

CLINIC COLUMN

“FORWARD MARCH”

The Interpretation & Understanding of a March by Lt Col Steven Grimo



Marches have been composed throughout every period of Western Music. Masters such as Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Bruckner, and Wagner have all composed original works in this form. The march qualifies as an important part of wind literature and band heritage. Conductors sometimes mistakenly look upon marches as secondary musical offerings, rather than recognizing the joy and energy produced by such programming “gems.”

This highly stylized form, like a waltz or minuet, served much like a dance for bodily motion. The march was a functional musical form designed to keep a regular beat with an encouraging sound to keep troops in step. In the seventeenth century, small bands of musicians marched, participated in processions, and provided rallying sounds

for large gatherings. These early collections of instrumentalists usually consisted of winds and drums; “louder was better” for the open-air performances. By the eighteenth century, military musicians performed short and simple marches. During the mid-eighteenth century, the military band consisted of winds in pairs with an added side drum and bass drum; the trumpet and sackbut were occasionally added. It was not until the French Revolution that large wind bands resembled the ones we know today. As composers began to write for larger ensembles, the musical sophistication of a march began to improve. The history of the wind band closely paralleled the development of performance practices for the march.

As the nineteenth century approached, percussionists and wind musicians were assigned to military units, establishing the lasting concept of a “military” band. As military bands expanded their functions, performances began to include concerts for events such as the arrival of dignitaries. This movement directly led to a variety of musical styles performed by military musicians, all of which included various dance types and the occasional added vocal or instrumental soloist.

During the early nineteenth century, Wilhelm Wieprecht of Germany worked extensively to establish what we have come to know as the “concert” band. Instrumentation was established and compositions and transcriptions of orchestral music were performed. This change in performance practice moved away from the “military” band concept toward the concert band of today. Patrick S. Gilmore, who was active in the United States from 1849 until his death in 1892, is considered the “Father of the American Band.” The Marine Band, founded in 1798, consisted of 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 horns, 1 bassoon, and a drum. It was not until 1861 that the band was authorized 30 musicians. The military tradition of musicians in uniform continued through Sousa’s time and continues worldwide today.

The popularity of the quickstep dates back to the early nineteenth century and became the musical foundation of dancing as well as marching. The quickstep is sectional, with repeats and no key changes. The quickstep resembles the galop (a quick dance in 2/4 time). Also during this time period were grand marches, which were slower and longer than the quickstep and were in 4/4 meter. These grand marches were similar to the classical minuet with two strains (each repeated), a trio in a closely-related key, and a *da capo* (a return to the first strain). This form became the standard for marches after the middle of the century.

Like the poise and passion of a Strauss waltz, great marches are cheerful and driven to make your body move and your feet dance. Creativity, inspiration, and formal structure qualify such a composition as an important part of band repertoire. Marches are truly expressions of “music in motion,” full of humor, inventiveness and a descriptive style. The age of the march coincided with the development of the professional wind band. The transition from the Gilmore band of 1859 and Sousa’s designation as the leader of the Marine Band in 1880 encouraged prosperity and progress in concert band development. March masters such as Sousa, Fillmore, Alford, K. L. King, Goldman, J. J. Richards, R. B. Hall, and Russell Alexander developed a musical form similar to Johann Strauss and his treatment of the waltz.

March Styles - One of the main factors in performance is selecting the appropriate tempo. Moving a metronome marking up or down can determine the need for single or double tonguing for the brass section. These tempos are characteristic of various periods and historical function.

Early American military marches were 120 beats per minute, and Circus marches were double time, creating excitement and intensity for the Big Top performers.

Slower than American marches, European marches are between 104 and 112 beats per minute with a more deliberate pulse. German and British marches have similar characteristics and tempo qualities as well.

The Paso Doble, known as a Spanish or Latin American march, is relaxed with a rubato and operatic flavor. Some of these marches may be quicksteps with excitement and a festive quality, much like Circus marches.

Tempo & Pulse - Rhythmic accuracy is the single most important factor when performing a march. Problems arise when an ensemble or section plays “in tempo” but not “in rhythm.” Incorrect subdivision and note placement cause unsteady motion within the music. The march should feel effortless and comfortable for both the players and the audience.

Articulations & Dynamics - Marches are performed with a variety of articulations. Notes that are not slurred should be played shorter than written. Accents are approached by adding length and weight or by creating space between each note. Avoiding the hard-tongue attack and using more air support will produce a better accent.

Dynamic contrast and creativity will be essential to the performance. Variations between each strain of a march and contrast between sections, will make for an exciting and effective performance.

Consider changes and variations in instrumentation from strain to strain. Avoid the constant tutti band sound. Mix and match various colors and contrast.

Essential elements:

1. Tone quality, intonation, control
2. Accuracy, articulations, unity
3. Tempo, precision, ensemble
4. Interpretation – style, phrasing, accents, dynamics, balance, expression

Objective Checklist :

1. Rhythmic energy
2. March style – detached style
3. Attack and breath
4. Release, tone and tongue
5. Accents
6. Dynamics, phrasing, expression
7. Inner voices – balance, definition
8. Counter melody
9. Bass line and horn balance to melodic line
10. Basic march elements – melody, harmony and rhythm
11. Tone quality
12. Vitality, motion and character – clarity of rhythm
13. Percussion – rhythm, movement, tempo and precision
14. Clarity of upper voices, ornamentation, accuracy and unity
15. Balance, blend, and projection