

Music eases pain of war for Marine

James Salamanca, injured in Fallujah, says mentally replaying tunes soothes fear

By DAVID STABLER
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When James Salamanca joined the Portland Youth Philharmonic five years ago, he had no idea what music would mean to him today. A standout musician, he's 19 now, and a U.S. Marine fighting in Iraq.

But music, he says, helps keep him going.

Salamanca, who graduated from Westview High School in Beaverton last year, entered the Portland Youth Philharmonic when he was 14 — one of the youngest principal percussionists in the group's history. He stayed five years, then joined the

Marines last year, a decision brought on by Sept. 11, 2001.

Initially stationed in Kuwait, Salamanca's 1st Marine Expeditionary Division was deployed to Fallujah recently. Last Saturday, Salamanca was wounded in rebel-held Fallujah, where a gathering storm of violence left eight Marines dead that day.

On Monday, he e-mailed very relieved family and friends, describing the improvised bomb that exploded beside his vehicle. No one died, but Salamanca injured his ankle and lost some hearing in his left ear.

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PORTLAND YOUTH PHILHARMONIC

On an orchestra road trip to Walla Walla last year, James Salamanca (right) stands backstage alongside Alvin Schultz and Sarah Exum.

Salamanca: 'Every day I think about music,' he says

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His injuries were not serious enough to put him "out of business," he wrote. "I'm still walking, runnin', doing my mission operations."

But he suffered a deeper loss when his buddy, Richard Slocum of Saugus, Calif., died Oct. 24.

Salamanca isn't the first member of the Portland Youth Philharmonic to enlist. Many more have joined up during the orchestra's 80 years.

During World War II, for example, enough young musicians joined up that the orchestra printed a note in its program seeking replacements.

John A. Simpson, who played in the 1930s, joined the Army and worked on the Manhattan Project, an experience that led him to testify in Congress against the use of nuclear weapons in war.

Huw Edwards, who conducted the orchestra from 1995 to 2002, remembers Salamanca vividly.

"He was a godsend," Edwards

said. "I needed a good timpanist/percussionist, and this slender, quiet, well-presented lad appeared at the auditions. He was very reliable and inordinately talented. He was also a bit of a showman, but he could 'walk the walk.' He had great skills and oozed confidence."

Salamanca even turned his parents on to classical music, said his father.

"I was more into the pop, 1960s music," said Rony Salamanca, "but when he started playing in the orchestra, he brought me to the beauty of classical music."

In a recent e-mail, James Salamanca described music's power over him. "Every day I think about music. A tune that I've played with the orchestra is always playing in my head, soothing my fear and makes me realize that the world is not solely corrupted by madness . . . I would never have realized that without playing with the orchestra."

He continued: "You hear all this stuff about war and killing and mutilations and all this nasty stuff going on (worse if you see it for real, trust me). People look to the artists, who have dedicated their lives in perfecting a beauty created by humans, to truly realize that all this nonsense isn't worth it. Especially music, where

different people with totally different backgrounds can come together and create something beautiful, instead of two different groups coming together in war and trying to kill each other off. Just doesn't make any sense."

To lift Salamanca's spirits, the Portland Youth Philharmonic is sending care packages to him and his platoon.

Appropriate items include nuts, beef jerky, socks, Handi Wipes, disposable razors, playing cards, magazines and paperback books.

Items can be dropped off at the philharmonic's office, 421 S.W. Hall St. The phone number is 503-223-5939.