with sorrow and death for so long that they were now ready to bust out into any form of celebration. By the night of November the 18th, the gathering of people in town had swollen to over 10,000, eager to celebrate a great victory.