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Boston University
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by Dan Rager

The Interpretation of Sousa

Ever since the public fell in love with John Phillip Sousa's (1854-1932) music, conductors have been programming it for their audiences. Sousa is best known as the king of marches and for good reason. He composed music of many styles, including operettas, songs and suites. Aside from these, most of his works were composed specifically for band including 136 marches which are independent pieces (Raoul F. Camus). His fame as a composer of marches was augmented by his role as conductor of The United States Marine Band and his own band, The Sousa Band. His international fame and commitment to music education has provided a repertoire of music for every school band in the United States (Sousa, P. John).

Sousa's music transcends cultures and genres internationally which is why he is the most recorded band composer to date (Mitziga, Walter). His marches are diverse in character and described as being typically American sounding, perhaps because of their breezy energy.

Among the finest of Sousa's marches are *The Washington Post*, *The Fairest of the Fair*, *Hands Across the Sea* and *The Thunder*. These titles were chosen for this recording anthology because of their popularity as being the most recorded marches that he wrote (Mitziga, Walter). They also have a common thread between them. Firstly, they were all commissions dedicated to special events. Three of these were written in 1889 and are considered military marches.

The odd title, *The Fairest of the Fair* represents a beautiful young woman that is portrayed splendidly in the lyrical lines. Together, they create a unique colloque of themes that when put together take-on a new life. Finally, all four were assembled into a symphony titled *Symphony on the Themes of Sousa* composed by Ira Hearshen (Symphony on Themes of Sousa). Hearshen is a Hollywood film composer with dozens of films to his credit including *Rush Hour*, *Cats & Dogs*, *All Dog's Go to Heaven* and *Seabiscuit*. His works for band are extensive and include performances by The U. S. Marine Band, The U. S. Army Field Band and others. His first symphony is based upon the themes of these famous Sousa marches.

- *Symphony on the Themes of Sousa* is a wonderful portrait that captures the many moods of these four marches. It transcends the music into a contemporary sound yet keeping true to Sousa's original idea.
- *The Washington Post* is a patriotic march written at the request of the famous news paper of the same name for their essay contest awards ceremony presented on June 15, 1889.
- *The Thunderer* march was written in March of 1889 for the Mason's of Washington D.C. Sousa was fascinated by what they considered mystical qualities in otherwise natural phenomena so he wrote a march around these characteristics.
- *The Fairest of the Fair* was one of Sousa's more melodic, less military marches and was composed for the annual Boston Food Fair of 1908. It is

claimed that the memory of a pretty girl he had seen at an earlier fair inspired the composition which was the only march he wrote that year.

- *Hands Across the Sea* is a military march written in 1889 and dedicated to all of America's allied countries abroad.

Conductors and composers have always looked for new approaches and direction to validate their musical interpretation of Sousa's music. To this end it is the objective of this writer to compare the above titles with different recordings and bands. The conductors of these recordings have their own interpretation and sound. So does composer Ira Hearshen who wrote the four movement symphony based on these themes. As I discovered, Hearshen transforms Sousa's music to another realm bringing it into the 21st century.

This compilation of marches represents four different bands and two conductors. It is the performance interpretation of these marches that unify the titles. In today's musical world, interpretation comes in many forms which convey all aspects of recording performance including recording equipment, concert halls, ensemble size, type of instruments as well as a conductor's perception of tempi and style. While interpretation varies from group to group and conductors put their personal touch on the music, one could argue the original was best and everything after is subjective. There is one more reason to identify and interpret these marches and that is a personal touch.

It is interesting to note that while John P. Sousa was the most recorded composer of band music, Frederick Fennell was one of the most recorded American conductors in history (Simon, Robert). As a young musician, Fennell

met Sousa in 1931 at a summer music camp known today as Interlochen. Years later he would conduct and record all of Sousa's marches by ensembles around the world. From humble beginnings to his fortitude that lead to Frederick Fennell becoming the conductor of the Eastman Pops Orchestra and later founder of the Eastman Wind Ensemble (Raoul F. Camus), Fennell first recorded *Hands Across the Sea*, *The Washington Post* and *The Thunderer* with The Eastman Wind Ensemble as a tribute to Sousa (Hands Across the Sea).

The first track begins with a symphony based on these march themes. Fennell recorded these with the Tokyo Kosei Wind Ensemble of Japan in October 18-19, 1995. The marches are incorporated into a large symphonic work called *Symphony on the Themes of Sousa* by Ira Hearshen. Each march theme is transformed into an elaborate array of polyphonic textures, rhythms and harmonies. The work employs Sousa's original themes at times while exploring new contemporary material based upon the theme. Each of the four movements incorporates a march and are scored in this order: *The Washington Post*, *The Thunder*, *The Fairest of the Fair*, and *Hands Across the Sea*. At the end of each movement the original march returns as if you are listening to Sousa's original.

Incorporating these marches into a symphonic collection and composing them into a symphony has never been done before until Hearshen (Simon, Robert). His interpretation on the thematic material has stretched the limits of the march in the way we experience it. His conclusion reverts back to Sousa but he has taken the listener on a music journey they will not forget.

Frederick Fennell's interpretation of this music takes a different approach and it is interesting that this symphony of themes begins the CD, track 1. Perhaps the marches are attached to something much bigger than the typical breezy march. Fennell concludes each movement of the theme at a slow tempo. One has the sense he wants to stretch the piece out for as long as he can. In doing so, the music takes on an entirely different feel uncharacteristic of Sousa and Fennell's other march recordings.

Tracks 2, 3 & 5 were recorded between 1956 and 1958 on the 'Mercury Living Presence' label by The Eastman Wind Ensemble. The LP was re-released on compact disc in 1994 (*Hands Across the Sea*). The performance of *The Washington Post*, *Hands Across the Sea* and *The Thunderer* are clean and balanced well in the wind instruments. Upon closer listening you will find a particular Fennell trait as the bass drum and crash cymbals penetrate through the ensemble not found by most conductors. The tempo is a perfect 120 as Sousa scored it and Fennell not only maintains the tempo, he uses the contrasting dynamics to create a light, lyrical and jubilant sound throughout. The sound is warm because it was originally recorded on analog tape.

The Fairest of the Fair on track 4 is a Fennell arrangement conducted by Jerry Junkin and performed by the Dallas Wind Symphony. Junkin has been the Artistic Director and Conductor of the Dallas Wind Symphony since the bands debut in 1985 (*Strictly Sousa*).

While this march was in the symphony of themes in track 1, it sounds fresh and exciting to be performed as an independent work. The band

instrumentation is larger and the sound of the group more homogenous. The recording devices and hall in which this was recorded define the ensemble's unique sound. After one listening you feel as though this is the finale and the next piece is the encore. Why is this march different from the others in sound and excitement? The way in which it was recorded and the size of ensemble comes into play, but the interpretation of what Junkin did with it tells all. One cannot sit and listen to this march at the tempo it is performed without jumping out of their seat to march along. The sound is loud with dynamic, articulate syncopated lines that penetrate to the bone. It is unforgettable and you will impatiently wait for the next track at its conclusion.

After taking a quick look, track 6 appears to be similar to 2, 3, and 5 as Frederick Fennell again conducts the Tokyo Kosei Wind Ensemble in Sousa's *The Thunderer* (March World Vol. 4). The noticeable difference is that the record label is Brain Records. Immediately you hear a different sounding ensemble and interpretation of the march. Fennell's thundering interpretation of *The Thunderer* is like a calm storm. The performance is homogenous and played more like Mozart than Sousa. The tempo is quick and the band's sound is light. The heavy percussive bass drum and cymbals associated with Fennell recordings are missing. All instruments are played at the same dynamic level throughout creating a fast uninspiring march.

The final two tracks (7 - 8) on this recording are *The Washington Post* and *Hands Across the Sea* (Strictly Sousa). Performed by the Dallas Wind Symphony, Jerry Junkin again adds his personal interpretation as to what a

march should sound like. Instead of using an arrangement of these marches, he uses the original score from which Sousa wrote. The performance sound is pure and clean of 20th century augmentative frills that are so prevalent in modern arrangements. This approach has given the listener a reason to love what they hear. Junkin's exciting interpretation is not his, it belongs to the composer who wrote it right the first time, John Phillip Sousa. Junkin's job as a conductor was to interpret what Sousa wrote and he accomplished that goal.

This anthology is a good collection of marches that represents different ideas and interpretations on how a composer, conductor or ensemble can perform a single piece of music. It is the artistic integrity of such people who take musical principles to a higher level for the listeners' enjoyment. This anthology is a rare glimpse as to what can be accomplished to expand and excite those of us who love the music of the march.

Interpreting Sousa

- 1) Symphony on the Themes of John Philip Sousaby Ira Hearshen
 - I. After "Washington Post"(17:33)
Moderato – Molto allegro
 - II. After "The Thunderer"(7:23)
Largamente
 - III. After "Fairest of the Fair"(5:15)
Allegro non troppo
 - IV. After "Hands Across the Sea"(14:06)
Allegro non troppo

- 2) Washington Post.....Sousa/arr. Brion & Schissel(2:18)
- 3) The Thunderer.....Sousa/arr. Fennell.....(2:43)
- 4) The Fairest of the Fair.....Sousa/arr. Fennell.....(2:39)
- 5) Hands Across the Sea.....Sousa/arr. Brion & Schissel(2:47)
- 6) The Thunderer.....John P. Sousa(2:36)
- 7) Washington Post.....John P. Sousa(2:27)
- 8) Hands Across the Sea.....John P. Sousa(2:50)

Duration [50:37]

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