An “All-American” Tradition

As we celebrate America’s birthday, we are reminded of the iconic pieces of music associated with our Independence Day and one in particular comes to mind. Of course, it makes perfect sense that it would be a programmatic work by a Russian composer that commemorated the defeat of Napoleon’s armies. The “Overture 1812” by Tchaikovsky is now as much a part of American 4th of July celebrations as fireworks, hot dogs, and parades.

Over my more than 37 years in military music and now conducting community bands, I’ve performed this piece at least 50 times. Some of those performances were not quite like Tchaikovsky envisioned when he put pen to paper.

In the early 1980’s I was the bandmaster of the Army band in Panama. On July 4th we would do two performances, one on the Atlantic side and one on the Pacific side. In May I went to visit the salute battery who would be performing the “cannon part” and as I approached their training area, I heard a recording of the “1812” booming over loudspeakers. When it got to where they were going to fire their howitzers, they all shouted “Boom, Boom!” However, what they were shouting had absolutely no relationship to where the cannon shots were in the score. Instead, they were where some enterprising artilleryman thought sounded “cool” and were more of a disco rhythm track. After an intense discussion with the battery commander, I was firmly informed that “this is the way we do it here.” As it turned out, he was precisely correct. When we performed it on the Atlantic side, the entire audience shouted “Boom, Boom!” as if they had rehearsed it. We then loaded the band on Chinook helicopters while the guns were sling-loaded under choppers and we flew to the Pacific side for the second rousing performance.

A few years later I was a junior officer who had just arrived at The United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own” and had not yet been in front of the Concert Band. The “1812” was not something the band really looked forward to but when Colonel Eugene Allen told me to go in and rehearse them, I was determined to come prepared to show my “artistry.” During the opening chorale, rather than beating time, I had studied countless wonderful orchestral recordings and was going to dazzle them with my melding and artistic shaping. About four bars in, one of the senior Sergeants Major stood up and said, “That’s not the way we do it here,” as if talking to an addled child. He proceeded to show me how to conduct a straight 4/4 with no rubato at all. Luckily, I was intimidated enough by them to do exactly as he said and we finished the “rehearsal” and went to lunch. When it came time for the concert, I was informed that the junior officer always conducted the cannons. I was given a score that said “Guns” where big red lines indicated where I would cue the guns. The Presidential Salute Battery of The Old Guard was arrayed by the Washington Monument and my job was to tap the shoulder of their officer when we got to the big red lines. It went superbly and the huge audience went wild. I was so proud of myself that I asked the officer if they had more rounds and he said they did. My plan was to fire all four cannons on the stinger of “Stars and Stripes.” Colonel Allen was not one for surprises, especially from a Lieutenant. He conducted the stinger, four cannons roared, and his head whirled around toward me. But the audience exploded in applause and he broke into a smile, much to my relief.

A few years later, the National Symphony Orchestra was to perform “1812” as part of the nationally televised “A Capitol Fourth” on the National Mall. The cannons would be several football fields away from the orchestra by the Reflecting Pool so an extra beat had been added to the Gun Score. This was before cell phones so the plan was that someone would hold a walkie-talkie in front of the orchestra and I would be listening on another radio down on the mall, following along in the score. About two minutes in one of the radios went dead and I had absolutely no idea where the orchestra was in the music. It takes 21 rounds to perform the piece and I asked the battery commander how many rounds they had. He replied, “At least 100.” I stared at the score, pretending I knew where we were but with no inkling of what was going on in the music. After about five minutes, I started telling him randomly to fire and the thousands of people on the Mall started to go wild. We just kept firing until I could faintly hear a cheer from up on Capitol Hill where the orchestra was and we fired one more “volley fire” with all four cannons. In all, we fired around 60 rounds. Later on, there was a reception in the Capitol Rotunda where Maestro Rostropovich of the National Symphony Orchestra was searching for who had cued the cannons. After being introduced, he forcefully cursed me out in Russian until his assistant took him away. I didn’t get into trouble because the audience had loved the barrage!

At Fort Monroe, Virginia, the 4th of July Celebration was out on an airfield and we were expected to perform “1812” in its entirety with live cannons. But this audience was there for fireworks, not Tchaikovsky, and there was someone in the front row blasting country tunes on a boombox while we performed the first part of the concert. Rather than slugging through the entire “1812,” we started about two minutes from the end, cannons fired, fireworks went off, and all went home happy. I was able to convince my boss to let us do a proper “1812” at a feature summer concert in August and it rapidly grew into an annual event that drew thousands, and no one played a boombox!

The U.S. Army Field Band tours the country and so we would do “1812” in a variety of settings and with no idea if there would be cannons or how well prepared they would be. At one concert in rural Pennsylvania we arrived and saw a line of antique cannons and howitzers of all eras. On the stage was a table with a console full of switches and a sign that said “Concussion Section.” The gentleman at the console said he didn’t need any rehearsal or anyone to cue him and he was 100% right. He read his own score and at each gun shot, flipped a switch and a gun would roar to life, and roar they did! He must have loaded them with double charges because the shock waves and the deafening booms were pretty impressive.

So, this 4th of July as you celebrate the birth of our nation to the strains of Tchaikovsky’s most famous work, remember that someone, somewhere is cueing the cannons and is hoping it all works out!

In next month’s issue, we’ll talk about rehearsal planning. Please stay in touch at www.ThomasPalmatier.com!