

The Interpretation of the Concert March

Dr. Timothy Rhea

Marches represent true band music and, if prepared properly, can offer rewarding musical experiences for bands, conductors, and audiences. Some directors seem reluctant to program these wonderful pieces, yet they are some of our most audience appealing. It's possible this lack of programming is based on unfamiliarity with proper march interpretation and performance. Given that many components of march style have been handed down through oral tradition, I hope the following information regarding elements of proper march performance will encourage you to incorporate this genre into your programming.

To perform a march well, the conductor and ensemble must believe in this musical form. Consider these reasons why you should incorporate marches into your instruction and performance:

- Individual musician technique development (abundance of active parts)
- Opportunities for the development of style and interpretation
- Involvement of the entire ensemble
- Audience appeal
- Excellent opener or closer to a concert

While it is impossible to address all aspects of march performance here, the following ideas about the various elements of march style have assisted me tremendously with my

ensembles, and I expect they will do the same for you.

Rhythm and Style

A discussion of marches must begin with the topic of rhythm. A steady pulse throughout the performance of a march is imperative. This is achieved by all ensemble members maintaining an internal subdivision of the pulse that places beats and subdivisions of the pulse precisely in the correct spots.

The basic rhythm structure (downbeats and upbeats) should be rehearsed for stability and accuracy by the percussion section, bass line, and rhythmic harmony sections (usually horns or trombones, and possibly lower trumpets and saxophones). To help establish the steady pulse, work with your students to help them avoid compression of notes that are of the same rhythmic value. Rushing is particularly problematic near the end of phrases and strains, and during crescendos (conversely, slowing often occurs during diminuendos).

Achieving proper march style begins with attention to articulation and note length. Marches are generally played in a marcato (detached) style. Attacks should be firm and solid which is accomplished by increasing the note weight. The longer the note, the more weight it should receive. While individual musicianship will dictate the final decision, there are some general guidelines relating to march style.

When successive notes appear with no articulation marking, marcato style can be achieved with fifty percent sound (perhaps even a bit longer), followed by fifty percent silence. When the main melody of a march appears at the beginning of the trio section, it is traditional to adopt a more legato approach to style. When notes of longer value follow notes of shorter value, detach the short note, with the long note being firmly articulated and held the full value.

As stylistic markings are added to notes, they may be interpreted as follows:

- *Staccato*: fifty percent sound, fifty percent silence, lighter attack (think detached as opposed to short – avoid anything brittle)
- *Normal accent*: seventy-five percent sound, twenty-five percent silence
- *Housetop accent*: fifty percent sound, fifty percent silence, harder attack.

March style is achieved through the modifications of printed notes. Correct style is achieved through 1) note weights and 2) note lengths. Both must remain consistent across the ensemble or musical line.

Always look for musical motives to expose and be certain to bring out counter accents to the melodic line when available. Take advantage of the opportunity for volume on the big notes and for technique on the little notes.

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Musical shaping is achieved through appropriate phrasing. All notes, whether melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic, must be directed toward the peak of the musical phrase, and all phrases should peak on a point within the phrase. This point must be identified and be given proper emphasis. A consistent air stream is critical and should not be interrupted between notes in a phrase. Notes of one beat or longer should be held full value, especially when tied across a bar line or followed by a rest or breath mark. All music is either ascending or descending to form a peak in the musical phrase, and while we must keep in mind that there is one climax to every phrase, sub-climaxes may also exist.

Balance, Blend, and Clarity

March performances often suffer from lack of attention to balance, blend, and clarity. Clarity is defined as hearing each individual part during a performance by the full ensemble. *This is a must.* As in all music, the priority of balance in marches should begin with the melody, followed by the countermelody, harmony, and finally, the rhythmic parts. Downbeat and upbeat rhythmic figures should be felt, not necessarily heard. This is particularly important in the marches of Sousa as much of the harmonic writing is scored in horn and tuba. All parts written by a composer are important—do not edit out parts such as lower clarinet or trumpet. The balance of the harmonic elements should begin with proper balance within each section and should be founded on good intonation (unison and chordal).

Tempo

While the ultimate decision of march tempo depends on the size and ability level of the ensemble, the following are a few guidelines compiled from a variety of sources. For the standard American quickstep march (composed to accompany marching), a tempo of 120 beats per minute, with slight variations, is the standard. For the American circus march (used to create an atmosphere of excitement), a tempo of 144–160 beats per minute is appropriate. When you perform marches from outside the United States, the following tempos can be applied:

- British marches: 108–116 beats per minute
- German/Austrian marches: 104–112 beats per minute
- Spanish *Paso doble*: 108 beats per minute
- Italian marches: 116 beats per minute or slower
- French marches: 126 beats per minute

No matter the march style being performed, there is some room for tempo variation. It is the job of the director, however, to choose a tempo with which the ensemble will be comfortable and that is within the boundaries of what is musically acceptable.

Eliciting the Emotions of a March

Attention to musical nuances will showcase the emotional content in a march performance. Dynamic contrast is a must for musical performance. Start by varying the dynamic levels on the repeat of a strain. One way to accomplish this is by thinning the instrumentation. It is not, however, acceptable to alter the composer's original melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic concepts at any time. Rescoring high woodwind parts the first time through a trio is a great way to reduce dynamic levels. One might consider removing the percussion section the first time through a legato strain. Attention to varying note weights is an additional way to provide marches dynamic contrast and energy.

Percussion Considerations

The bass drum and cymbal players should stand next to one another near the back center of the ensemble. The bass drum should be played with a hard beater – lightly, except for accents. The left hand should be used to dampen the non-batten head. In original quickstep editions, the cymbal, using German or Viennese 18-inch cymbals, normally doubles the bass drum part. Use only one snare drum unless an additional field drum is indicated. Hard plastic or brass mallets should be used for bell parts. Most timpani parts were added by someone other than the composer, and doubling woodwind obligatos on a mallet instrument is not representative of standard march performance practice.

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Selecting a Published Edition

The use of accurate and proper performance materials is of paramount importance in the presentation of a march. Many reputable editors maintain the original integrity of marches. When searching for an edition of a march, consider those that cleaned up the march only by removing misprints and clarifying dynamics and articulations with a full score and larger readable parts. For marches by John Philip Sousa, the editions available through the “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band, offer a brilliant insight into the performance style of Mr. Sousa.

General Comments

Marches should provide a musical experience. Nothing is more boring than three minutes of *mf*, performed with a lack of energy and style.

William Revelli (University of Michigan) compares note weights to how we speak using the term inflection. How we speak and stress syllables makes the spoken word come alive. This is also true in all music – especially marches.

The inclusion of marches in rehearsal and performance can serve as a wonderful teaching tool and will offer superb musical rewards. As most march performance concepts are present in all wind band music, their careful preparation should carry over into all ensemble rehearsals. Through careful and meticulous preparation, marches can offer musical rewards and enjoyment for conductors, ensembles, and audiences.

While hundreds of marches have been written for bands, there is an enormous variation in quality. The following is a basic listing of several marches that have enjoyed great popularity and I have found to be of musical worth:

Easier

Americans We, Henry Fillmore
The Black Horse Troop, John Philip Sousa
The Courier Journal, Robert Brooke Griffith
Golden Bear, Joseph John Richards
Kiefer’s Special, William H. Kiefer
On the Square, Frank Panella
Pentland Hills, Jimmie Howe
St. Julien, Arthur Hughes
Queen City, William Boorn
Under the Double Eagle, Joseph Franz Wagner

More Difficult

Action Front, Hermann Blankenburg
Battle of Shiloh, Charles Lloyd Barnhouse
Boys of the Old Brigade, W. Paris Chambers
Colossus of Columbia, Russell Alexander
Eagle Squadron, Kenneth J. Alford
The Gallant Seventh, John Philip Sousa
Honey Boys on Parade, Edward Cupero
In Storm and Sunshine, John Clifford Heed
Purple Pageant, Karl L. King
Rolling Thunder, Henry Fillmore

Dr. Timothy Rhea is currently in his 30th year at Texas A&M University, serving as Director of Bands & Music Activities. He serves as administrative head of the Music Activities Program, is conductor of the University Wind Symphony, and oversees the Texas Aggie Band. Dr. Rhea holds degrees in music education and conducting from the University of Arkansas, Texas Tech University, and the University of Houston. During his tenure at Texas A&M University, Dr. Rhea has conducted the Texas A&M University Wind Symphony for conventions of the Texas Music Educators Association, the College Band Directors National Association, the Midwest International Band & Orchestra Clinic, the Western International Band Clinic, and the American Bandmasters Association. Additional concerts have included Carnegie Hall, and five European tours with performances in Ireland, England, Italy, Austria, Germany, and the Czech Republic. The TAMU Wind Symphony has released several internationally distributed recordings. In addition to conducting, Dr. Rhea maintains a very successful career as an arranger and composer with an output of over 300 pieces, to include over fifty published works. Dr. Rhea maintains an internationally active schedule as conductor, clinician, and adjudicator having appeared throughout the United States, Europe, and Australia. He has received the Citation of Excellence from the National Band Association, was selected as the Texas Outstanding Young Bandmaster of the Year and has received the President’s Meritorious Service Award to Texas A&M University. Dr. Rhea is Past-President of the American Bandmasters Association, and currently serves as Vice-President/Secretary of the John Philip Sousa Foundation, in addition to positions with several related professional organizations. He recently oversaw the planning and construction of the new Texas A&M University White - Walker Music Activities Center which opened in July of 2019. In this new facility, the Dr. Timothy B. Rhea Concert Rehearsal Hall was named in his honor. In 2020, he received the Association of Former Students Distinguished Achievement Award in Administration from Texas A&M University.