

Military band uninspiring

By IFAN PAYNE
Music Critic

I do not suppose that there can be many people left in this country (and even fewer in communist countries) who still live under the delusion that art is somehow separated from politics, or from any other aspect of our society for that matter.

These ruminations were brought on while listening to the 1st Infantry Division Army Band performing in Arts in the Park on Thursday evening.

The concert brought to mind a recent press conference given by the Brooklyn Academy of Music to announce their New Wave festival of music programmed for the fall. The press conference consisted in part of a number of representatives of funding agencies congratulating themselves on being so generous in supporting the creative arts.

One of the more creative of those artists, Laurie Anderson, produced an ovation from the audience by pointing out that the current federal budget for military bands was \$99 million, while the total budget of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was \$11 million. (I hasten to add that Ms. Anderson had her facts correct, and I may have transcribed the numbers incorrectly...but then, what's a million dollars here or there between us piccolo players?)

Clearly the bare figures lead to too facile a conclusion. The military band

budget, presumably, has to pay for clothing, instruments, housing, shiny shoes and a staff car for the general, whereas the artists supported by the NEA are not supposed to have overheads and incidentals nor shiny shoes.

But the question may legitimately be asked whether we are getting our money's worth out of the military bands, especially when contrasted with the richness of the creativity that permeates every aspect of society as a result of the less than ten percent of the military band budget that is allotted to the governmental support of all of the arts in this country through NEA.

This line of thought is dangerous. It gets us into asking how much of one MX missile will \$11 million buy. A tail fin perhaps, or maybe just the radiation hazard symbol stamped on the side of the weapon? But then we are as a species more concerned with death than with life and with destruction than with creation.

All of this is far too weighty a matter to foist upon the shoulders of the 1st Infantry Division Band playing on only one valve, as it were, under a temporary conductor.

The band — Army? Pentagon? — is apparently seeking a new director and C.W.O. Pierson was called up, from teaching junior high school in Rio Grand Valley, Texas, to fill in for three weeks.

So it is unfair to comment in such circumstances on a concert that consisted of a string of unannounced numbers that were neatly but uninspiringly played.

The band was followed by a brass quintet, composed of members of the band, which played selections that ranged from ragtime (Tom Turpin's *Harlem Rag* to the light-hearted, John Cheetham's *Scherzo*).

Unfair or not, though, as I sat listening to the two ensembles, and thought back over other recent Army band concerts in Manhattan, I did wonder...\$99 million, huh?

That buys an awful lot of polished brass...but have I, or anyone else, heard ten times the quality or quantity of music compared to that funded in whole or part by the National Endowment of the Arts?

I'm not at all against military bands, but I cannot help thinking that there is something wrong with our priorities somewhere...and that some of the money might be diverted to the lady with the funny haircut who knows how to prick the egos of the men in the three-piece dark suits and to be witty about it as well.

Friday, June 17, 1983 The Manhattan Mercury A3