The Story behind Last Note to Victory

During the Civil War music played a significant role in the lives of both Union and Confederate soldiers. It was used for recruitment and enlistment gatherings, boosted the men’s morale, and issued orders to the soldiers on the battlefield. Music was the soldier’s diversion from bloodshed, homesickness, and boredom. In a combination of regulations from the U.S. War Department and the Union Army, every infantry, artillery, and cavalry unit would have two musicians and every regiment twenty-four member band. By December 1861 the Union Army had 28,000 musicians actively engaged in 618 different military bands, and it is believed the Confederate Army had similar numbers. When the musicians were not performing musical duties, their primary role was to help remove the wounded and dead soldiers from the battlefield. As the war dragged on and the mortality rate for musicians and combatants grew the Union disbanded their brass bands in July 1862. The soldiers that comprised these bands were sometimes reenlisted and assigned to musician roles.

Throughout the Civil War there were numerous stories told about musical duels between Northern and Southern bands as they played across that battlefields at night while their military units waited for the fighting to begin the following morning. On December 30, 1862 General Rosecrans’s Army of the Cumberland and General Bragg’s Army of the Tennessee settled their regiments a mere 700 yards apart on the eve of the Battle of Stones River. That evening a battle of the bands began across the battlefield with the Northern band playing “Yankee Doodle” and “Hail Columbia” and the Southern band responded with “Dixie” and “Ronnie Blue Flag.” Both bands then played “Home Sweet Home” to the cheering of the soldiers on each side of the battlefield, and then both Northern and Southern soldiers sang the song together.

The student’s song “Last Note to Victory” is loosely based on the military bands of Union Army’s Company H of the 114 Pennsylvania Infantry Zouaves and the Confederate Army’s 26th North Carolina Regiment. Both regimental bands played throughout the Civil War, and each were eventually imprisoned as non-combatant soldiers: the Company H band was captured December 16, 1862 and sent to Libby Prison and the 26th North Carolina Regiment band was captured on April 2, 1865 and imprisoned at Point Lookout, Maryland. While both bands’ instruments were confiscated as part of their capture, when they were released they were able to quickly acquire new instruments and continue playing as a band. After the war concluded on April 9, 1865 the North Carolina band returned to Salem, North Carolina on July 2, 1865 to serve as the community’s Moravian band.

Music and words
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