

A Short History of a Very Famous Song – La Marseillaise

The tune and words are generally accepted to have been written in one night (24-25 April, 1792) by Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle.

Born in 1760 in Lons-le-Saunier, France, Rouget de Lisle is a man about whom not much is known. He was neither a political figure nor a famous musician, yet, while serving as a Captain of the Engineers, he composed a song that inspired a nation.

The story goes that a certain General Kellermann, in command of the Rhine Army at that time, asked the Mayor of Strasbourg, to commission a patriotic revolutionary battle-hymn. The mayor (Dietrich) turned to aspiring poet and amateur musician Rouget de Lisle. After an initial private rendition at Dietrich's home, the song was performed for the regiment and was an instant success with the troops. Originally entitled 'Le Chant de Guerre de l'Armée du Rhin' - 'The Battle Hymn of the Rhine Army' - it quickly spread throughout revolutionary France.

So why is it called 'La Marseillaise'?

The song won further popular acclaim when it was sung by General François Mireur at a patriotic banquet given in Marseilles for his newly formed militia battalions. The revolutionary battle-hymn got a jubilant reception from the volunteers and Mireur decided to adopt it as a marching song. He had copies printed under the new name of 'Chant de Guerre aux Armées aux Frontières' - 'Battle-hymn of the Frontier Armies' - and distributed them among the troops as they prepared to set off for Paris. They sang it with gusto all the way to the capital.

It was at this time that the song acquired its new name. When the Marseilles militia made their impressive entry into Paris on 30 July, 1792, it was to a rousing rendition of their favourite marching song. The Parisian crowds instantly warmed to its patriotic call to arms and dubbed it 'La Marseillaise', after the troops that had brought it to the heart of the revolution. Little more than a week later, the revolutionary militias stormed the Tuileries on 10 August to the strains of Rouget de Lisle's battle-hymn and spurred on by his blood-thirsty stanzas.

The Official National Anthem

'La Marseillaise' was initially established as a national song of the (First) Republic by decree on 14 July, 1795, but was banned under the First Empire, and the Restoration. A return to grace at the time of the July Revolution in 1830 was followed by a resurgence in popularity until it was again abolished under Napoleon III's 2nd Empire. It was not until 1879, under the Third Republic that it was re-established as the official national anthem. In 1887, an 'official version' was agreed upon and adopted by the War Ministry. Since then it has remained the tune played at all official state ceremonies or sporting events.

During the Second World War and the Nazi occupation 'La Marseillaise' was associated with the patriotic Free French and resistance movements. In September 1944, Free French officials were giving instructions that 'La Marseillaise' was to be sung in schools to 'celebrate our liberation and honour our dead'.

The 4th and 5th Republics

'La Marseillaise' was named as the official national anthem in the written constitution of the Fourth Republic in 1946, and again in October 1958 in that of De Gaulle's Fifth Republic. In 1974, newly elected President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had some changes made to the

score to make it closer to Rouget de Lisle's original. In 1981 François Mitterand succeeded Giscard and promptly reversed the changes, returning to the 1887 version.

The Author

One last twist in the story concerns the author. In 1915 Rouget de Lisle's ashes were transferred to Les Invalides in Paris, resting place of national heroes.

Ironically, the truth about de Lisle is, that he was a royalist and refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new (revolutionary) constitution. He was then imprisoned and only escaped the guillotine because of the fact that he composed the famous song. Before his death in 1836, de Lisle wrote several novels and operas, none of which would ever achieve the success of La Marseillaise.

/End