Teaching the Great American March

Over the years, I have been asked to guest conduct and do clinics for ensembles of all types and their most frequent request was that I work on a march. Like many conductors, I at first bristled at being asked to do a march instead of something more “challenging.” However, time (usually) does bring a bit of wisdom and I learned that there was in fact a great desire to learn how to do marches correctly and the assumption was that as a military music director, I was an expert in the genre. Yes, military bands do perform a lot of marches, but we certainly don’t have a monopoly on the art form and like anyone else, I had to work to develop that part of my repertoire.

So, when confronted with something you want to get better at, what do you do? Find someone who knows more than you, of course! So, I recommend two fantastic resources. The first is a handout from a Midwest Clinic session in 2006 presented by Dr. Robert Jorgensen. Bob was Director of Bands at the University of Akron, a Past President of the American Bandmasters Association, and a former member of The U.S. Army Field Band. Go to <https://www.midwestclinic.org/user_files_1/pdfs/clinicianmaterials/2006/robert_jorgensen.pdf> and you will find the most complete and yet easy to understand guide on how to properly perform marches as well as a list of recommended marches arranged by difficulty level. The second resource is a video on YouTube featuring Loras Schissel with The United State Army Band “Pershing’s Own” entitled “Secrets to Successful Sousa.” In this video, Loras works on four different marches and provides entertaining insight into the back stories and how to perform them correctly.

Before getting into techniques to teach marches, it’s appropriate to ask why should we be performing them? As educators, it should interest us that nearly every important musical concept that’s relevant to all parts of the literature can be found in a march. The musicians must have a highly developed internal metronome to avoid compressing rhythms. Dynamic contrast is a must, phrase shaping (especially in trios), wide varieties of articulation, and the ability to put melody, countermelody, and accompaniment in their appropriate place in the fabric are all required. Ask yourself that if you are teaching a jazz band, would you completely ignore music by the Count Basie Orchestra or other great ensembles of the swing era? Of course not! So why do I continually judge band festivals with not a single march being performed? Lastly, and most importantly, are our audiences. I recently conducted a Memorial Day concert with the Boulder (CO) Concert Band. Without exception, the greatest rounds of applause followed each march. Don’t our audiences’ opinions count?

In working with an ensemble on a march, I first ask them what kind of music it is. They instantly reply, “It’s a march!” to which I respond, “No, it’s a dance.” Most Sousa marches were popular in dance halls long before they were played on a parade field. When quizzing them about what makes a good dance tune, they always say, “It’s the beat.” Right there you have the core of what it takes to do a march correctly. A rock-solid rhythmic groove only happens when the entire ensemble has their internal metronome working. This causes many directors to break out the amplified metronome. Don’t do it! A fascinating (but challenging) book called “The Master and His Emissary” discusses how our brains work. The music part of our brain is wired to be able to ignore mechanically produced sounds but is wired to “perform with” human produced sounds. Instead of an amplified metronome, have a musician stand in front of the ensemble with a hard-plastic mallet and a wood block. Musicians of all ages will instantly see where they have been compressing rhythms and altering the tempo. Once they feel what it’s like to play with the entire ensemble “in the groove” they will consistently be able to reproduce that feeling.

Marches generally have a melody, countermelody, and an accompaniment. Rather than talking to them about balance (which is an irrelevant concept to someone sitting in the band) I use focus, as in how can we make a great 3D picture for the audience? Simply asking them to put melody in the foreground, countermelody in the midground, and accompaniment in the background will immediately improve the “balance.” On the repeat of the phrase, putting the countermelody in the foreground and the melody in the midground can provide a bit of variety.

Marches challenge our ensembles to perform with great dynamic contrast. I find that getting an ensemble to perform a full, rich *forte* (defined as strong, but not loud) will give them a good anchor point. Then work to retain that quality of sound and focus at successively lower dynamic levels. Once you’re proven to them that they can indeed perform at *piano* and given them an idea of what that feels like, you can then get them to incorporate that effect into the march (and everything else too!).

In selecting march repertoire, look for editors that have added value to the march and not just printed it on larger paper. The best of these is Loras Schissel. His editions are so thoroughly edited that if the ensemble “plays the ink” it will be pretty good. Loras provides an articulation for nearly every note and includes voluminous notes for the conductor. These editions generally require a band that can handle Grade 4 literature. James Swearingen has arranged march editions that can be handled by most Grade 2-3 bands. They are faithful to the original but have been expertly edited to put them in the grasp of younger bands.

Key to proper performance is really paying attention to the articulations and making them truly contrast with each other. I like to use string bowings to physically demonstrate the articulations. You can find a depiction of this on my website, [www.ThomasPalmatier.com](http://www.ThomasPalmatier.com) and view “Guide for the Blue Collar Music Director.”

As for younger bands, don’t we want them to play with a steady sense of rhythm, develop phrasing, use dynamic contrast, contrast articulations, and properly balance the parts? So, don’t wait until high school to start teaching marches. Bob Jorgensen’s paper includes a good list of Grade 1 and 1.5 marches and Robert W. Smith has written several excellent marches in the Grade 1-2 range.

Obviously, a written article is not the best venue to convey how to teach a march, so here are my suggestions:

- Teach and perform marches, not as “throwaways” but as core parts of your repertoire. Your ensemble will gain many benefits and your audiences will love it.

- Study Bob Jorgensen’s masterful paper and watch “Secrets to Successful “Sousa.” You will automatically be in the top half (at least) of directors in your march knowledge.

- Select well edited march versions appropriate for your ensemble and apply just as much care to them as your “major works.”

- Include great march recordings in the listening list for yourself and your band.

Finally, I hope to have conveyed why teaching great march performance is important to us as educators. If you need an additional motivation, I don’t know a single adjudicator who doesn’t hear a well-played march without reacting very positively because we know how rare that is and how indicative it is of a great music educator and a great ensemble. Want to score high ratings? Perform a march superbly!