

MUSIC REVIEWS

American spirit shines at WASBE

By MARVIN SOSNA
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The calendar said it was July 11, but for two hours Sunday afternoon it might as well have been July the Fourth.

That's because the United States Air Force Band concluded the weeklong festival of the World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles with an almost all-American concert in San Luis Obispo's Harman Hall.

"All-American" is hardly an exaggeration; all the music, save one piece, was the work of American composers based on American themes, was conducted, played and sung by Americans, and was performed in a distinctly American style that displayed power, polish and precision in abundance.

Conductor Col. Lowell E. Graham's band makes no secret of its patriotic message; from an up-tempo "The Star-Spangled Banner" that opened the program to an even upper-tempo "The Stars and Stripes Forever" that ended it (be-

fore encores), the Air Force ensemble represents American music, and it found a receptive audience in the brim-full concert hall.

Comparisons were inescapable as WASBE '99 featured the Marine Band of the Royal Netherlands Navy (see accompanying review) and the United States Air Force Band on succeeding afternoons. Here were two military bands of about the same size and with ostensibly the same purpose of conveying their national culture to audiences. Their musical messages could hardly have been more different, the Air Force Band aiming for volume and massed voices, the Dutch band taking a more decorative path highlighting individual musicians.

The Air Force Band has the voice of eagles, and it used it to full advantage in the first program piece, a premiere of Jack Stamp's aptly named "Cloudsplitter Fanfare," one of three debut performances Sunday, all of them performed with their composers in the

audience: Timothy Mahr's instrumental capata "Into the Air" and, after intermission, Roger Nixon's "Monterey Holidays," a three-section narrative honoring that California coastal area's annual Butterfly Parade, Fiesta Lanterias and Heritage Celebration.

Using every chance the composers gave, the band pushed volume, timpani and percussion, adding to the nervous energy that permeated all three premiere works. Only in Nixon's soft-topped Fiesta Lanterias section did tonality make itself evident.

The band showed its versatility in Samuel Barber's "Knoxville: Summer of 1915" with soprano Sgt. Julianne S. Turrentine evocative voice singing James Agee's prose-poetic memoir of America on the edge of the first World War. Harman Hall has yet to write the winning acoustic formula for handling solo voices, however; Turrentine's vowel sounds flowed well, but the words themselves were all but lost.

Band from Netherlands was indescribable

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Put it this way: If bringing hundreds of musicians, composers, band directors and other wind instrument enthusiasts to San Luis Obispo rested on no other grounds than Saturday afternoon's performance by the Marine Band of the Royal Netherlands Navy, it would be enough.

Normally adequate words that normally adequately describe such an event simply fail; thunderous, triumphant, supreme, overwhelming — words even like those inherent superlatives still fade from the task of telling what happened in the concert held under the auspices of WASBE '99.

It was music, and more.

Conductor-Music Director Maurice Hamers and his 60 instrumentalists created sounds

that filled the hall itself, and then filled everyone in the capacity audience in Harman Hall, reaching every anatomical, sensory and spiritual component of the human experience.

Take a deep breath. Now: Listen to the creation of the world as seen by Stephen Melillo, a composer who confesses his personal God-link in such works as "Godspeed" and "Speech of Angels," each of which opened the two sections of the program.

It was like this: a shattering of the former silence, and then an opening, an awakening of the spirit (in "Godspeed") after which a choir of sounds never heard before ("Speech of Angels") brings a message of comfort and hope. Melillo is to wind music what Beethoven was to the symphony orchestra, and he follows a Beethovenesque design of

increasing the musical tension almost to the breaking point, receding, and then reaching again. It is superlative musical craftsmanship and inspiring to hear.