

BANDS IN WAR-TIME

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NO ONE is ashamed to admit a complete ignorance of band music; it is, in fact, rather considered the right thing to have no interest in the subject. Most "serious" musicians, together with the "cultured" public, take for granted that band music is terrible. It is not particularly difficult to justify this attitude. The only catch in the matter is that the state of band music is at least partly the result of the apathy shown by these same "serious" musicians and music-lovers.

Now that the country is at war there is a sudden surge of interest in bands and band music, particularly as they are involved in the Army and in connection with Army and civilian morale. With this interest is generally coupled an assumption that our band music is very poor, and that something should be done to improve it. Whatever the case, it is certain that if our war-time band music is bad, it is because no one bothered to take much interest in it during peacetime.

Band music has special functions and peculiar problems, and it may be useful to examine these briefly. There are not now in the United States, nor have there ever been, many professional bands. There have certainly been few good ones. Their activities and accomplishments are rather set apart from a study of the country's band music as a whole, for the band in the United States is primarily an amateur organization. During the last twenty-five years town and village bands have been supplanted by high-school and college bands, of which there are unbelievable thousands. It is the standards and practices of these groups that must be considered. It is impossible to understand the problems of Army and Navy bands without reference to the development of band music in the schools.

High-school bands are not independent musical organizations. Each one is part of a vast system which has been created in the schools. The constitution and activity of a high-school band is determined by policies formulated by the National High School Band Association. This group

exercises what amounts to a dictatorship of taste and of technical aims. Professional musicians, and the problems of professional "serious" music, have no place here; if they are known to exist, it is in a negative way. The Association is interested in "music education" rather than in music in the abstract, and its aims and accomplishments must be viewed in this light. So successful has the program been, from the standpoint of organization, that it amounts to a huge business enterprise with great ramifications, both musical and commercial. Instrument manufacturers and publishers of band music both realize their dependence on the organization. It can be said without reservation that no band music is published in the United States which is not designed for use by the school bands, and which is not in line both musically and technically with the policies laid down by the Association. As a result, Army bands and others are forced to draw upon a repertory created for an entirely different purpose from their own and suited to entirely different needs.

The high-school "symphonic" band is thoroughly standardized. Its instrumentation, which tends to grow larger each year, is established by regulation. Its repertory is chosen for the most part from the lists of selected material compiled by the Association each year. In order to participate in the contests and festivals which are the leading features of school music activity, the instrumentation *must* conform to the standard and the music *must* be chosen from the approved lists.

The tendencies shown in high-school band music are all toward bigness: more instruments, rather than better writing for present instruments, bigger and fancier music of a late-romantic elaborateness, rather than simplicity and straightforwardness. No one can gainsay the fact that the youngsters in these bands often play remarkably well. Sometimes the instrumental technic is simply phenomenal. Unfortunately there is little to indicate a corresponding growth of musicality or musicianship. The music on which the youngsters are trained would almost preclude that possibility. The lists of selected music are (with some exceptions) collections of mediocre materials, containing second-rate works by "name" composers and a good deal of hack stuff written especially for "educational" use. The best that can be said is that there is still time to hope for change, and some indication that change may already be on the way. At present, however, the materials used show the influence of "culture" rather than of discrimination and taste. Whether great thought has been given to the selection of material from the standpoint of fundamentally *musical* educa-

tion cannot be decided on the evidence of the selections themselves. It would seem at best doubtful.

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The connection between the development of band music in our schools and the present situation in our Army bands is not as slight as it may seem. School bands have accustomed the public to a higher degree of proficiency than one normally finds in an Army band. The standard Army band of twenty-eight pieces also seems like a skeleton in comparison with the usual school outfit. Further, the band music now published for the school bands is almost entirely impractical for the smaller Army units. The Army bandmaster is left with an almost insuperable problem as to repertory.

During the last war the case was quite different. The Army band had to face comparison with small town bands which never rehearsed from one end of a year to the other. Published band music was arranged with small bands in mind; it usually sounded awful no matter what size combination tackled it. Army bands today are forced to continue using a good many of these antiquated "oom-pah" arrangements, since the newer ones are almost all hopelessly out of the question. Persons having to do with Army bands realize this problem; to the end of finding a solution a survey of available material was recently made. The results of the survey showed, of course, serious shortcomings in the available repertory. It is now to be hoped that some action will be undertaken to remedy the situation.

The two most practical methods of remedy seem to be:

- 1) To increase the size of the standard army band or
- 2) To create a whole new repertory for the use of these bands as they are today.

According to recent report, the authorized instrumentation has now been raised to thirty-five pieces. This is a compromise that will not come near solving the repertory problem, though it will give a little extra body of sound to the average band.

The proficiency of the present small army bands varies considerably, though most of them play rather badly, and I cannot say that I have heard any really fine ones. A lack of seriously-trained bandmasters may have something to do with this condition. There are certainly enough skilled players available, and more are being drafted every day. Not all of these draftees seem to find places in the bands, however. Since there are, no doubt, more players than vacancies, it is a question of first-come-first-served. Important though is the fact that no draftees are considered for bandmaster-

ships, as far as I have been able to find out. From a Service standpoint, this is obviously logical; musically, it prevents fresh personalities and fresh ideas from getting much of a chance with the Army bands. The Music Educators are agitating for a change in this situation. Since many school bandmasters will be taken into the Army, the Music Educators' Conference seems to feel that they can be of service as bandmasters. The entire question seems to me, however, to be up to the Army to decide, on the basis of just *what kind of bands it wants*. Outsiders seem to forget that Army bands are Army adjuncts, and that their functions and usefulness are determined by military men and not by professional musicians. Army bands are not primarily concert organizations; they play for marching, for inspection, and for a dozen other set purposes. If they give any concerts, purely for entertainment, that is incidental.

Undoubtedly if the Army officials in charge feel that Army morale can best be served by having a larger, or differently constituted, standard band, they will take steps toward making such changes. It is true that the present small band is limited both as to repertory and as to scope of performance, and it is also true that better levels of performance and selection are today generally expected. But change actually depends on the answer to the question of how important the Army itself considers its band music.



The American composer has a serious responsibility in regard to bands. Had he in the past been able to show convincingly what he could do with band music, there would perhaps be some call for him to get to work today to provide our Army bands with new material. But the American composer is an unknown quantity when it comes to bands. Sadly enough, most of the recent contributions to band literature by well-known serious American composers have been disappointing affairs. The exceptions, however, show what really can be done in the band medium; these few pieces are perhaps the best hope we have that there is any future at all in band music. For what is needed in the last analysis is not better players or fancier collections of odd instruments — but better compositions, better arrangements, and (incidentally) better conductors. That a field so popular, and with such a hold on the American imagination, should have remained alien to our serious musicians is a reflection on none but the serious musicians themselves.