

Blossom Band: A Northeast Ohio Tradition.

By Mike Telin



“I’ve heard about Blossom Music Festival for a long time so it’s going to be a treat for me to be there,” conductor Michelle Rakers said during a Zoom conversation. “I know it’s a very good band and I have some friends in it — a former Marine Band member is in the trumpet section and one of the percussionists was in the army band in D.C. So it’s going to be nice to connect with them and all these great musicians.”

On Thursday, July 3 at 8:00 pm Rakers will make her Blossom Festival Band conducting debut during Salute to America. The program will feature a mixture of music both new and old.

As always, weather permitting, the evening will conclude with a spectacular fireworks display. The program will be repeated on Friday, July 4 at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Michelle Rakers was the senior assistant director for “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band and Marine Chamber Orchestra from 2004–18. Her career with the Marine Band began in 1998 after winning a national audition for a trumpet position. Rakers was the first female conductor and first female commissioned officer in the history of “The President’s Own.”

Rakers’s expansive playlist will include works that are staples of July 4 concert programs, including *The Star-Spangled Banner*, *God of our Fathers*, and *America the Beautiful*. “We also have an Armed Forces Medley to honor the members of the Armed Forces past and present and their family members.”

The conductor said that Leonard Bernstein’s Overture to *Candide* is an “explosive piece that will make a great opener for the concert’s second half.” She programmed Aaron Copland’s “The Promise of Living” from his opera *The Tender Land* because it’s a piece

about hope, gratitude and thanksgiving. “I wanted to honor those we’ve lost in service, those who can’t be there, and those we’re grateful for.”

Three works are by living composers, beginning with John Williams “Flying Theme” from *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. “It’s always great to have his music on the program. He’s an incredible composer and an incredible man,” Rakers said. “We got to work with him quite a bit at the Marine Band and we developed a fairly close relationship as Hal Leonard was starting to publish those signature editions of his works for band. We were at the forefront in trying out these professional level arrangements that are very complicated — as all his music is — and not easy to play.”

Rakers said that Ryan George’s (b. 1978) *Firefly* has great imagination and is full of excitement and charm. “It’s a beautiful piece the band came across during my time there and we started programming it in our concerts.”

After a turn as a trumpet player in the Naples Philharmonic in Florida, James Stephenson (b. 1969) embarked on a successful career as a composer. “His works have been played by orchestras all over the United States and I’m pretty sure abroad as well,” Rakers said. “*Stars and Stripes Fanfare* is a piece in a John Williams style but it’s layered with bits and pieces of *Stars and Stripes Forever*. I understand that a band director came up to him and asked if he would write something based on Sousa’s march but with the flair of John Williams. But the piece has found a niche and I think he did a great job.”

The program also features three works by twentieth and twenty-first century composers. “I wanted to give a nod to Ohio and the Marine Band,” Rakers said. “Claire Grundman (1913–1996) was born in Cleveland and graduated from East Cleveland Shaw High School. In *Concord* he uses some New England hymns, so the piece harkens back to the age of our Revolution. It was premiered by the Marine Band and makes a great concert opener.

Sammy Nestico (1924–2021) began his music career as an arranger with the Marine Band. “He then moved over to the Air Force for a short period of time in D.C., and then became an arranger for Count Basie’s orchestra until he ended up in Hollywood where he wrote and arranged TV and film scores for *Mission Impossible*, *Charlie’s Angels*, and *M*A*S*H*. He was an amazing person and his *Uniquely Trombone* has a great 70s vibe.”

Rakers said that H. Owen Reed’s (1910–2014) “Carnival” from *La Fiesta Mexicana* is a great symphonic work for band that doesn’t get played as much as it should. “It’s a complicated piece to play. It has a mariachi quality that harkens back to Aztec dance and has a huge cultural influence from his time spent in Mexico.”

Turning our conversation to Rakers time with “The President’s Own,” she said that it was exciting to get to be an important part of many historical events. “We saw things

from behind the scenes in the White House, and were able to create special arrangements for guests such as Kennedy Center honorees Tom Hanks or Meryl Streep who would be wandering through the halls of the White House. That's always exciting, but mostly I enjoyed working with such a great group of musicians."

Rakers's job also included a number of administrative functions. "The band actually has several offices to report to — of course the White House supersedes everything. But there's also an office in the Pentagon making sure we're following guidelines."

"The President's Own" is a large ensemble of 156 musicians. "Since I left they've added maybe ten or eleven more positions just to keep up with the times. But there's a lot of demands on the band from playing for functions around the city and metropolitan area to ceremonies at Arlington. The band also goes on tour."

Rakers said that one thing many people are not aware of is that there is also an orchestral component within the Band. "So we provide both band and orchestra concerts. The orchestra is quite small — nine violins, three violas, three cellos, and two basses. It was created to be an ensemble at the White House and is often used in the foyer. As guests come up through the first floor entrance and up the stairs into the foyer, the first thing they hear is the music, then they see the red coats. It's nice to watch people's expressions."

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