

# Following executive orders, 'The President's Own' Marine Band scraps concert

The canceled collaboration with Equity Arc was to feature high-school musicians of color who competed for spots to perform with the U.S. Marine Band.

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By [Michael Andor Brodeur](#)

There is perhaps no band closer to the president's ear than the U.S. Marine Band, long known as "The President's Own."

Founded in 1798 by an Act of Congress, it's the nation's oldest continuously active professional musical organization, with a stated, singular mission to "perform music for the President of the United States and the Commandant of the Marine Corps."

The band's repertoire, therefore, is subject to the president's tastes, whims and, in the case of a May 4 concert that recently vanished from the schedule, executive orders.

Last week, "The President's Own" quietly canceled a concert program originally billed as the "Equity Arc Wind Symphony." The performance was to be the culmination of a "multiday music intensive with musicians from "The President's Own," and high school musician fellows selected through auditions organized by the Chicago-based Equity Arc, a nonprofit organization that provides "specialized mentoring support for young BIPOC musicians" and "helps institutions take meaningful steps toward equity and inclusion."

A spokesperson for the Marines confirmed in an email Tuesday afternoon that "the Marine Band's participation in this event was canceled in accordance with recent Executive Orders."

Equity Arc's executive director Stanford Thompson and associate director Magee Capsouto confirmed in a phone interview that the cancellation impacts up to 30 young musicians from across the country who earned their spots through competitive virtual auditions and were to perform at the Rachel M. Schlesinger Concert Hall and Arts Center on the Northern Virginia Community College campus in Alexandria.

"We believe in the training and mentorship of these musicians, and being able to put them into spaces where they can learn what it's like to be a professional performing musician," Thompson said. "One of the things we've wanted to do is expose students to military careers, and we've seen nothing more powerful than when the musicians we work with have opportunities to sit side-by-side in rehearsal, performances and coaching."

"The work that we're doing is focused so much on the musicians, their level of talent, their dedication for what they do, and the amount of work that they put in," Capsouto added.

Thompson also credited the U.S. Marine Band's commitment to education as key to the partnership between the organizations, and expressed concern that military bands across the country may find these types of outreach programs harder to accomplish.

A previously released season announcement brochure is still available online, and bills the original May 4 "Equity Arc Wind Symphony Concert" as "the expansion of Equity Arc's national programs for precollege musicians of color."

But on the official President's Own Marine Band calendar, the Equity Arc concert has been replaced with a program of unspecified film music titled "May the 4th Be With You: Marine Band at the Movies."

The original Equity Arc Wind Symphony program assembled a mix of traditional Marine Band favorites: John Philip Sousa’s “Nobles of the Mystic Shrine,” Percy Grainger’s “Lincolnshire Posy” and Samuel A. Ward’s “America the Beautiful” would be performed alongside works by living composers, including one piece titled “Let Freedom Ring” by Lt. Col. Ryan Nowlin, who was slated to conduct at the concert (along with Capt. Darren Y. Lin and guest conductor Rodney Dorsey, a professor of music at Florida State University College of Music).

Also scheduled for the program was “Sweet Chariot,” a piece by Kennedy Center composer-in-residence Carlos Simon; “Bravado,” a 2023 work for wind band from composer Gala Flagello; Michael Brignolo’s wind arrangement of Grammy-winner Gabriela Ortiz’s “Kauyumari”; and “Rising Light,” a work by Kevin Charoensri, a Thai American from San Diego who is studying music composition at the University of Texas at Austin.

## Charoensri: Rising Light



Charoensri, 21, posted his own announcement of the cancellation to his Facebook page on Sunday.

“It has come to my attention that the program, one based on equity and diversity of voices, is no longer supported at the federal level under this administration,” the post reads, “and it was for this reason that the program and performance were canceled.”

“I look forward to the day where my music, and the diverse voices of composers like myself, will once again be welcomed on the national stage,” he wrote.

In an phone interview on Monday, Charoensri said he received a call Friday morning from leadership of “The President’s Own.”

“They simply said that due to the executive orders impacting DEI-related programing for several agencies, the Marine Band was instructed to cancel the collaboration and therefore cancel the entire concert.”

The cancellation comes amid a flurry of questions surrounding the fate of other programming at the federal level that could run afoul of a series of executive orders issued by President Donald Trump aimed at “Ending Illegal Discrimination And Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity” and “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing.”

But where recent cancellations at the Kennedy Center have come via the decisions of the artists themselves or following financial determinations reportedly unrelated to the orders, the cancellation of the Equity Arc concert is among the first cultural performances specifically halted by the administration’s efforts against “DEI” initiatives at the federal level.

Charoensri composed “Rising Light” in 2022 at 19, deeply troubled by his mother’s fear following a wave of anti-Asian hate crimes in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic. He created a bristling musical response — one that moves from mournful meditations into a passage of defiant claps and stomps.

“I wanted the piece to be a non-apologetic piece of the celebration of Asian American culture as one,” he said, “while also being a peaceful but loud protest.”

Reached by email, Simon said he was “deeply disappointed and concerned” that his composition “Sweet Chariot” — which incorporates influences from African American spirituals as well as Gregorian chants — was removed from Marine Band program, “on the basis of initiatives that were meant to bring us together, not tear us apart.”

“As an African-American, I have heard spirituals and songs that are rooted in the Black experience all my life,” Simon wrote. “My intent in writing this piece was to show that regardless of race, gender or class, we all have to live and die. The quotations (“Swing Low” and “In Paradisum”) are taken from two totally different cultures, but yet speak about the same thing in different ways. I think that it’s important for artists bridge these gaps that divide us and to start (and finish) discussions about our differences.”

“I think it’s hurtful and it’s wrong,” Charoensri said of the decision to cancel.

“[Capt.] Darren Lin made it perfectly clear that I was on this program because of my own merit and what I stand for as a person and a composer, not because they had a quota to fill,” he said on Monday. “It was incredibly hurtful to see that my piece, and honestly, me as a person — because they go hand-in-hand, especially with a piece like this — were categorized into this giant hammer swing that had no targets. It was like a blind swing.”

But Charoensri, currently a composition student at the University of Texas at Austin, expresses the most regret over the lost opportunity for the high school musicians “who have all lost a substantial part of their music education.”

“This is not about me, it’s about a bigger cause,” he said. “I will get another chance to hear this piece at some point. I have the privilege and the luxury of that. These high school seniors, they will never be able to do this again.”

“It’s unfortunate that we’ve got caught between all of this, and that these young musicians won’t have a chance to rehearse in the barracks and get to know the musicians, to have the parents and families in D.C.,” says Thompson. “With everything that’s going on, this was going to be a really big, bright spot.”