

Medical Orchestra Composes 'Love Letter to the Troops'

By Gerry J. Gilmore
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 6, 2006 – U.S. servicemembers deployed worldwide will get a special Valentine's Day serenade from the largest medical musical group in the United States.

The nonprofit VA-National Medical Chorale and Symphony Orchestra today performed a bevy of classical, popular and patriot music before a Pentagon audience for broadcast to overseas troops on Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, over the Pentagon Channel and American Forces Radio and Television Service.

Victor Wahby conducted the 300-member musical group in the Pentagon Auditorium. The group spans the United States and enlists members from the Department of Veterans Affairs system and from the non-VA health care community. The group was founded here in 1991.

Celebrities Ed McMahon of "Tonight Show" fame and ABC television news journalist Cokie Roberts co-hosted the Pentagon event that was performed before a mix of veterans groups and servicemembers. The program's theme was "For the Love of America."



*Members of the VA-National Medical Chorale and Symphony Orchestra Feb. 6 as it performs a bevy of classical, popular and patriot music before a Pentagon audience for broadcast to overseas troops on Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, over the Pentagon Channel and American Forces Radio and Television Service. Photo by Doug Moss
(Click photo for screen-resolution image)*

McMahon, a retired Marine Reserve colonel, voiced his support for America's servicemembers, noting they are heroes. "Keep your chin up, OK? We're rooting -- for you," he said.

"Hang in there, all of you out on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan or on aboard ships in the middle of the ocean," Roberts said.

Pete Geren, special assistant to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, provided welcoming remarks at the event.

"I certainly want to welcome this distinguished musical group," Geren said. "Men and women who devote their lives to the service of the men and women who have served us in uniform are here today to offer you a very special musical treat, in a way to send a love letter to our troops scattered all over the world."

The program also featured a series of personal readings by other celebrities, such as Washington Times journalist Tony Blankley, and members of Congress and senior military leaders.

Army Sgt. 1st Class Antonio Giuliano, a member of the U.S. Army Chorus, participated in the event, and together with the musical group's Susan Joy Bishai sang a stirring rendition of songwriter Lee Greenwood's, "God Bless the USA," among other selections. The Army Chorus, he said, is a component of the U.S. Army Band (Pershing's Own).

Giuliano said he enjoys singing to servicemembers, especially those who serve in harm's way during the global war against terrorism.

"It's indeed an honor and a pleasure," Giuliano said.

The concert was co-sponsored by DoD's "America Supports You" program. Attendees were asked write up thank you messages that will be delivered to overseas-deployed troops later this year.

Harriet Ginsburg was among scores of attendees who filled out postcard-sized "America Supports You" message cards after the concert concluded.

"The concert was great," Ginsburg said. "I'm filling out my cards and (I) love our troops."

Ginsburg added a personal message for U.S. servicemembers.

"Save America. Keep America safe," she said.

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Harriet Ginsburg fills out an "America Supports You" message of support card for overseas-deployed U.S. servicemembers at the conclusion of a Feb. 6 musical event at the Pentagon featuring the VA-National Medical Chorale and Symphony Orchestra. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore

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Celebrities Ed McMahon of "Tonight Show" fame, right, and ABC television news journalist Cokie Roberts co-hosted a Feb. 6 Pentagon musical event performed by the VA-National Medical Chorale and Symphony Orchestra before a mix of veterans groups and servicemembers. The program's theme was "For the Love of America." Photo by Doug Moss

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