

The history of the grand American experiment in democracy lives, in many ways, in the stories of the service members who put their lives on the line—and, in some cases, paid the ultimate price—for their country.

Without the service and sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, the United States of America might only be a lofty idea rather than the unique constitutional federal republic the nation is today.

Indeed, the courage, dedication and patriotism of our service members take on even greater significance in 2026 as the nation celebrates the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Whether they are late-18th-century colonials who took up arms against the most powerful world empire of their day; members of the U.S. military engaged in far-flung conflicts across today's globe; or family members who wait for the safe return of their loved ones, their stories tell us who we are and who we hope to be, as Americans.

Their words reflect the unquenchable spirit of a great nation. Even their smallest acts of heroism remind us that safeguarding the land of the free, on and off the battlefield, requires vigilance, strength of will and a sense of patriotic purpose far greater than we possess as individual citizens.

Their words are the beating heart of *Letters From The Front*.

The vocal chamber work, written in 2025, was commissioned by Ian Gindes, the award-winning pianist, producer and longtime member of the Army National Guard, in which he currently holds the rank of Major. It comprises a prelude for piano alone, a dozen songs for individual voices (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass-baritone), two duets and three vocal ensembles.

Letters from the Front is at once an extended song cycle and a grand musical tapestry of American history, hope, faith, aspiration, despair and optimism in times of war.

The libretto, by French stage director and librettist Mirabelle Ordinaire, draws on the experiences of service members as expressed in their correspondence. Texts span virtually the entire history of this nation—from the American Revolution and Civil War, through the Second World War, to Vietnam and the Gulf War.

The words of these servicemen and women, family members and friends are but snapshots of the moment. Yet they remind us that the price of freedom is paid, to this day, in self-sacrifice and blood, by ordinary citizens called on to defend a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

The music, by New York- and Paris-based composer, producer and saxophonist Patrick Zimmerli, turns their experiences into aural poetry. With piano accompaniments that abound in period atmosphere, the score sounds American through and through. Even

as it draws on various classical and popular musical idioms, the lyrical impetus is very much Zimmerli's own.

An expansive prelude for piano sets the epic scope and patriotic tone of the cycle, leading directly into the first song, "I'll Live for Your Letters," for mezzo-soprano. Over swirling keyboard figuration, a mother sends loving prayers to her son as he goes off to fight in World War II.

In "I Set Myself Down This Moment," for tenor, a Revolutionary War Soldier tells his brother what life is like at camp. Catchy rhythms in the piano part add to the upbeat mood.

Tender longing suffuses the tenor's "Tonite Two Fellows Got Together." A waltz played at camp reminds a Soldier of the last time he danced with his wife, Tess, who awaits his return. "I nearly broke down and cried when I heard it," he tells his beloved.

One of the most powerful songs in the cycle is "A Minute Doesn't Go By." A grandfather and an Army combatant (sung by the bass-baritone) reminds his young grandson of what he is fighting for. With quiet solemnity, "Poppie" ends his letter with the declaration "I wish I was there with you."

Restless piano chords usher in the dramatic "Preparation For Battle," for tenor, in which an enlisted Soldier in the American Revolution anxiously anticipates a confrontation with British troops, following several bloody skirmishes.

In the blues-inflected "Vietnam War Song," for tenor, a 19-year-old Soldier relates to his mother the terror he felt watching his fellow Soldiers, some of them even younger than him, lose their lives while saving his own. The gripping song ends in numbed grief: "Now I know sorrow."

A comrade's death on the battlefield brings a comparably intense welling up of emotion in "Poem For Irving F. Diamond." The bass-baritone sings an ode to a friend and fellow combatant who perished in a battle that was the Allies' first step to victory in the Second World War.

"I'll Live For Your Letters Reprise," for mezzo-soprano, takes us back to where we began. A mother proudly reflects on her son's love of country as he goes off to war. She sends her own love in return: "If you're lonely, embrace me in your thoughts, for I'll always be there."

"Where Are You Tonight?" is a love duet for Emeline (soprano) and Jake (tenor), a wife and her officer-husband, who pour out their mutual affection in letters exchanged during the Civil War that separates them.

The affecting seriousness of that song is juxtaposed with the wife's down-homey "All Greasy And Salty," whose piano figuration evokes the twang of a country banjo.

Jake and Emeline join voices a final time in the unabashedly patriotic “This Is A Most Horrible War,” in which he expresses his longing to be home with her while affirming his belief in the rightness of the Union cause. His suffering is nothing, he writes, compared with “the priceless benefits of peace, freedom and national unity.”

“Engagement Letter,” for all four singers, whisks us back to the Pacific theater of World War II from which a Soldier proposes marriage to his girlfriend back in the States—“if I come home.” She offers a prayer in return: “Please, God, direct his actions so as to spare him for me.” The bass-baritone signs off with a patriotic benediction: “Let’s hope God brings victory to the free world soon.”

The brief “A Baby At Home,” for tenor, expresses the ebullience of a Soldier named Herman Gresik who has just learned from his wife’s cablegram that he is the father of a newborn baby daughter. “I think I will have to become a serious old married man, and not go out with the boys,” he crows.

No starker contrast can be imagined than the next section, “I Have A Rendezvous With Death.” Setting words by poet and World War I Soldier Alan Seeger, the ensemble piece displays Zimmerli’s skillful interweaving of the four voices and keyboard in somber counterpoint. It is the most harmonically dense of the songs.

“Now There Will Be Stories To Tell,” for bass-baritone, recounts in powerful declamation the foreboding of a combatant at the end of his service. Memories of enduring nonstop enemy bombardment haunt his waking hours. “I feel like an old man,” he laments.

In “It Won’t Be Long Now,” a Navy nurse named Helen (soprano), who is stationed overseas during World War II, can barely contain her impatience as she anticipates the end of the conflict and her return to “the good ol’ U.S.A.” The piano briefly quotes the National Anthem, reflecting her hopeful mood.

The ensemble finale bids farewell with a brief flourish of national pride: “Greetings to all of you, direct from the States. There is no place like the U.S.A.”

An ambitious and important contemporary American song cycle, *Letters From The Front* is very much a labor of love drawing on the creative gifts of many. It is dedicated to our service members and veterans, along with those who lost their lives in the birth and growth of the Republic.

- John von Rhein

John von Rhein was the classical music critic of the *Chicago Tribune* for more than 40

years until his retirement from the newspaper in 2018. He continues to write articles on musical subjects for such print and online publications as *Chicago Classical Review*, *Opera* magazine and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra program book. He is co-author (with Andrew Porter) of the book *Bravi*, a photo history of the Ardis Krainik years at Lyric Opera of Chicago (Abbeville Press). He holds an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from DePaul University. He lives in Chicago.