



Marine Band | Marine Chamber Orchestra | Marine Chamber Ensembles

JOHN PHILIP SOUSA

Perhaps more than anyone else, 17th Director John Philip Sousa is responsible for bringing the United States Marine Band to the level of excellence upheld today. As a composer, he wrote the best-known and most loved marches in the repertoire; as Director, he was an innovator who shaped the future of the Marine Band.

Sousa was born November 6, 1854, at 636 G Street, SE, Washington, D.C., near Marine Barracks where his father, Antonio, was a musician in the Marine Band. Sousa studied piano and most orchestral instruments, but his first love was the violin. Sousa gained great proficiency on the instrument, and at age 13, he was almost persuaded to join a circus band. However, his father intervened and enlisted him as an apprentice musician in the Marine Band. Sousa remained in the band until he was 20.

After his discharge from the Marine Corps, Sousa remained in Washington for a time, conducting and playing the violin. In 1876, he moved to Philadelphia where he worked as a composer, arranger, and proofreader for publishing houses. Sousa toured with a company producing the musical *Our Flirtation*, for which he wrote the incidental music and the march. While on tour in St. Louis, he received a telegram offering him the leadership of the Marine Band in Washington. He accepted and reported for duty on October 1, 1880.

The Marine Band gave Sousa his first experience conducting a military band, and he approached directorship differently than his predecessors. He replaced much of the library's music with symphonic transcriptions and changed the instrumentation to meet his needs. Rehearsals became exceptionally strict, and he shaped his musicians into the country's premier military band. Marine Band concerts began to attract discriminating audiences, and the band's reputation began to grow.

Sousa first received acclaim in military band circles with the writing of his march "The Gladiator" in 1886. From that time on he received ever-increasing attention and respect as a composer. In 1888, he wrote "Semper Fidelis." Dedicated to "the officers and men of the Marine Corps," it is traditionally known as the "official" march of the Marine Corps and was considered by Sousa to be his finest composition.

In 1889, Sousa wrote "The Washington Post" to promote an essay contest sponsored by the newspaper. The march was soon adapted and identified with the new dance called the two-step, and became the most popular tune in America and Europe. A British band journalist remarked that since Johann Strauss, Jr. was called "The Waltz King," American bandmaster Sousa should be called "The March King." With this suggestion, Sousa's title was coined.

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PLAYING AMERICA'S MUSIC SINCE 1798

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Under Sousa, the Marine Band also made its first recordings. The phonograph was a relatively new invention, and the Columbia Phonograph Company wanted to record a military band. The Marine Band was chosen, and 60 cylinders were released in the fall of 1890. Within two years, well over 200 Marine Band cylinders were released, placing Sousa's marches among the first and most popular pieces ever recorded.

The immense popularity of the Marine Band made Sousa anxious to take his Marine Band on tour, and in 1891, President Harrison gave official sanction for the first tour, a tradition which has continued almost annually since. After the second Marine Band tour in 1892, David Blakely, Sousa's manager, suggested he organize his own civilian concert band. On July 30 of that year, Sousa stepped down as Director of the Marine Band. At his farewell concert on the White House lawn, Marine Band members presented him with a handsome engraved baton as a token of their respect and esteem. Returned to the band in 1953 by Sousa's daughters, Jane and Helen, the Sousa baton is now traditionally passed to the new Director of the Marine Band during change of command ceremonies.

Sousa's last appearance before the Marine Band was on the occasion of the Carabao Wallow of 1932 in Washington. Sousa rose from the speaker's table, took the baton from Captain Taylor Branson, the band's Director, and led the band in "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

John Philip Sousa died on March 6, 1932, in Reading, Pa. His body was brought to his native Washington to lie in state in the Band Hall at Marine Barracks. Four days later, two companies of Marines and Sailors, the Marine Band, and honorary pallbearers from the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps headed the funeral cortege from Marine Barracks to Congressional Cemetery.

In Washington, D.C., on December 9, 1939, the new Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge across the Anacostia River was dedicated to the memory of the great American composer and bandmaster. In 1976, Sousa was included in the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in a ceremony at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, and in 1998, he was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame in Cincinnati.

The Marine Band rededicated its historic band hall at Marine Barracks as "John Philip Sousa Band Hall" in 1974. In addition, the bell from the SS John Philip Sousa, a World War II Liberty Ship, resides there.

In perhaps the most significant tribute to Sousa's influence on American culture, the U.S. Congress passed legislation in December 1987 designating "The Stars and Stripes Forever" as the National March of the United States. Audiences worldwide never seem to tire of its melodies and rhythms, and it is without a doubt the most frequently requested encore in the Marine Band's repertoire.

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