

Recreating Sousa:

Toward an Historic Performance Practice

A How-To Guide for the Archives:
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Initially, one might ask, why do we need another paper, lecture, or discussion about Sousa's marches? Surely we must have exhausted all possible avenues of inquiry related to a composer whose music has been so frequently performed for so many years. My contention is that the prolific performance of Sousa's marches has, in fact, been the single biggest factor contributing to poor performance practices, and this alone, demands a renewed focus on the issues to be considered in this document. The way many conductors perform Sousa's marches is as close to a hand-me-down oral tradition as we can find in music. We perform them like we have always heard them, and this may not always be the most appropriate manner.

Sousa marches, a staple of the traditional band repertoire, seem to fit anywhere in a program. Audiences enjoy hearing these works, and despite the common placement of the march at the beginning or end (encores, even) of a performance, it is important to recall that Sousa programmed his works within the body of his concerts, often – if not exclusively – to serve as encores to programmed works. This was his trademark – and only one of many that Sousa was concerned about protecting.

Before the widespread availability of recordings the only way to gain access to someone's "version" of a work was to buy the score edition of the performer. This practice is seen throughout art music, especially in solo repertoire. Today, if we want to hear a specific performer's version, we buy their recording - a simple process. In order for Sousa to protect the unique sound of his band, he had to be sure that what went into print would not represent his performance practice. If the performance practice were in print, then every band could sound like Sousa's, and the shrewd Sousa was not willing to allow this. It is with this realization that we can depart the pathway of what seems to have always been, and forge ahead toward what Sousa would likely have actually done.

Many editions, both old and new, from prominent names in our field are problematic in relation to instrumentation and registration. They are sometimes more concerned with following a tradition rather than what might be historically accurate. This again, is due in part to Sousa's protectionist ways. Sousa's band was a marching band that also played "sitting concerts." The marching editions were typically published but Sousa always altered his marches for these "sit-down" performances.

Tempo is a common problem with the performance of Sousa's marches. Most performances of these works are done at a tempo that is too fast, especially the triple-meter marches. Remember that Sousa's band did actually march, and some of his marches were the most popular *dances* of the time. We just kick these marches off as encores or openers, so the adrenaline is going, and they are too fast. While the tempo is quarter note = 116-126 in Sousa's recordings, the majority of his marches recorded lean toward 116. The variance in his recorded tempi can perhaps be attributed to the regulatory march speed mandated by the US Government. The British March Regulation tempo is quarter = 110 and the American Regulation and British Double-Quickstep were quarter note = 120 (this is why you might have always heard or said "English marches are slower and more regal"). In 1922, however, the US Government changed the regulation tempo to match the French march tempo of quarter = 128.

The following “Sousa-isms” are specific performance practice issues gleaned from numerous sources, but are especially indebted to rehearsal and performance observations of renowned Sousa scholar Keith Brion.

- The Sousa era performance practice for grace notes was to crush the grace note onto the beat and play as lightly as possible
- NEVER accent the pick-up notes - They are light, then hit the downbeat
- ALWAYS accent the accidental if it is in the melody or on a downbeat
- Don’t accent last notes in the ending prior to the trio
- The power in the march is in the octave doublings, not the volume
- Brass: only *mf* in introductions
- Trumpets never play *ff* – remember the cornet...
- If you see a “trumpet” part that is not “trumpeting” IT IS A FAKE - THROW IT OUT - You will be able to tell the difference

N.B. - Sometimes these parts will be blended, so don’t be fooled. Many editions we use today often are from the era when the American Bandmasters Association was pushing to develop standardized instrumentation, which was 3 cornet parts and/or two (three) trumpet parts. Sousa *usually* wrote for 4 cornets, solo-1/2/3/4, and if there are additional “real” trumpet parts they likely exist on a “regimental trumpet and drum” part.

- Heavy parts in tuba are split in 3 octaves and half cadences in phrase centers should be played louder
- At the last strain (1st time) sometimes Sousa had a muted cornet play along with woodwinds, but articulating while the woodwinds slur – this is a wonderful effect, and I have found this color to be useful in any march (this is perhaps the most useful, yet undocumented bit of knowledge I was able to glean from Keith Brion)
- In final trios, the tendency is to push ahead, but it must “sit back” in time, so think of weight-back marching on the heels
- For style, use the following key:



maybe separated



usually separated



always separated

- The Sousa march balance is like an hourglass, not a pyramid - horn and snare drum are in the center – don't approach the marches with a pyramid concept because you will never get the proper balance and clarity intended by the orchestration

Percussion Specific Issues:

- **Never, ever, ever, ever, ever use timpani in a Sousa march - Sousa never did, and he had a timpanist in his band - if he wanted it, he would have done it...it is a balance issue** - Remember the hourglass? The timpani rings into the center, and only muddies the waters

In the pace of a rapid-fire Sousa concert, the band would finish a concert number and would then immediately go into an encore march. The timpanist picked up a gigantic sign with the march title and paraded across the front of the stage so the audience knew what they were hearing.

- The pitch of the modern snare drum is higher than the snare drum of Sousa's time - In order to "hear" the snare drum clearly, it has to be performed too loudly on the modern instrument - Sousa used the snare drum as a non-pitched horn - Get a marching snare drum and put gut snares and natural heads (or fiberskin) on – you will like it (Always use open rolls...as open as possible) - the lower pitch lets the snare drum sit in the center of the hourglass structure - It does not need to be "loud" to be heard at that point
- The more a band relies on the percussion as time-keepers the more problems they will have holding a tempo - The drums accentuate the rhythms already present, so they are reinforcing the attacks of the wind parts - This is true of most percussion writing, but especially in Sousa and other marches
- Tuba and bass drum doublings: tuba is pitch, bass drum is articulation –You will need to explain this to the players - It will actually have the tuba and bass drummer begin to recognize they are a team – this will help everything you do, as this type of scoring is VERY common in wind band music
- On bells, use hard rubber mallets to avoid the clangy ding sound
- Experiment with where you strike the bass drum - it will actually produce different pitches that will better match the length of the tuba notes - It really does work

- In some of the editions by Keith Brion, he actually asks the bass drummer to “play melodically” and writes approximated pitches - Again, if the bass drum is working with the tuba, it will be easier, besides, why not give one of your better players a challenging bass drum part?
- *Someone once remarked to Sousa, “your bass drummer can almost play a tune on the bass drum” to which Sousa quickly replied, “He CAN play a tune on the bass drum.”*
- In 1920, while on tour many members of the band went on strike for one concert to protest poor travel and housing conditions - The bass drummer was one of only two players hired back - That is how important Sousa felt the bass drum part was – the bass drummer was also the highest paid member of the band

On the use of cymbals:

- The cymbal part was conceived for an “attached” cymbal (to the bass drum) - The cymbal is always with the bass drum, but should be sounded with or slightly behind – never ahead - 18” heavy cymbals (Germanic) are best because they have a definite attack
- After loud accents leave out the next two cymbal notes - This clears the air
- When the cornets are not playing, leave the cymbals out and use only bass drum
- Omit on *mp* or softer passages at your discretion
- In the final strain of marches (last 16-32 bars) the accents often come in the rests - Keith Brion refers to these as the “bombs” and suggests that they exceed the total tutti volume of the band

These rules apply to most American marches. In older editions, especially quick-step size, you will sometimes not even have a cymbal part.

The Structure of a Sousa March:

Intro – usually unison, careful attention to brass balance

First Strain – typically serves as a type of scherzo, make it light and playful with careful consideration of grace notes and ornamentation

Second Strain – more dramatic to contrast with the scherzo-like first strain, but often is contrasted with another scherzo idea

Trio (aria) – cantabile, but careful not to let melody influence the crisp style of accompaniment

Break Strain – most harmonically inventive section, marcato throughout, sometimes called a “dogfight” because the break strain often has two melodies working against one another developing several tonal areas

Grandioso (aria) – performed softly and cantabile – allow the double reeds to play out a bit here for a color contrast

Break Strain – same as before but with a crescendo into final grandioso –
DO NOT SLOW DOWN INTO FINAL GRANDIOSO!!

Grandioso – no longer an aria, brass marcato throughout, carefully balance counter-melodies in trombone and euphonium

The structure and scheme applied to:
The Stars and Stripes Forever

1st Strain – Harmony changes EVERY beat

2nd Strain – Harmony changes EVERY measure

Trio – Harmony changes EVERY 16 measures

Intro – probably the most famous few bars of music of American music,
balance carefully to avoid being too loud

1st Strain – scherzo theme

Clarinet in B \flat



A single staff of music in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The melody consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with a fermata over the final note.

2nd Strain – more dramatic through use of slower harmonic movement, but
notice the continued scherzo feel through a livelier
accompaniment

Clarinet in B \flat



Clarinet in B \flat



Horn in F

Two staves of music. The top staff is for Clarinet in B-flat and the bottom staff is for Horn in F. Both are in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The Clarinet part features a melodic line with a fermata, while the Horn part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with quarter and eighth notes.

B \flat Cl.



Hn.




Two staves of music. The top staff is for B-flat Clarinet and the bottom staff is for Horn. Both are in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The B-flat Clarinet part features a melodic line with a fermata, while the Horn part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with quarter and eighth notes.

Piccolo Solo – this is a solo *everyone knows*, but is often performed incorrectly due to poor editing; notice in these two separate excerpts where the trills begin – the trill is actually a mordent that should start ON THE BEAT

Example 1

Piccolo



Example 2

Piccolo



Break Strain Repeated – Don't slow down

Final Grandioso – no longer an aria, brass marcato throughout, carefully balance counter-melodies in trombone and euphonium to create style within the melodic slur

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