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## AN OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL BANDS AND ORCHESTRAS BEFORE WORLD WAR II

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It is not an exaggeration to characterize school bands and orchestras, along with the proverbial motherhood and apple pie, as symbols of much that is good and wholesome in American life. Instrumental music in the public schools has experienced tremendous growth during this century, and it continues to enjoy a "squeaky-clean" image and widespread popularity. The recent sesquicentennial of public school music education sparked interest in the historical roots of music education in this country. The purpose of this article is to outline the history of American school bands and orchestras prior to World War II.

### Nineteenth century roots

Compared to the relatively steady spread of vocal music instruction, instrumental music was slow to take its place in the school curriculum. School bands and orchestras existed only sporadically in the nineteenth century, and where they did exist they generally did not receive official recognition from school administrators. They were considered *ad hoc*, often meeting outside regular school hours, and were usually taught by a teacher of another subject who happened to be an amateur musician. According to Edward Bailey Birge, the primary reason for instrumental music's belated entrance into the school curriculum was a prejudice against secular music, with its instrumental associations, in favor of sacred music and its perceived associations with vocal music. This bias was exacerbated by a lack of opportunity to hear high quality instrumental music.<sup>1</sup> Other reasons included a dearth of trained instrumental teachers (most school music teachers having been trained in the singing school tradition), and a lack of precedent either in this country or in Europe for instrumental instruction in the schools.

Gradually, the situation changed. After the founding of the New York Philharmonic in 1842, highly trained European immigrants ar-

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rived to populate it and other professional orchestras. Around mid-century, European orchestras toured extensively our nation's cities, and in 1862, the well-known orchestra conductor Theodore Thomas, himself a German immigrant, formed his own orchestra. Thomas, an educator at heart, always programmed Beethoven interspersed with "lighter" music in an attempt to demonstrate the difference between music as art and music as entertainment.

These touring- and immigrant instrumentalists exposed city-dwellers to professional level instrumental music performances and teachers. Some of these musicians taught instrumental music, usually in music academies and homes.

The American band movement provided a greater impetus for public school instrumental music than did the orchestra. Three types of bands foreshadowed the public school band: military, town, and professional.

### Earliest bands

Military bands became prevalent during the Revolutionary War. They typically consisted of six to eight players, mostly woodwinds. The United States Marine Corps Band was formed in 1798, followed by the West Point Band in 1815. Most American bands in the first quarter of the nineteenth century were military or quasi military organizations.<sup>2</sup>

During the late 1830's and 1840's, military brass bands surpassed in popularity the all-woodwind bands and bands with mixed instrumentation. Three technological advancements in instrument design and manufacture made possible the creation of all-brass bands: the keyed bugle (introduced in this country around 1815), three-valved cornets and trumpets (which largely replaced keyed bugles in the 1840's and 1950's), and the saxhorn (first patented in 1845). Since these instruments could produce all twelve tones, they replaced clarinets on the melody.

The Civil War provided further impetus to the nineteenth century band movement. Civil War military bands typically consisted of eight to twenty-four players including percussion. Frequently, an entire band would enlist in one of the armies as a unit.

American town brass bands began to appear during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Two of the earliest well-known town bands were the Dodworth Brass Band of New York City, organized in 1834, and the Boston Brass Band, formed in 1835 by the virtuoso keyed bugle player Edward Kendall. As more and more town bands

were formed in the last half of the century brass band competitions became fairly common.<sup>3</sup>

Dozens of professional bands were formed in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. The "golden age of bands" was ushered in shortly after the Civil War by several famous bandmasters, the most important of whom was Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, an Irish-American bandmaster and cornetist who had led several Massachusetts bands during the 1850's. In 1873, Gilmore was appointed conductor of what became the most famous band in the country, featuring such famous performers as trombonist Frederick N. Innes, saxophonist E.A. Lefebvre, and cornetists Matthew Arbuckle, Jules Levy, and Herbert L. Clarke. Until his death in 1892, Gilmore led the band in more than one concert per day.<sup>4</sup>

Gilmore's most important contributions to the American band movement were his successful efforts to standardize the concert band's instrumentation by repopularizing the woodwinds, his three highly publicized marmoth music festivals held in New Orleans (1864) and Boston (1869 and 1872), and his insistence upon the highest possible musical standards from his bands. He and his band served as models for dozens of other professional bandmasters and their bands, who in turn inspired the formation of thousands of school, college, municipal, and industrial bands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most notable of the bandmasters inspired by Gilmore was John Philip Sousa, who, as conductor of his own band from 1892 to 1932, became the most famous bandmaster in the world.<sup>5</sup>

### Early school programs

The first school instrumental music program on record began at Boston's Farm and Trades School in 1857.<sup>6</sup> Several other programs are known to have existed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although little is known about these early instrumental programs,<sup>7</sup> it is safe to say that they were not numerous, that students did not receive academic credit for participation, and that there were no standard teaching methods, instrumentation, or curricula. In many instances string students began their studies with private teachers, while band students started in school programs. Often, school ensembles were composed of both stringed and wind instruments, and bore little resemblance to either orchestras or bands. Some of these bands (sometimes called "kid" or "juvenile bands") emulated professional and community bands with uniforms, parades, and concerts.

Orchestras, not bands, were the first to win widespread popularity in the public schools. Some of the earliest high school orchestra pro-

grams organized on a permanent basis were in Chelsea, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; New Albany, Indiana; Sullivan, Indiana; and Oakland, California. One of the first schools to award academic credit for participation was in Richmond, Indiana, where Will Earhart directed an orchestra as early as 1898 for which students received credit for participating by 1905. The difficulty of maintaining desirable instrumentation in high school orchestras populated by students of private teachers led to the development of grade school orchestras which served as feeder programs for the high school ensembles. Some programs were successful in this regard, as evidenced by reports of Earhart's Richmond, Indiana orchestra having reached symphonic proportions by 1912.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning of the twentieth century through about 1920, orchestras were far more numerous than bands in the American schools. In fact, 1900-1920 can properly be called the heyday of American public school orchestras. As late as the 1919-1920 school year, a survey revealed that 278 of 359 cities sponsored school orchestras, while only 88 sponsored bands.<sup>9</sup> In elementary instrumental programs of that era, string and wind players were often combined, just as in the nineteenth century.

The rise of school orchestras and bands from 1900 to 1920 coincided with new programs in music theory and music appreciation, the latter facilitated by the introduction of first the player-piano, and later the phonograph. This expansion of the music curriculum was due in part to successful efforts by leaders of the new progressive education movement to expand the schools' offerings, and to rapidly increase high school enrollments. According to Birge, instrumental music's "entrance into the schools was due to conditions inherent in the growth of democracy in education, which developed an elective system giving the pupil a free choice of a wide range of studies."<sup>10</sup> By the end of World War I, progressive education leaders viewed expanded music programs as an integral part of a new progressive American school system intended to be an "instrument of socialization," designed to help citizens take their places in the nation's emerging complex industrial society.<sup>11</sup>

School systems began to provide more tangible support for instrumental music programs during the late 1910's and early 1920's. This support came in the form of instruments, equipment, rehearsal and storage space, uniforms, and, in some cases, rehearsal time during the school day and academic credit. During this period, full-time instrumental music teachers, especially orchestra directors, began to be employed. Full time teachers were a significant improvement over the practice of using part-time instructors, teachers of other subjects, and even students to direct ensembles, or of having the ensembles led

by music supervisors, most of whom were vocalists. For a long period of time, many of these instrumental specialists were former professional performers, but gradually teacher-training institutions began to furnish trained instrumental teachers.

Another significant development in the 1910's and 1920's was the widespread adoption of class instrumental teaching in the schools, which made the teaching of instrumental music more practical and undoubtedly contributed to the growth of orchestras and bands. The teaching of instruments in classes, as opposed to private lessons, had occurred throughout the nineteenth century, but, as James A. Keene notes, these "isolated practices of class teaching did not find a fertile soil on the national landscape."<sup>12</sup> Around 1910, some American music educators observed a highly successful string program in England that was sponsored by an instrument manufacturing and music publishing company. This program, which began in Maidstone, England in 1897 and eventually spread to more than 3,000 schools, demonstrated the utility of violin class teaching. One of the music educators who visited England to observe the "Maidstone Movement" was Albert G. Mitchell, a music supervisor in Boston. Mitchell then organized violin classes in Boston in 1911, and wrote a class method book of his own in 1912.<sup>13</sup> His violin classes were added to the Boston school schedule in 1914. The effectiveness of class instrumental teaching was demonstrated for the first time at a national meeting of the Music Supervisors National Conference (MSNC) in 1920.<sup>14</sup> Class method books for other instruments appeared soon after Mitchell's class method for violin.

### Entering the modern era

The end of World War I marked the beginning of the modern era for public school instrumental music, especially for bands. Stirring band music and highly visible military bands had become associated with America's success in the war. After the war, bandmasters and band performers trained in military service became available to the schools in larger numbers. Reserve Officer Training Corps bands, formed in many high schools and colleges during the war, remained intact or were converted to regular school bands.<sup>15</sup> As the country entered the "Roaring Twenties," American school band programs benefited from a booming economy, a population swelled by millions of new immigrants, a larger number of high school students, especially those from the rising middle class, and a greater availability of musical instruments.

Another factor contributing to the exploding school band movement was the fact that radio, the phonograph, motion pictures, the emergence of jazz, and automobiles were changing recreational patterns, re-

sulting in a lessening of interest in town and community bands. Town bands had long provided musical enjoyment and recreation for participants, entertainment for listeners, and had contributed to parades, ceremonies, and other town rituals. In the 1920's, school bands began to perform these functions, and, in doing so, replaced town bands in much the same way that public school vocal programs had assumed the functions of singing schools in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

The late 1910's also saw the beginning of a serious interest in instrumental music education on the part of professional organizations. Convention programs of the Music Teachers National Association, National Education Association, and MSNC had, for years, included sessions related to instrumental music, but around 1917-19 the topic took on increasing importance. An example of association support was the founding in 1922 of the MSNC Committee On Instrumental Affairs, a committee that came to play a very important role in the band and orchestra movement.

The decade of the 1920's saw phenomenal growth in school band programs. In contrast to the beginning of the 1920's when orchestras dominated, by the end of the decade the vast majority of high schools, and many grade schools as well, were supporting bands. School orchestras appear to have grown steadily but somewhat less rapidly in number and size during this time.<sup>17</sup>

### Band and orchestra contests

One of the major factors leading to the spectacular growth of instrumental programs after World War I was the contest movement. Beginning in the late 1910's, as an outgrowth of school music appreciation classes, the so-called music memory contest proliferated. In addition, county-, district-, and state-level music contests for performing ensembles became more numerous.<sup>18</sup>

By the early 1920's, the decrease in the number of professional and town bands led to concern among manufacturers and dealers about instrument sales. Consequently, a Chicago-based music merchants' association and the Band Instrument Manufacturing Association sponsored a national band contest in Chicago in June 1923. The event was widely publicized. Invitations were mailed to hundreds of grammar school, high school, and military school bands. Only thirty bands actually competed, with one-half of them from the Chicago area. A high school band from Fostoria, Ohio, directed by John W. Wainwright, won first place in the high school division.<sup>19</sup>

This contest, or tournament as it was called, was poorly run in many respects: there was considerable misleading precontest hype, there

was only one judge, there were no requirements for instrumentation or repertoire, the marching competition was cancelled, and the contest was held out-of-doors in less than ideal surroundings. Despite its shortcomings, however, this "national" contest generated such high levels of enthusiasm that subsequent contests were planned.<sup>20</sup>

In an attempt to prevent contests from becoming overly commercialized, sponsorship was turned over to the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music (NBAM), a music advocacy organization sponsored by instrumental manufacturers. Under the direction of the MSNC Committee on Instrumental Affairs, state and regional elimination contests were proposed, and repertoire lists were developed for both junior and senior high schools.<sup>21</sup>

An insufficient number of state and regional contests held in 1924 and 1925 were in compliance with the new rules, so no national contest was held in those years. One of the main problems was that the repertoire lists consisted of music too advanced for many of the bands, both in terms of technique and instrumentation. In 1926 enough states and regions complied with the rules that a national contest was held at Fostoria, Ohio. Of the thirteen competing bands, the Joliet Township High School Band of Joliet, Illinois, directed by A.R. McAllister, won first place; Fostoria, Ohio placed second; Ogden, Utah was third; and a band from Louisville, Kentucky placed fourth.<sup>22</sup>

Also in 1926, the National School Band Association was formed to help administer future contests along with the NBAM and the MSNC. Its name was changed to the National School Band and Orchestra Association in 1929.<sup>23</sup> Subsequent national band contests were held in Council Bluffs, Iowa in 1927 with twenty-three bands competing; Joliet, Illinois in 1928 with twenty-seven bands; Denver, Colorado in 1929 with twenty-six bands; Flint, Michigan in 1930 with forty-four bands; and Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1931 with forty-two bands.<sup>24</sup>

The 1927 national band contest featured several changes: bands were divided for the first time into two classes, A and B, according to school enrollment; a double elimination requirement for the six best bands in Class A was added; and a sight-reading component was made compulsory. A national solo contest was added to the band contest in 1928, and small ensemble events and a category for Class C bands began in 1930.<sup>25</sup>

Also in 1928, points were subtracted for deficient instrumentation. Eventually, bandmasters Sousa, Clarke, Edwin Franko Goldman, Frederick A. Stock, and Taylor Branson were asked to formulate a standard instrumentation for concert bands. This group recommended a strong woodwind component in keeping with the traditions of the

Gilmore and Sousa bands. Their recommendation went against the British brass band tradition, as well as the American school band tendency at the time.<sup>26</sup> Their recommended instrumentation has remained more or less standard to this day.<sup>27</sup>

Orchestras followed closely upon the heels of bands. The first approved state-level orchestra contests were held in fifteen states in 1928,<sup>28</sup> followed by thirty states in 1929. The first national orchestra contest was held in 1929 in Mason City, Iowa, followed by contests in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1930, and Cleveland, Ohio in 1931.<sup>29</sup>

Several well-known musicians adjudicated the national band and orchestra contests from 1926 through 1931, including Sousa, Goldman, and Joseph E. Maddy. The 1931 band contest featured the seventy-seven-year-old Sousa as conductor for the massed band concert. Despite the popularity of the contests, however, they were becoming more and more competitive, so that by 1931 a strong movement arose to convert them to festivals. Many people believed that the practice of declaring only one winner in each category was destructive to all ensembles that failed to win first place. Adding to the resentment was the fact that Joliet, Illinois had won in Class A at the first three official national band contests (1926-28), and after a year of ineligibility in 1929, placed second in 1930 and recaptured first place in 1931. Similarly, Hobart, Indiana, directed by William D. Revelli, won in Class B in both 1930 and 1931. The fact that winners were decided by as little as four-tenths of a percentage point, was also resented.<sup>30</sup>

The controversy over contests versus festivals was resolved through a compromise: group ratings replaced individual rankings at the 1933 national band and orchestra contests. (No national contests were held in 1932 due to general dissatisfaction with the contest system and to the country's economic conditions).<sup>31</sup> Eventually, a five-division system (I-V) was settled upon, the system in use today. Even the semantics were resolved with the acceptance of the term "competitive festivals" (or "competition-festivals").<sup>32</sup>

With a new name and revised rating plan, national band festivals were held in Evanston, Illinois in 1933 and Des Moines, Iowa in 1934. National orchestra festivals were held in Elmhurst, Illinois in 1933 and Ottawa, Kansas in 1934. After these two years, national band and orchestra festivals alternated years from 1935 through 1937, during which orchestra competitions were held in Madison, Wisconsin in 1935 and Columbus, Ohio in 1937, and a band festival was held in Cleveland, Ohio in 1936.

Due to the difficulty of finding suitable host cities and to the travel distances required for participants in the national festivals, a plan was