

MARCUS
YOU PROBABLY ALREADY FOUND
THIS INFO, BUT HERE IT IS AGAIN,
EJ

John R. Bourgeois¹

Performing *The Stars and Stripes Forever*

While our government has succeeded in making *The Stars and Stripes Forever* our national march,² even our highest elected officials cannot legislate the way it is performed. Sousa's masterpiece is often reduced to a cliché - used (and abused) in advertisements or wherever its inevitable effect is advantageous. Familiarity, in this case, has not bred contempt. It has bred more insidious problems.

Sousa once said, „A march is the most difficult of all music to interpret,“ yet rarely are marches afforded the study and rehearsal they deserve. Without the same careful preparation as other music we perform, Sousa's music is a poor imitation of what he intended.

Study of *Stars and Stripes* requires equal attention to both the performing materials and the Sousa Band performance practices. Examination of the original manuscript score (now in the possession of the Library of Congress) is an essential part of this study.

THE ORIGINAL EDITION

Stars and Stripes was first published by John Church in 1897. The published parts are faithful to the original score with two major exceptions:

First, the tuba part in the first strain of the manuscript is written as a series of half notes. In the 1897 (and later) editions, dotted-quarter notes with 32nd note „appoggiatura“ take the place of the lonely and far-less-interesting half notes.

Perhaps Sousa's manuscript score reflects musical „shorthand.“ (Sousa may have written the simple half note line in haste). Or space may have been at a premium. (The original score is rather small.) In any case, the tuba parts that were used by the Sousa Band contain the augmented line. We may, therefore, consider it authentic.

A second (and more intriguing) discrepancy occurs in the final strain (see chart 1). Sousa's manuscript clearly shows the melody in measure 24 of the last strain written as two *half notes* rather than the dotted-half and quarter note rhythm which occurs at this point in the trio. Although the published band parts show the rhythm in the last strain changed to correspond with the melody at the trio, the original orchestra edition of *Stars and Stripes* retains the use of the two half notes in bar 24 of the last strain.

¹Colonel John R. Bourgeois was director of the United States Marine Band „The President's Own“ from 1979 to 1996. This article is reprinted, with permission, from the September/October 1989 issue of *BDGuide* in honor of the centenary of this outstanding march.

²On December 11, 1987, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill into law which designated the *Stars and Stripes Forever* the national march of the United States. It was the culmination of fifteen previous efforts in Congress since Sousa's death in 1932 to give the march this official status.

Sousa usually composed four distinct cornet parts, marked Solo, 1st, 2nd and Third. In the 1951 edition, we find only three cornet parts, marked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd (see chart 2). The part originally marked „Solo Cornet“ is re-marked „1st Cornet.“ The important and distinctly different „1st Cornet“ part is changed to „2nd Cornet.“ More important, the part intended for *both* the 2nd and 3rd Cornet players is re-marked to read „3rd Cornet“, thereby cutting in half the number of players assigned to this important harmonic line.

Chart 2 *The Stars and Stripes Forever*
March

1897 JOHN CHURCH EDITION 1951 JOHN CHURCH EDITION

Solo Cornet 1st Cornet

Trio
p

1st Cornet 2nd Cornet

2nd and 3rd Cornet 3rd Cornet

This part for 1st & 2nd trumpet (1951)
is not in the original 1897 edition

The most valuable changes in the 1951 edition are snare and bass drum parts edited by August Helmecke (bass drum virtuoso of the Sousa Band for 22 years) to conform to the way he performed them with Sousa. These two parts are a valuable source of information. The Bell and Timpani parts, however, are inventions of the anonymous editor. Sousa did not use timpani on marches. Sousa added bells from time to time, but not as shown on the Bell part to the 1951 edition. To recreate proper Sousa style, bells should double the melody softly at the trio. (Note: bells should not roll on longer notes.)

THE SOUSA BAND

Once performance materials are verified, we must address the Sousa Band performance practices. As composer and conductor, Sousa incorporated many distinctive performance techniques which were his trademarks. Sousa said to his musicians, „Any band can play the printed arrangements but we shall play them differently.“ August Helmecke wrote, „People have no idea how Sousa wanted his marches played because the effects that brought them to such vivid life under the big boss' own direction never got marked into the scores. The notes alone give but the barest skeleton of what a Sousa march can be!“

Sousa's marches were published with intentional doublings. To quote Helmecke, „in some of the marches, not a single bar of rest is written for cornets and clarinets (this was done so marches could be played by small bands); but when Sousa led his own band in these works, he'd simply wave the unwanted brasses into silence.“

Frank Simon, Sousa Band solo cornetist 1914-1921, once said, „There are so many things he did to make it colorful, not just a march where you go through and play it. He 'doctored them up' to make them interesting to the public. That's why he became so famous. Not only for the marches but for HOW he played the marches.“

In his autobiography *Marching Along*, Sousa wrote, „The chief aim of the composer is to produce color, dynamics, nuances, and to emphasize the storytelling quality. The combination and composition which gives that result is most to be desired.“

Sousa achieved this goal by giving verbal instructions to his band about exactly how to play each march. These changes became a part of Sousa Band performance tradition, passed along from one member to another over the years.

A basic outline of these performance changes is as follows: repeated strains were seldom played the same way twice. To provide contrast in volume and tone color, Sousa eliminated cornets, trumpets, and trombones, dropped upper clarinet parts an octave, and reduced (or eliminated) percussion parts on the first time through certain strains.

Sousa's performance practices were not capricious or arbitrary. These carefully-orchestrated (pun intended) changes became standardized in the performances of the Sousa Band.

Those who suggest that Sousa made performance changes out of boredom with his music are incorrect. Such action is inconsistent with his personality. Sousa was a musician of infinite detail. About the rehearsal and performance of marches, Sousa Band clarinetist Sam Harris wrote, „He stressed the importance of being on the alert for all details - tempo, accents, dynamics, nuances, breathing, articulation, and proper balance.“

Colonel Howard Bronson, another Sousa Band member, made the following comments in an address to the CBDNA: „Why did Sousa's compositions take on a different character when played by his band? He knew exactly how he wanted the band to sound and he developed a playing character that expressed it. Each player knew exactly how Sousa wanted certain passages to be played - just the right shading and perfect coordination. His own compositions were played with meticulous attention to dynamics, shading, and tone coloring. The printed scores do not carry the dynamic markings as actually played by the band.“

THE MARINE BAND

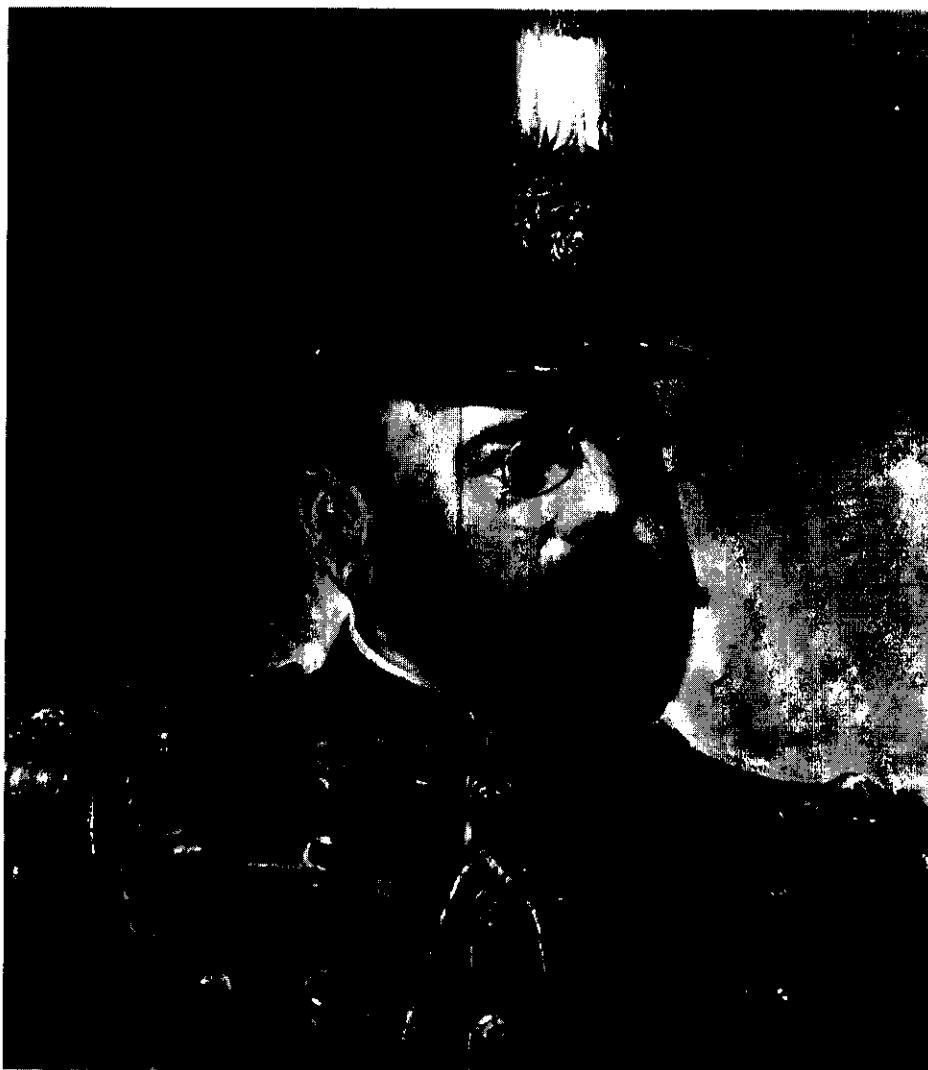
A Sousa march performance without Sousa's own interpretive desires is not authentic. However, authenticity in performance is an interpretive decision for the conductor. When I conduct *Stars and Stripes* with the U. S. Marine Band, I must consider the Sousa performance traditions as well as those which have evolved within our own organization.

Sousa became Director of the U. S. Marine Band in 1880 at age 26. He left the Marine Band in 1892 to form his civilian band and composed *Stars and Stripes* four years later. We do not know when the Marine Band first performed the march,

but we can assume that it entered our repertoire no later than 1897 (the year of the original publication).

One feature which has remained consistent since Sousa is the use of cornets as the primary soprano voice of the brass section. In our average 65-piece concert band, we use 7 cornets and 2 trumpets. When no separate trumpet parts are written (as in *Stars and Stripes*) the trumpets double the primary cornet parts.

We use the printed alto and bass clarinet parts (if those instruments are on stage). In recent years, on the trio we have added the manuscript harp part Sousa used with his band.



John Philip Sousa, 17th Director of „The President’s Own“
United States Marine Band (1880-1892)

Our Marine Band percussionists use manuscript parts written out over 20 years ago to reflect the performance tradition passed along from member to member.

For many years, Marine Band percussionists played bass drum with attached cymbal. (The technique was made famous by August Helmecke with the Sousa Band and used by most professional bands of the period.) Our current percussionists choose to use separate bass drum and cymbal players. They feel this gives better control of both instruments.

We use the concert snare throughout, but on the last strain double it with the deeper field snare, adding depth and volume.

My tempo on *Stars and Stripes* is very close to Sousa's: 120-126 beats per minute. In his later years, Sousa's tempos became faster (132-138 at times), yet slower tempos are more representative of his entire career and of those actually used for marching.

ADDITIONS & CORRECTIONS

Changes we make in the music are very similar to those used by Sousa:

Introduction and First Strain: None. We play it as written.

2nd Strain: First time, mezzo piano. Cornets, trumpets, and trombones are out beginning with the pick-ups to the 2nd strain. Clarinets are „in the staff“ (parts written above the staff are played down an octave the first time through). On the repeat, clarinets are back in the written octaves, brass are back in, playing forte.

Trio: Cornets, trumpets, and trombones are out again. Clarinets are „in the staff“ and everyone plays piano. (We use the harp here.)

Break-Up Strain (1st time): Everyone in, fortissimo, as written. All flutes switch to piccolo and come to the front of the stage just in time for the piccolo solo.

Last Strain: Piano. Cornets, trumpets, and trombones are out the first time through, clarinets are „in the staff“ and we feature the piccolo solo.

Break-Up Strain (2nd time): Everyone back in, fortissimo. Piccolos return to their seats. Going into the final repeat, I make a slight retard (Sousa did not). Cornets, trumpets, and trombones stand in their places rather than coming to the front of the stage as the Sousa Band did.

To make informed interpretive decisions about *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, the conductor must know the history of the work and the habits of the composer. Sousa composed with a concept of the march which is not found solely within his scores. In effect, the composition was not fully realized until it was performed under his direction.

The Stars and Stripes Forever is now our national march. It symbolizes the importance of this music and of bands to our nation. Like other national treasures, it must be preserved by succeeding generations. Band directors have a unique responsibility to preserve the essence of the Sousa tradition - one which lives only in performance.