

**Interview with 1993 Award Winner, Erika Sato
by Grant Porter, September 2024**

We recently discovered that one of our Monday Musical Club Award winners from 1993, **violinist Erika Sato**, has had a very distinguished musical military career performing in “The President’s Own” United States Marine Chamber Orchestra in Washington D.C.



Master Gunnery Sergeant Erika Sato,
1993 MMC Award Winner

The mission of “The President’s Own” is to perform music for the President of the United States and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Founded in 1798, it is America’s oldest continuously active professional musical organization.

Erika graduated from Beaverton High School in 1994, went on to attend the Julliard School and was accepted in “The President’s Own” US Marine Chamber Orchestra back in August 2003. Since then, for the past 21 years, she has performed regularly for Presidents and other dignitaries at the White House.

I contacted Erika to let her know Monday Musical Club is still alive and well, and asked if she would be willing to do an interview for our next newsletter. Please read on to enjoy her interview:

Q. Erika, congratulations on your amazing career! You are notably the first female Asian-American and non-white female to attain the rank of Master Gunnery Sergeant, (E-9) in the Marine

Corps! You’ve come a long way since receiving our award in 1993. What do you recall about your Monday Musical award and audition?

A. “Thank you and thanks to Monday Musical Club for all the support you give to students and the wonderful work you do with the musical organizations you support in Portland! I remember MMC’s cash prize was very generous. It went toward plane tickets to visit and audition for colleges my senior year in 1994. It is amazing to see how the program has expanded and is thriving. I don’t remember exactly what I played for the audition. It was probably either the Mendelssohn or Barber Violin Concerto, probably the latter as I performed that solo in 1993 with PYP,” (Portland Youth Philharmonic).

Q. Tell us a little more about your early musical experience playing with PYP and about your Portland-based teachers.

A. “I was in PYP from ages 8-17. I spent two years in the Prep Orchestra and the rest in PYP. I soloed with both Prep and PYP. I was concertmaster for my senior year of high school and for the tour of Germany that we took in the summer of 1994. I studied with Raphael Spiro and Kathryn Gray (Oregon Symphony). I also soloed with the Oregon Symphony in 1993, playing the first movement of the Barber Violin Concerto and the solo for Dance Macabre for their youth concerts series after winning the Corbett Competition.”

Q. What led to your decision to apply for “The President’s Own”?

A. “I had no idea military music careers were possible until I met someone in a military band while completing my Masters degree at Juilliard. I spent the next year in DC freelancing while taking orchestral auditions and met other players from different bands in the area. They were talented players, nice people, and had exciting jobs with great benefits! When I saw that the Marines had an opening, I was playing in the Colorado Symphony Orchestra. I was intrigued, having met people in the military bands, so I was ready to try out a new and different path, and here I am over 21 years later!”

Q. I served 30 years in the Army and didn’t meet many service members from Portland, so that’s an unusual and big step. How has that turned out for you?

A. “You’re right - when I joined, there wasn’t anyone else from the area who had done this as a string player. Woodwind, brass, and percussion players have all known about military bands growing up as a career option, but it isn’t well known in the orchestral world outside of the DC/Maryland/Virginia area and usually takes a conversation to get people to understand. My hope with this article is that we can show the different facets and opportunities available, plant the seed, and present this as a viable career option. I saw several singers have won your competition over the years and I also know that many vocalists are not aware of military choirs as a career option, much like I was for the strings. We have two professional singers in the Marine Band. For special events, they join the professional choruses of the Army, Navy, and Air Force to sing as the Joint Armed Forces Chorus. So, there are opportunities for vocalists as well.

For me personally, it’s been a better overall fit than I could have ever imagined, and I have been able to do so much: performing orchestral works, soloing, lots of chamber music, teaching educational outreach clinics and masterclasses, as well as creating chamber music programs that other band members have performed on. My last one was in honor of the 50th Anniversary of Women in the Marine Band in March, 2023.”

Q. I read that you played a great role in coordinating the 50th anniversary event. You reached your 20 years of service about that time. Congratulations! I found this article complete with program notes: [Celebrating 50 Years of Women in the Marine Band](#). I take it you found that to be very fulfilling?

A. “I have loved collaborating in small ensembles and performing chamber music throughout my career, and creating programs showcasing my colleagues' talents has been one of the highlights.”

Q. How would you describe a day in the life for you:

A. “Schedules differ weekly and depend upon what is needed. For the Marine Chamber Orchestra, we appear at the White House an average of 200 times a year in different small ensembles ranging from solo harp, string quartets, or full orchestra. We present public orchestra concerts, performing an annual showcase series and popular summer series in the DC area. We offer a chamber music series, which has been one of my favorite parts of being in this organization, and I will touch on that in more detail. We perform educational outreach at schools in the National Capital region, and visiting school groups will often come visit and observe band and orchestra rehearsals. We support ceremonies and events throughout Washington DC, including Presidential Inauguration activities, State Dinners at the White House, the United Nations Gala, and receptions for the Commandant of the Marine Corps.”

Q. Do you have any special memories of performances or any experiences that you would like to share?

A. “I have been so fortunate in this career to have been a witness to history and many incredible moments. One that particularly stands out was at the White House in 2007; after she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bush, watching Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, race over as the orchestra played the theme from the book's movie adaptation and then give us a standing ovation from her wheelchair brought me to tears.”

That’s a very touching theme and soundtrack by Elmer Bernstein that captured the essence of the movie and the book. You truly have been a witness to history to have been a part of that event. Harper Lee’s portrayal of racism in the 1930s is akin to what your father must have experienced as a Japanese-American nisei during WWII when he was placed in an internment camp at Tule Lake.

You told your own family’s amazing four-generation story for the Marine Corps observance of Asian-American Pacific Islander Heritage month in May 2024. Here’s the video you made so our readers can watch for themselves.

(Please “click” on the video below to hear Erika’s story about her family:



Q. Performing in The President’s Own Band must be highly competitive for a musician to get accepted but I’m sure there is a lot going on behind-the-scenes. What types of activities support the musicians?

A. “Yes, there are several. We are always working with our Support Staff offices: Operations for scheduling, venue liaison, and logistics, Library for music acquisition and rentals, Office of Communication for concert programs and promotion, Recording Lab for audio/video support, Supply for our uniform and instrument needs. Stage Crew for on-site logistics. It has been a fantastic opportunity to learn and develop organizational and leadership skills and see what it takes outside of performing to put on a concert in full; it is a team effort, and without their contributions, we would not be successful!

For those students who may not feel like a performing or teaching career is right for them, these specialties are more broadly applicable to a wide range of industries, and they may want to look at this side of the performing arts and consider learning more about them.”

Q. What additional advice would you give to today’s music students?

A. “In this day and age, young people should pursue and develop as many interests and skills as they can. All traditional career paths are not guaranteed for success, so to stand out, they need to diversify their skill sets and cultivate the things that they are passionate about in order to be heard. And we need their voices!”

Q. Thank you Erika. Is there anything else you would like to say to your friends at Monday Musical Club? How about leaving us with a song? (Video below):

A. “Yes, congratulations to all of you at Monday Musical Club on 120 years of supporting young people in the Portland area music community! Here is a video of me and Gunnery Sergeant Regino Madrid discussing the historical role of strings in the Marine Band and performing Bruce Dukov's arrangement of John Philip Sousa’s march “[The Stars and Stripes Forever](#)” (for string duo).”