



Lieutenant Colonel Ryan Nowlin, Director

MARINE CHAMBER ORCHESTRA  
Sunday, April 19, 2026 at 2:00 P.M.  
Rachel M. Schlesinger Concert Hall and Arts Center  
Northern Virginia Community College  
Alexandria Campus  
Captain Darren Y. Lin, conducting

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Danses sacrée et profane

Danse sacrée  
Danse profane

*Olivia Shidler, harp soloist*  
*Winner of the 2026 Marine Band Concerto Competition*

Olivier Messiaen (1908–92)

*Des canyons aux étoiles... (1972–74)*

*MGySgt Hilary Harding, horn soloist*  
*SSgt Mary La Blanc, xyloimba soloist*  
*MSgt Gerald Novak, glockenspiel soloist*  
*SSgt Dominic Muzzi and GySgt Christopher Schmitt, piano soloists*

Part I

Le désert (The Desert)  
Les orioles (The Orioles)  
Ce qui est écrit sur les étoiles... (What is written on the stars...)  
Le cossyphe d'Heuglin (The White-browed Robin)  
Cedar Breaks et le don de crainte (Cedar Breaks and the Gift of Awe)

Part II

Appel interstellaire (Interstellar Call)  
Bryce Canyon et les rochers rouge-orange (Bryce Canyon and the Red-orange Rocks)

Part III

Les ressuscités et le chant de l'étoile Aldébaran (The Resurrected and the Star Aldebaran)  
Le moqueur polyglotte (The Mockingbird)  
La grive des bois (The Wood Thrush)  
Omao, leiiothrix, elepaio, shama  
Zion Park et la cité céleste (Zion Park and the Celestial City)

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# ***PROGRAM NOTES***

## **Danses sacrée et profane**

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

It was not until the early nineteenth century that the harp truly came into its own as a featured instrument in the Western art music tradition. Sébastien Érard patented the double-action pedal harp in 1810, which gave harpists access to diatonic pitch collections in every key. Still, luthiers sought other solutions to make the harp a fully chromatic instrument. One such solution was Gustave Lyon's chromatic harp of 1894, which featured a single string for each pitch and eliminated the need for pedals. Lyon's company, *Pleyel et Cie*, commissioned many composers to write for the chromatic harp, thereby promoting its use. Debussy was commissioned in 1903 by *Pleyel et Cie* to write a test piece for the Brussels Conservatory featuring the new instrument.

The *Danses* are a superb example of Debussy's compositional style. Drawing inspiration from the Symbolist poets, Debussy's music is filled with harmonic and melodic ambiguity and subtle orchestral shadings. His music drew praise from the younger, progressive generation and disdain from more conservative voices. Saint-Saëns, by then one of France's most conservator musical voices, only had "nasty things" to say about Debussy's recent music.

The *Danses* offer great technical and musical challenges to the harpist, yet the prevailing mood is that of serenity and reverie rather than virtuosity. The *Danse sacrée* (Sacred Dance) has a weightless, timeless quality. Debussy allows block chords to move freely up and down the scale, a technique known as harmonic planing or parallelism. Debussy lets go of an expectation for harmonic tension and release, giving the movement an austere and mystical quality. The *Danse sacrée* flows directly into *Danse profane* (Profane Dance). In contrast to the *Danse sacrée*, the *Danse profane* unfolds into a light, graceful waltz in a more conventional, functionally tonal idiom. Although the chromatic harp was not widely adopted by performers, editors quickly ensured the *Danses* could be performed on the more common pedal harp. To this day, this work remains a cornerstone of the harp repertoire.

## **Olivia Shidler, harp soloist**

*Winner of the 2026 Marine Band Concerto Competition*

Olivia Shidler of Short Hills, New Jersey, is a junior at Millburn High School and Juilliard Pre-College in New York where she studies with Nancy Allen. She has played the harp for ten years, having studied with Stacey Shames until 2021. At age twelve, she made her Carnegie Hall debut as a Music Fest Grand Prix Winner and was featured at Symphony Space in the Anselmo Competition's Winners' Concert. At age fifteen, she won third prize in the American Harp Society's National Competition Intermediate II division and First Place in the Young Artist Harp Seminar Mock Audition Competition. Shidler was featured on the April 2024 "Rising Stars" episode of Public Broadcasting Service's *Now Hear This* and won first prize in the 2024 Charleston Romantic Music Competition. She was invited to join Carnegie Hall's Weill Music

Institute's National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America this upcoming summer. She has performed under the batons of Adam Glaser, Xian Zhang, Daniele Rustioni, and Gustavo Dudamel with the New York Philharmonic Youth Orchestra.

***Des canyons aux étoiles...*(1972–74)**

Olivier Messiaen (1908–92)

Olivier Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles...* ("From the Canyons to the Stars...") is one of the composer's grandest and most visionary creations: a vast, twelve-movement meditation on nature, time, faith, and cosmic wonder. Commissioned in 1971 by the American philanthropist and arts patron Alice Tully to celebrate the bicentenary of the Declaration of Independence, the work was inspired by Messiaen's travels to the American Southwest—especially Utah's Bryce Canyon and Zion National Park—where geological immensity and blazing night skies sparked a profound spiritual response.

For Messiaen, nature was never merely scenic. A devout Catholic and lifelong mystic, he believed the natural world to be a direct manifestation of divine order. In *Des canyons aux étoiles...*, the twelve movements unfold as a sequence of sonic tableaux rather than a traditional narrative. Some movements are austere and monumental, evoking geological stillness through slow tempos, massive sonorities, and resonant percussion. Others explode with rhythmic vitality, dominated by Messiaen's ecstatic birdsong transcriptions—meticulously notated from real species he observed in Utah, including the wood thrush, canyon wren, and meadowlark. For Messiaen, a self-taught ornithologist, birds were "probably the greatest musicians to inhabit the planet," and here they serve as messengers between earth and sky.

*Des canyons aux étoiles...* is scored for orchestra with winds as a focal point and brings four solo instruments into the spotlight: horn, xylorimba, glockenspiel, and piano. The piano plays a central, often dazzling role, functioning at times as a soloist and at others as a source of color and resonance. The horn, frequently placed in a prominent, almost ritualistic role, suggests calls across vast spaces—echoes that seem to ricochet off canyon walls or vanish into celestial distance. The xylorimba and glockenspiel add both weight and brilliance to the musical narrative, reinforcing the work's rich palette of sounds.

Messiaen adds two unusual instruments to an already substantial percussion section: the aeoliphone, a type of wind machine, and a géophone, which the composer invented specifically for this work. The géophone contains lead pellets sliding and tumbling against a thin drum head, which is meant to evoke the sound of tectonic movement or microscopic shifts of rubble on a canyon floor.

Harmonically, the piece draws on Messiaen's signature "modes of limited transposition," where symmetrical groupings of whole-tone and semi-tone intervals (rather than a diatonic scale) form the structure. Thus, like most of Messiaen's output, the work is neither "tonal" — there is no tonic or home key — nor "atonal," because there *is* a hierarchy within the twelve available tones. The result of all of this is a sound world that feels suspended outside conventional tonal gravity. Time itself seems elastic, reflecting Messiaen's belief that sacred music should liberate the listener from ordinary, clock-bound experience.

*Des canyons aux étoiles...* stands as one of the late twentieth century's most ambitious testaments to the idea that music can bridge the physical and the metaphysical. It asks the listener not simply to hear, but to contemplate—to stand at the edge of vast spaces, look upward, and listen for eternity.

### **Master Gunnery Sergeant Hilary Harding, horn soloist**

Horn player Master Gunnery Sergeant Hilary Harding of Princeton, Kentucky, joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in May 2003 and was appointed assistant principal horn in October 2012 and principal in May 2018. She began her musical training at age eleven. Upon graduating in 1996 from Caldwell County High School in Princeton, she attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where in 2000 she earned a bachelor’s degree in music. In 2002, she earned a master’s degree in music from the Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and in 2007 she earned a doctorate of musical arts at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Her horn instructors included Martin Hackleman of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, DC, Peter Landgren of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and Kazimierz Machala, formerly of the Sydney Symphony in Sydney, Australia. She was featured as a tour soloist in 2008, performing Camille Saint-Saën’s “Morceau de Concert” Opus 94. She performed the world première of James Stephenson’s transcription of his *Sounds Awakened* in 2013.

### **Master Sergeant Gerald Novak, xyloimba soloist**

Percussionist Master Sergeant Gerald Novak of Alamogordo, New Mexico, joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in December 2006 and was appointed section leader in September 2018. Master Sgt. Novak began his musical instruction on piano at age four and percussion at age nine. After graduating in 1991 from Alamogordo High School, he earned his bachelor’s degree in music education from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, in 1996. He earned his master’s degree in orchestral percussion performance in 1998 from Temple University in Philadelphia. His instructors included Alan Abel of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Larry Vanlandingham of Baylor University, and Erik Forrester of the Interlochen Arts Camp in Michigan.

Prior to joining “The President’s Own,” he was principal percussion and a founding member of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra in Kuala Lumpur and also served as acting principal percussion with the London Symphony Orchestra in England. He has performed with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in the Republic of Singapore; the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in Poole, Dorset in England; the Haddonfield Symphony in New Jersey; Delaware Symphony Orchestra in Wilmington; and the Waco Symphony Orchestra in Texas. He also toured with the American Wind Symphony, based in Pittsburgh, attended the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado, and was a member of the National Orchestral Institute in College Park, Maryland, and the Spoleto USA Festival Orchestra in Charleston, South Carolina.

### **Staff Sergeant Mary La Blanc, glockenspiel soloist**

Percussionist Staff Sergeant Mary La Blanc of Mission Viejo, Calif. joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in July 2024. Staff Sgt. La Blanc began her musical instruction on percussion at age ten. After graduating in 2018 from Orange County School of the Arts in Santa Ana, California she attended the University of Southern California, (USC) where she completed her bachelor’s degree in percussion performance in 2022. She then attended The Juilliard School and completed her master’s in percussion performance in 2024. Staff Sgt. La Blanc’s instructors have included James Babor and Joseph Pereira at USC and Daniel Druckman at The Juilliard School. Prior to joining the band, Staff Sgt. La Blanc was an extra percussionist with the Metropolitan Opera, Talea Ensemble, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Mainly Mozart All-Star Orchestra, Santa Barbara Symphony and Long Beach Symphony.

### **Staff Sergeant Dominic Muzzi, piano soloist**

Pianist Staff Sergeant Dominic Muzzi of Ocala, Florida, joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in April 2023. Staff Sgt. Muzzi began his musical training on the piano at age three and graduated from Westport High School, in 2012. He attended Florida State University in Tallahassee where he earned a bachelor’s degree in piano performance in 2016. He then attended the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and received his master’s degree in piano performance in 2018. He completed a doctorate of music from Indiana University in 2023. His notable instructors included Read Gainsford at Florida State University and Karen Shaw and Roberto Plano at Indiana University. Prior to joining the band, Staff Sgt. Muzzi was a member of the 100<sup>th</sup> Army Band at Fort Knox, Kentucky. He also performed with Symphony New Hampshire, the Shreveport Symphony, and Villages Symphony Orchestra.

### **Gunnery Sergeant Christopher Schmitt, piano soloist**

Pianist Christopher Schmitt of Fairfax Station, Virginia, joined “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band in August 2013. Gunnery Sgt. Schmitt began his musical training on the piano at age five and graduated from the Seton School in Manassas, Virginia, in 2004. He attended the New England Conservatory (NEC) in Boston before transferring to The Juilliard School in New York where he earned a bachelor’s degree in performance in 2009, a master’s in 2011, and a doctorate in 2016. His teachers included Marjorie Lee of Virginia, the late Patricia Zander of NEC, and Julian Martin of Juilliard. Prior to joining the band, Gunnery Sgt. Schmitt taught privately and gave master classes in New York and in the Northern Virginia area.