Sousa’s Descriptive Works and Suites as Class-Cultural Mediations

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Graduate Program in Music

The Ohio State University

2017

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Abstract

American bandleader John Philip Sousa’s rise to international fame during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries coincided with a time of growing self-awareness and criticism in American musical culture. Numerous groups and music ensembles formed in the United States around this period that dedicated themselves to so-called “highbrow” European classical music while dismissing American works as imitative or inferior. Though Sousa is recognized as a composer primarily through his American marches—a genre clearly distasteful to the Eurocentric symphonic halls and opera houses of his time—his lesser-known descriptive works and multi-movement instrumental suites reveal that the bandleader desired to appease both casual concertgoers and trained music analysts. Sousa strove to entertain and educate his audience equally and show them the value in both popular (“lowbrow”) music and its high-art counterpart. His programs for the United States Marine Band and the Sousa Band were characterized by a strong presence of well-known contemporary tunes and songs and orchestral transcriptions alike. The descriptive works and suites do not neatly fall into either category, and instead serve as a middle ground that bridges the opposing ends of the spectrum.

Sousa’s two descriptive works—The Chariot Race in 1890 and Sheridan’s Ride in 1891—were the result of early experimentation with the wind band ensemble to expand
the United States Marine Band’s repertoire for new performance seasons. The works focused on programmatic musical depictions and instrumental effects to convey a narrative to the listener, but Sousa also incorporated more intricate musical techniques in their context, such as chromaticism and leitmotivs. The first suite, *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1893, continued this practice but did so in a much larger form with multiple movements and subsequently more space for musical development. The suites are among the longest instrumental works that Sousa composed for the concert band. As such, they offer a unique perspective not only on Sousa’s navigation of high- and lowbrow musical concepts, but also on his personal compositional style.

Writings and correspondences related to American music at the time and Sousa and his activities suggest that his endeavors with the new genres were generally well-received but ultimately saw limited lasting effects. Sousa personally expected that the suites—particularly *The Last Days of Pompeii*—would come to be considered the shining jewel of his compositional output and serve to shape future American music. Although critics and concertgoers typically lauded the pieces for both their programmatic clarity and musical depth, music analysts such as Louis C. Elson and Frédéric Louis Ritter seem to have been uninterested in including them and their composer in their publications on American music. Though they failed to reach the degree of importance Sousa hoped they would in his legacy, the descriptive works and suites represent a critical facet of their composer’s beliefs on class culture and music development in America as it entered the twentieth century.
Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks go out to Drs. Arved Ashby, Grame Boone, and Eric Johnson at the Ohio State University, as well as my parents, Scott and Mary Ann Wilcer, for their guidance and support throughout my academic studies. The amount of time you have all given to me has been more than generous, and shall remain ever important to me.

I would also like to show my appreciation for the late Dr. Paul E. Bierley, whose work with and writings on John Philip Sousa were invaluable for my research. I am honored to follow his footsteps and further contribute to the legacy of the March King.
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Chapter 1: Introductory Remarks and Sousa amidst His Contemporaries

Introduction

John Philip Sousa presents an unusual conciliation of so-called “highbrow” and “lowlbrow” cultures within the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.¹ These terms have become controversial to modern research due to their tendency to simplify values and social perspectives down to crude hierarchies while affirming elitist notions of culture. Although such terminology is largely recognized today by its use as a classification device by historians such as Neil Harris and Lawrence Levine, Sousa himself acknowledged its presence in his own time and considered the concept of a cultured and uncultured duality to have very real effects on his music.² In particular, his pair of descriptive works (titled The Chariot Race and Sheridan’s Ride) and the recurring multi-movement “suite” emphasize a fusion of cultured and less-cultured attributes and mentalities towards music in general: The pieces’ longer duration and section-based forms allowed for a deeper, more complex musical texture in comparison to the songs

¹ Specifically, the terms “highbrow” and “lowlbrow” were first used in reference to American culture in the 1880s and after 1900, respectively. While Sousa’s writings do not normally use these exact terms, he incorporates various synonyms that emphasize a “cultured” and “uncultured” spectrum present in music during the same time period. Refer to Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 221-222.
² Sousa serves as a useful recurring musical subject in Levine’s book and is clearly involved with both extremes of social class. Levine focuses on his appearance and the band’s in general rather than explicit compositions and programmatic content.
and marches common to Sousa’s personal repertoire while still utilizing a similar
instrumental configuration and size for the band. These sectional or multi-movement
forms, however, avoid traditional music labels and seem to have been chosen by Sousa
for their ambiguity and versatility. Compared to the standard art music symphony with its
rigid four-movement structure, the suite of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was
open-ended, even nebulous as a compositional genre. Likewise, so-called “descriptive
works” lacked definitive overarching characteristics apart from an extensive and explicit
program accompanying the music. The two genres embraced concepts established by
European music culture and its respective composers, but their execution was ultimately
dictated by Sousa’s popular-oriented style of music to create a smaller, more digestible
and streamlined descriptive framework for his audience. Given that these two categories
of works are the largest purely instrumental genres that he composed and published, they
provide not only a critical perspective on his interpretation of “high” and “low” qualities
in his own band music, but also on his ability to mediate between them as a leading figure
in American musical life.

Sousa amidst His Contemporaries

The roots of Sousa’s clash with both European elitism and a fledgling American
vernacular trace back well before his leadership of the Sousa Band beginning in 1892.
From an early age, he trained as a violinist and performed in various environments,
among them the United States Marine Band. After leaving his apprenticeship with the
Marine Band in 1875, Sousa was approached by the American philanthropist W.W.
Corcoran, who offered him the opportunity to leave the country and study music in
Europe. Sousa experienced such an aversion to the situation and the looming sense of indebtedness and indoctrination he felt over Corcoran’s offer that he began to exert his musical independence from patrons, organizations, and even to a certain extent, national cultural identities altogether, particularly when the identity in question was the result of governmental subsidy or institutionalized nationalism.³ It was an independence that Sousa championed throughout his life but was periodically required to clarify, considering his own stature as an “American” composer.

Contrastingly, Sousa’s account while working with Milton Nobles’ travelling production company later in the same year reveals a desire for greater musical professionalism and dissatisfaction with the kind of stubborn amateur music-making in the States that he felt ultimately caused compositions and performances to suffer.⁴ Sousa’s tightrope-walking between the established, patron-indebted European tradition and that of the younger United States brought about what he considered his most immutable personal laws when it comes to music production: self-sufficiency and quality.⁵ Many regional American bands and ensembles in Sousa’s time failed to obtain the personnel and degree of ability required for creating a standard of professionalism in the service of works as that witnessed in Europe and American orchestral groups, but

³ In Sousa’s own words: “I never got out of a house quicker than I did out of that one... The idea of being under obligations to anybody was very distasteful to me and though Mr. Corcoran might have sent me to Europe, I feel that I am better off as it is—even without the benefits of European education…” See John Philip Sousa, Marching Along, Revised Edition, ed. Paul E. Bierley (Westerville, Ohio: Integrity Press, 1994), 31, 187.

⁴ In a particular episode in Streator, Illinois, a group of players hired for a performance lacked half the required instruments, refused to practice before the engagement, and foisted “local favorites” upon the already-decided program. Sousa was forced to locate authorities in order to remove the individuals following an argument regarding payment. Ibid., 43-47.

⁵ Ibid., 186-188.
Sousa refused to accept the benefaction system that highbrow institutions relied on financially as a solution. In his eyes, reliance on these funds would ultimately lead to external social and political co-option and devalue artistic liberty and the production of creative works.\(^6\)

Sousa’s pursuit of aesthetic integrity raises the question of the artist’s role in regards to “culture.” It is a question that he himself weighs in on in his autobiography *Marching Along: Recollections of Men, Women, and Music*, particularly so when comparing his career goals to those of the orchestral conductor Theodore Thomas. Although the two figures ultimately travelled disparate paths—Thomas organizing and acting as the first director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Sousa going on to become one of America’s most popular band leaders—their beginnings show striking correlations. Not only did both coordinate with the American printing magnate and impresario David Blakely for managing their ventures at some point, but it was in fact Thomas who largely inspired Sousa’s appreciation for classical music alongside concert showmanship. Sousa was just turning fifteen in 1869 when Thomas’ travelling orchestra visited his hometown of Washington D.C. near the end of their first tour.\(^7\) Both figures played a critical role in spreading awareness and appreciation for classical compositions to the American public through touring; Sousa, however, was recognized far less for

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\(^6\) Levine addresses the topic of music patronage extensively via the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and other musical entities. While these examples did not occur until closer to the turn of the century or afterwards, he stresses the presence of the system elsewhere in American art and culture beforehand. Refer to Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, 128-132.

doing so. In a 1928 article reflecting on Sousa’s career, the soprano Nora Fauchild defended the bandmasters’ accomplishments towards this objective:

We all know what a great impetus to music in this country was given by Theodore Thomas and his orchestra but Mr. Sousa’s similar contribution is sometimes given less emphasis than it deserves. Not only did he perform orchestral masterpieces in hundreds of communities which, before the coming of the radio, could not have heard them […] and not only did he reach in metropolitan centres thousands who might never have become acquainted with the greatest music, but he has been doing so since 1892. ⁸

The disparity in reception between Sousa and Thomas stemmed foremost from the two conductors’ choice of ensemble: Thomas led a standard string and wind orchestra fully capable of fulfilling the orchestration of various classical works as requested by their original scores, whereas the wind and brass concert band used by Sousa was a hybrid of preexisting band traditions and Sousa’s own trialing with instrumentation and organization. Not only was the concert band a newer, developing medium for a longstanding high-art music culture, it was also open to practices of transposing and adapting works. In order to account for alternate instrument types and the different indoor and outdoor settings the band may play in, certain pieces necessitated changes from their original form. The concert band as a result appeared simplistic and inferior to the orchestra in the eyes of the upper echelons of music society, and the accounts and writings from this social class perpetuated this perception.

_The National Music of America and Its Sources_, written in 1899 by the music researcher and editor Louis C. Elson, exemplifies high society’s negative views of the

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band tradition while admiring the European-inspired orchestra. Elson explicitly condemns Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore—who is widely regarded as Sousa’s predecessor in American march music—when he summarizes the bandmaster’s Peace Jubilees in 1869 and 1872. Gilmore first came up with the concept of the Jubilee to celebrate the end of the American Civil War by organizing the largest musical event possible then witnessed on American soil. Both events resulted in so-called “monster” concerts that required the organization and participation of thousands of musicians, singers, and performers. Elson brazenly opens his impressions of the Jubilees by proclaiming Gilmore “a very enterprising Irishman,—not too heavily burdened with classical tastes.” In regards to the massive collaborative initiatives themselves, he bluntly characterizes them as “scheme[s] of wholesaling art” and little more than a “musical bargain-counter.” Nonetheless, Elson admits—perhaps begrudgingly—that the Jubilees were worthwhile investments for the American public, as they “planted the seeds of good music in hundreds of villages where they had not existed before.”

Being published in 1899, Elson’s text directly coincided with the early career of the Sousa Band. It was intended as a thorough, holistic reference resource for the development and current status of music in the United States. Yet no mention of the March King or his already-renowned ensemble appears in these pages despite this chronological congruence, even when he offers focused analysis on largescale celebrations where Sousa’s group was clearly in attendance and present as a major attraction. Just prior to his deconstruction of Gilmore and the Peace Jubilees, Elson takes

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a page to address the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, otherwise known as the World’s Columbian Exposition. Both Thomas’ and Sousa’s ensembles were present as official musical representatives and drew considerable attention from fairgoers. Elson showers praise upon Thomas for his services as a “classical musician,” the result of which he claimed “was apparent in every orchestral detail” at the event. Contrastingly, Elson acknowledges neither Sousa nor even the existence of an official band for the occasion. The closest he comes to addressing this non-orchestral presence at the Fair is his bold, ennobling claim that the committee of the fair “appealed to the great American composers to furnish new selections that should be national music.” Elson leaves no room for the reader to postulate on the outcome of the call to action, however:

The result was again a proof that such music is not made to order, for, although our greatest composers were heard from, nothing that can by any stretch of fancy be called permanent, resulted.

Curtly summarized, Elson considered Thomas and his orchestra as the only agents of American musical culture at the World’s Fair who were worth identifying by name. Clearly, the label of “national” music as implied in the book is not simply earned through the act of indigenous production; additional sets of prerequisites lie beneath the surface, tracing back to high-culture circles and their preferences. It is a far cry from the seemingly open-minded declaration he makes several chapters earlier while on the topic
of song in American culture, that “…any song of the people, whatever its emotions may
be, has a right to be classed as national music.” 13

Elson was not the only writer to bemoan the seeming absence of “national”
American music nearing the end of the nineteenth century: the German-American
composer and writer Frédéric Louis Ritter made similar remarks in his 1883 book Music
in America. Ritter expresses his concerns directly: “How are we to account for this utter
absence of national people’s music and poetry in America?” 14 Ritter’s perception of band
music itself does not fare much better than Elson’s, as he portrays the genre and its
ensemble as a disappointing placeholder for the sentimental, nostalgic tunes and songs he
envisions in his ideal American society:

   The American youth has no sweet, chaste, pathetic love ditties to sing in
   ‘doubtful hope’ under the window of the adored one. He buys that article in the
   shape of a brass band: if this does not go directly to the heart, it, at any rate, can
   be heard for miles around. 15

Elson and Ritter’s dismissal or outright disregard of prolific popular bandleaders and the
band tradition itself suggests that it clearly failed to satisfy their criteria to be considered
“national music of America.” As a result, the genre was not worth mentioning any further
than listing it as a persistent fad, a distraction undermining the progress towards
legitimate and honorable national music.

   Though Elson seemed to place Thomas on a pedestal at the time of the World’s
Fair in Chicago and depicts him as independent from the likes of concert bands, Thomas

13 Ibid., 161.
14 Frédéric Louis Ritter, Music in America, 1883, with introduction by Johannes Riedel (New York:
15 Ibid., 422.
maintained a forthright and reciprocal relationship with Sousa. The two were in close contact and were well aware of each other’s performances, and they attended each other’s shows in 1892 for the dedication of the World’s Fair buildings in Chicago. Afterwards, they met to speak heart-to-heart about their beliefs and roles as musical figureheads in the United States. Sousa drew such extensive comparisons between their careers and ensembles in *Marching Along* that he seems to encourage readers to interpret Thomas as his high-culture counterpart. Sousa does not let them take the comparison too far, as he confidently addresses and clarifies the divergence in their paths and ultimate goals: “He gave Wagner, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky, in the belief that he was educating his public; I gave Wagner, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky with the hope that I was entertaining my public.”

Levine likewise employs the concepts of “education” and “entertainment” throughout his analysis of class in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, though he uses these terms to define a subjective assumption of authority over culture. The association of Thomas and other similar-minded figures with “teacher roles” definitively elevates their musical position as a sort of guardian of knowledge and the public’s well-being, although simultaneously it suggests a degree of forced, regulated necessity—the necessity of “being cultured.” Sousa himself claims he took the supposedly lower route as an entertainer.

The roles of entertainer and educator are not so definitive and clear-cut, however. Nor do they offer a comprehensive representation of societal positions in fin-de-siècle American music and their motivations. At the same time Sousa was heading the U.S. Marine Band in Washington D.C., Henry Lee Higginson established the Boston

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Symphony Orchestra in 1881 and later the Boston Pops Orchestra in 1885. Higginson, unlike Sousa and Thomas, did not come from a life of musical performance but rather running a brokerage. Through his financial successes, he funded the Boston Symphony Orchestra entirely on his own in the effort to uphold the group according to his desires. Like Sousa, he demanded autonomy from external patrons, and it was only due to diminishing health and fear of the organization’s dissolution that he ultimately relinquished control to trustees. Yet as was the case with Thomas, he concentrated on Eurocentric music-making and showed a greater preference for foreign musicians and conductors. This inclination was less a way of keeping the benefit of the people in mind, but rather was a way of prioritizing “the music itself.” As put by Levine, Higginson served less as a “missionary” to high music—as was Thomas—but as a self-established “preserver of the faith”, protecting the sanctity of art. Levine is far from the only individual to parallel high music culture with religion, nor was Higginson the only target for the comparison. In 1910, The English music critic Hermann Klein wrote in his book *Unmusical New York* that the titular city’s historical pedigree up to that point qualified it as “the Mecca of the musical world.” Without prolific ability and social connections, though, “[the artist] never gets within kneeling distance of the shrine[…] or com[es] to

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19 Klein’s book originated from a lecture he gave the prior year titled “The Truth about Music in America” at Bechstein Hall (now Wigmore Hall) in London. The text expands upon his original claims and arguments and serves to better clarify his particular interest with New York, rather than the United States collectively.
close quarters with the priestesses of the ‘Four Hundred’.

Much of New York’s high musical community, Klein argues, was simply off-limits to the general population. Indigenous composers and performers had an even worse time of it, given the Eurocentrism witnessed in the concert halls and opera houses.

Higginson’s activities in Boston similarly discouraged all but the most devout visitors from reaching his inner sanctum. Nevertheless, it was not beneath him to provide some sort of offerings to the hopeful. The creation of the Boston Pops Orchestra in 1885 allowed for the production of higher quality light music performance alongside more “classical” material, but it effectively divided the repertoire in two and rejected the blending of these two worlds. Higginson’s system seemingly lacks the educative drive of Thomas’ orchestra and the intent to adapt to popular tastes or alter its format and presentation as Sousa would do to fit his programs—neither role adequately describes Higginson and his organizations.

Where Higginson and Sousa clearly differ is in regards to commercial sustainability. Higginson was happy to suffer financial loss so long as “art” remained intact: he personally paid the symphony’s deficits after each season with little concern for the support of the general music-going community. By contrast, Sousa might even come to resemble that extreme of the popular, lowbrow portion of the spectrum: the entrepreneur, the arts businessman. Far removed from the “educators” and “preservers” of culture—who served to instruct the masses, promoting themselves and their sacrosanct

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20 The “Four Hundred” Klein refers to here was a term coined by Samuel Ward McAllister to describe the top social elite of New York during the late nineteenth century.
music as role models for society—Sousa’s decisions depended heavily on popular public reception and financially sustaining the band. He quickly realized the advantages to acknowledging and respecting the musical preferences and heritage of his audience at a given performance. In order to tap into this potential wellspring of popularity, Sousa began deciding ahead of time on inserting pieces into his concert programs, pieces that he felt resonated with his audience. The predetermined encore system came to be one of his favorite tools for structuring concerts, and as time progressed, the encore framework only grew in size and scope. A typical Sousa Band performance inserted at least one “crowd favorite”—normally a Sousa march or a smaller well-known work or song—between each listed piece on the program, but it was common to see up to three or even four encores assigned to a single programmed entry.²²

Sousa’s encores normally did not relate significantly to their preceding pieces. More often than not, the two components were wholly independent of—if not directly contrary to—each other in terms of musical genre and programmatic content. As a result, individuals claiming some authority over musical culture vocally considered the practice as degrading to the transcribed orchestral works and belittled them in Sousa’s programs.²³

²² Paul Bierley provides a substantial list of Sousa Band concert programs within an appendix to his *Incredible Band of John Philip Sousa*. Examples of the triple-encore phenomenon are found throughout the Sousa Band’s lifetime, revealing that this practice remained a consistent element of the band’s performance practices. Four-encore sets appeared later in the band’s lifetime, usually within the 1920s on. See Paul E Bierley, *The Incredible Band of John Philip Sousa* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 270-309.

²³ “Classical selections were enthusiastically encored, as their careful and artistic rendition merited, but the tumultuous outbursts that greeted the first strains of “The Liberty Bell,” “The Washington Post” and other Sousa marches warranted a suspicion that while classical selections might be appreciated, the audience wanted the marches, and the whole list, from A to Z. Sousa generously gave them.” See “Sousa and His
Detractors likewise criticized the sheer quantity of these popular or commercially-originating works in comparison to the size of the actual concert and declared his musical activities as indulgent and opportunistic. While Sousa’s descriptive pieces and suites served primarily as programmed works for concerts and not as encores, it is clear that they stem from the same tradition of adopting popular and commercial themes. Both the first descriptive work and suite—*The Chariot Race* from 1890 and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (henceforth shortened to *The Last Days*) from 1893—programmatically turned to popular novels of the time. These were topics Sousa’s audience would clearly recognize and show interest in as musical adaptations; whether this attention would be supportive or dismissive was less certain, considering Sousa was testing new waters as a composer.

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24 Sousa himself offers an example of such criticism from the British writer John F. Runciman in his autobiography. In particular, Runciman objected to the quantity of encores given by the Sousa Band each concert and the speed in which they switched between pieces; as quoted by Sousa, “It appears that encores must be easily earned in Sousa’s country. In this retrograde country of ours, the audience is invariably given an opportunity of proving that it really wants to hear something a second time.” See Sousa, *Marching Along*, 336.
Chapter 2: The Descriptive Works

Introduction

The term “descriptive work” must first be clarified in order to understand the two pieces’ significance as unique occurrences in Sousa’s repertoire and as predecessors to the suites. The Chariot Race from 1890 and Sheridan’s Ride in 1891 are two single-movement pieces for band composed while Sousa still oversaw the United States Marine Band, and scholars have assigned them multiple musical genres and labels over the years. During Sousa’s own time, The Chariot Race in particular was repeatedly referred to as a “symphonic poem.”\(^{25}\) Later authors, including Ann M. Lingg in her book John Philip Sousa from 1954 and Neil Harris in his article “John Philip Sousa and the Culture of Reassurance” published in Perspectives on John Philip Sousa in 1983, label them suites or orchestral suites which groups them with the three-movement suites composed between 1893 and 1925.\(^{26}\) Paul E. Bierley isolates these two pieces in the 1984 edition of

\(^{25}\) Two such examples displaying the chronological and geographical endurance of the “symphonic poem” definition exist within “Miss Della Rocca Scores” from Musical America (8, no. 26) on November 7th, 1908 and Arthur H. Rackett’s “John Philip Sousa: Memoirs of a Famous Band Leader” in Musical Canada (1, no. 11) in January of 1930. Sousa himself uses the label in a program example in Marching Along on page 99.  

The Works of John Philip Sousa under a new and more independent term: “descriptive works.” I have chosen to adopt Bierley’s categories here because his cataloging is based on an intelligent overview of Sousa’s works as a whole, and I wish to emphasize the difference between these two pieces and the works in multi-movement formats that were also called “suites” during Sousa’s career.

Bierley’s term is admittedly ambiguous and introduces some issues. Firstly, a third work exists under the “descriptive works” section in his book: “A Stag Party,” originating between the late 1880s and 1890. While Bierley talks about the other two pieces in some detail, he mentions this work only briefly by name and redirects the reader to the “humoresques” section later in the book for further details. Furthermore, the phrase “descriptive works” is used elsewhere by other writers: Patrick Warfield in Making the March King from 2013 introduces The Chariot Race and asserts that “Sousa…had already written several descriptive works for band, but The Chariot Race was his first such piece not to be based on borrowed material.” While Warfield’s book was published well after Bierley’s, he doesn’t use the phrase “descriptive work” as Bierley uses it; it is likely that he is referring to the aforementioned humoresques in this statement. The humoresques were intended as displays of wit, humor, and showmanship in performances by Sousa’s ensemble, and they functioned more like musical skits. Most incorporated popular, preexisting tunes in such a way that listeners at the time would

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28 Patrick Warfield, Making the March King: John Philip Sousa’s Washington Years (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 177.
recognize them easily. Since the humoresques were tailored specifically as concert routines and not as works intended to be reproduced, Bierley highlights that they were ultimately “kept exclusively for the Sousa Band”; none of the fourteen humoresques he lists in The Works of John Philip Sousa were copyrighted or published. In comparison, The Chariot Race and Sheridan’s Ride—pieces he defines as “descriptive works”—persisted beyond Sousa Band performances after being published in 1892 and 1908, respectively. The Stag Party never reached the commercial public as a reproducible work, and therefore will not be discussed here despite its inclusion in Bierley’s category of descriptive works.

*The Chariot Race*

The Chariot Race, also referred to as Ben Hur’s Chariot Race, came about in 1890 via the suggestion of Hannah Harris, the manager of the Star Course at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. She suggested Sousa consider writing a piece centered on the chariot race from Lew Wallace’s highly popular 1880 novel Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ. The Chariot Race indeed portrays this single event, but in its focus, it divorces the scene wholly from the book’s larger plot and themes. The tribulations of the protagonist Judah Ben-Hur and his pursuit of vengeance against Messala for his wrongful conviction and the desolation of his family fail to materialize in Sousa’s musical context.

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30 Ibid., 133.

31 Ibid., 105.

32 Warfield, Making the March King: John Philip Sousa’s Washington Years, 177.
He directs the audience’s attention to dramatic dynamic swells and fanfares in the band and a large variety of percussive effects to capture the sounds of the setting. Sousa’s acoustic renderings transported his fin-de-siècle audience to a first-century Rome, but it is as if he delegated them to the stands as objective onlookers and not so much as companions to Ben-Hur and Messala; the delight and adrenaline of the actual action of chariot racing supersedes the narrative.

This is not to say that Sousa referenced the event from the book only via the title of the composition; the piece was clearly intended to be interpreted with some awareness of Wallace’s book. To help in this effort, a number of newspaper articles covering concerts with the descriptive piece quoted entire portions of the original text that describe the race; one such instance occurs in *The Atlanta Constitution* covering a performance comprised entirely of original Sousa compositions on December 8th, 1895 at the Grand Opera House.33 Although this degree of coverage was uncommon, it allowed even those with no prior knowledge of the novel to take part in interpreting the programmatic musical events more “faithfully.” The issue as observed from a hypothetical high-culture perspective still stands, however: The abridged synopsis provided in the article fails to cover the psychological and moral development so critical to *Ben-Hur*. The weight of Ben-Hur and Mesalla’s rivalry, the permanence of Mesalla’s injury and financial ruin as a result of the race, and the resulting growing obsession of destroying Ben-Hur are all lost

within this summary, and subsequently appear to be ignored in Sousa’s musical recreation of the scene.

Listeners and critics primarily lauded Sousa’s depictive abilities, but several accounts such as that from the Middlesex *Times* in 1892 hint at a lack of value beyond momentary excitement: “The tap of the horse’s hoofs, the rattle of harness, the clash of the chariot wheels, the snap of whips… This was not exactly music…but it was fun.” What then was music for the Middlesex reporter? He apparently wasn’t willing to call Sousa’s work “music” on account of its literal musical effects. “True” music must therefore abstain from these devices—they are considered a crutch, the mark of a failed artist who is unable to satisfactorily present their ideas via music structure and functional themes. Furthermore, by what standards does this non-music count as “fun”? Perhaps the trait lies in the ease of comprehension for the general public, which consequently diminishes its total aesthetic depth and worth. The repetitive striking of woodblocks in *The Chariot Race* can only be interpreted as the galloping of horse hooves and leaves no room for the cultured analyst. If a work refuses to allow some liberty of interpretation, does it deserve attention at all? Clearly, the *Middlesex* critic does not go the lengths of repudiating the work outright, but he surprises with his unwillingness to call it “music” amidst otherwise glowing admiration. *The Chariot Race* acquired some degree of a “cultured” essence despite its popular nature, nevertheless. The fact that the work was repeatedly referred to as a “symphonic poem”—the same genre of Bedřich Smetana’s *Vltava* and Franz Liszt’s *Les Préludes*—distanced the approximately five-minute piece

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34 As quoted by Neil Harris. See Neil Harris, “John Philip Sousa and the Culture of Reassurance,” 20.
from Sousa’s customary output and reaffirmed the beginnings of a new form of instrumental composition for the fledgling March King.

_Sheridan’s Ride_

Sousa composed his second descriptive piece in 1891, immediately following _The Chariot Race_ with the hopes of repeating his success in new instrumental genres. Like its predecessor, _Sheridan’s Ride_ emphasized audial representation but drew from a significantly wider quantity of programmatic sources. He again turned to literature for inspiration, this time beginning with Thomas B. Read’s Civil War poem of the same name from 1864. As Warfield notes, however, this was not the sole source for the work. Five clearly-defined sections (referred to as “historical scenes”) exist in the single-movement, continuous work: “Waiting for the Bugle,” “The Attack,” “The Death of Thoburn,” “The Coming of Sheridan,” and lastly, “The Apotheosis.”

Each of the sections was inspired by different poetic sources, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s “Waiting for the Bugle” and Nancy Priest’s “The Soldier’s Death.” With their stanzas as a foundation, Sousa constructed a romanticized, patriotic American tale of conflict, struggle, and death, but ultimately victory for the Union Army at the Battle of Cedar Creek in 1864 following the return of the titular General Philip Sheridan.

Sousa’s own involvement with the United States military offers a deeper legitimacy to _Sheridan’s Ride_ and its descriptive devices. Even outside of his service in

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35 These particular labels do not appear in the published parts by John Church Co. in 1908, but the sections may be identified by double bar lines and tempo markings.

36 Warfield, _Making the March King: John Philip Sousa’s Washington Years_, 196.
the different branches, audiences recognized him by the formal uniforms and decorative medals he donned while conducting his ensemble; Sousa was inseparable from a martial appearance and demeanor. Several different bugle calls dot the B-flat cornet’s melody as both an iconic descriptive element and a listener’s guide to the program: a distant call of “Assembly of the Trumpeters” and “Reveille” at the opening awakens the rest of the band and sets the stage for the impending battle. Prior to the battle, “Call to Arms” sounds out over the chromatically descending band. Sousa relies on the iconicity of these calls and his audience’s ability to recognize them. Once identified, the audience recalls the melodies’ respective martial functions and subsequently interpret them as actions within the narrative. Musically, the calls’ repeated arpeggios serve to establish the key of B-flat early on as a sort of tonic point of stability for the audience, as the following battle scenes modulate several times and travel chromatically up and down the register. In Sheridan’s Ride, Sousa essentially strives to strike a compromise with his “high” and “low” audiences following his experiment with The Chariot Race. The new descriptive piece is substantially longer and more intricate in its musical components (perhaps responding to the criticism The Chariot Race received), but it still insists on strong programmatic depictions through familiar tunes and recognizable sound effects.

As was the case with The Chariot Race, a significant portion of the effects within Sheridan’s Ride stem from the percussion section. Naturally, Sousa repeats his equine representation from The Chariot Race through the repetitive striking of wood- or temple blocks in a galloping pattern. The official parts published by the John Church Company later in 1908 do not specify the instrument to be used, however; the player is only given
the directive “Horses.” This particular ambiguity may be excused, given that the marking is not intended to be taken literally as an orchestration request. Issues of interpretation arise more when bearing in mind that the part also calls for “musket” and “cannon,” both of which *have* been literally specified by earlier classical composers. It quickly becomes apparent that these labels are indications for effects, given that the “muskets” part is written with rolled notes like the snare and bass drum (and firearms have no real way of executing such notation) and that “cannon” shots are called for so frequently that over two-dozen artillery guns would be needed were someone to attempt to execute the piece literally (see Figure 1).

The performer is left with an awkward situation: they are given two staves in the part, one with standard snare and bass drum notation and the other calling for descriptive effects. No means of interpreting these effects is offered, least of all in terms of instrumentation. One possibility is that Sousa expected the purchaser to recall the tune from the Band’s own performances and witness its percussionists in action. If such an explanation is true, he placed unrealistically high expectations on the performer-to-be’s memory: Not only is the instrumentation for the piece undocumented in the printed version, but so is the means of organization and execution. For example, four instruments—snare, bass drum, musket, and cannon—are called for simultaneously at the *Allegro con fuoco* (emphasized by the box in Figure 1), yet the percussion section in the

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37 Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Wellington’s Victory* and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture* are two such cases of artillery usage in classical repertoire.
Sousa Band regularly consisted of only three men.\textsuperscript{38} To play the piece “authentically” in the same manner as Sousa’s ensemble, one percussionist must play two of the parts at once. This was not a single-time occurrence, either; the published version of \textit{The Last Days} repeats the problem, although here the various instrumental lines are clarified with standard western instruments listed and not described by their programmatic equals. The first movement, titled “In the House of Burbo and Stratonice,” similarly calls for four concurrent instruments: snare, bass drum, tambourine, and timpani. As this multitasking was more of a case of making do with the resources available to the Sousa Band and operating with a more condensed roster, it is unlikely that Sousa would purposefully demand musicians to recreate the Band’s exact system in their own performances. And while lack of clarity in the percussion parts may simply be an oversight, it is more probable that they were intentional and gave the performer some liberty of instrumentation. If the goal of the orchestration is to imitate real-life sounds and objects, then immutable instrumentation not only limits the potential for more elaborate interpretations but also excludes ensembles lacking those specific instruments. Certain instruments may be strongly insinuated—as with the wood block for creating galloping patterns—but in listing the instruments as “Horses” or “Muskets” Sousa’s score reflects a sense of flexibility and descriptive encouragement. His performances are not the final say in their realization, contrary to Higginson’s idea of “preserving” music. To Sousa the descriptivist, the score is not law but a malleable and customizable script that may see

\textsuperscript{38} Bierley offers a series of charts outlining the instrumentation of the Sousa Band over time. While 1907 lists four active members, \textit{Sheridan’s Ride} was played regularly before this point and would have cemented a three-player rendition. See Paul E. Bierley, \textit{The Incredible Band of John Philip Sousa}, 251-252.
revisions as an encouragement of realization as an acknowledgment of varying executive
abilities.

Alongside these descriptive effects in *Sheridan’s Ride* exist abstract musical
motives employed to expand the syntax of the battle. As explained by Warfield, Sousa
turns to melodic direction as the germinal device for the descriptive work. Upwards and
downwards motion in the melody is intended to portray the two opposing Civil War
armies: ascending figures depict the Union forces and descending motion represents the
Confederates.\(^{39}\) Within these general directions of motion, there also exists a specific
recurring theme that represents the respective army (see Figure 2). Sousa himself refers to
these two themes as “*leitmotifs*” in an interview for the *Washington Post* on February
26\(^{th}\), 1892, simultaneously reminding the reader of Richard Wagner’s influence and
imbuing *Sheridan’s Ride* with a similar sense of monumentality and compositional
depth.\(^{40}\)

The amount of actual movement within the themes may be further interpreted as a
signal for dramatic tension: The Confederate motif incorporates quick descents in eighth
and quarter notes and covers an octave and a half. The Union theme by comparison
ascends stepwise to reach just a fifth above its initial position over the same number of
bars; their battle to cover ground (both programmatically and musically) is a much more
difficult one when compared to the leaping Confederates. As these two leitmotivs
struggle, the general melodic direction surrounding them clarifies the battle’s

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) “Set to Music by Sousa: The Popular Conductor Tells about the Composition of ‘Sheridan’s Ride,’” *The
proceedings, as reproduced in Figure 3. Scenes II and IV ("The Attack" and "The Coming of Sheridan") represent the pinnacles of this conflicting directional duality. With B♭ major established early on by the cornet as a point of balance between the two forces and with identities given to the two overarching melodic directions surrounding this harmonic point, Sousa offers even musically illiterate listeners a basic set of tools and guidelines for comprehending his retelling of the Battle of Cedar Creek. These resources serve as a bridge, a stepping stone to bring listeners of all musical and social backgrounds into his music and its narrative. And if all else fails, the listener still has the descriptive effects as a means of excitement and stimulation; Sousa’s composition serves his audience through both education and entertainment, offering a variety of points of entrance ultimately for their greatest benefit and ability to appreciate the piece. Simple comprehension of his descriptive effects was clearly not his goal, even so. Several months after his 1892 interview with the Washington Post, Sousa and the Marine Band were to play Sheridan’s Ride again in Los Angeles on April 12th and 13th. The Chariot Race was also to be performed for this concert, and due to the two pieces’ popularity up to this point, they were accentuated in a series of advertisements in the Los Angeles Times for the upcoming event.

Both pieces received vivid illustrations in the advertisement with charging horses in dramatic scenes of struggle to reinforce their programmatic, visual nature; below its illustration, Sheridan’s Ride is even referred to as “The Great Musical Picture” to further
accentuate this audio-visual relationship. These advertisements featured an additional component regarding Sheridan’s Ride, however: notated depictions of the Union and Confederate leitmotivs. No other musical excerpts appear in these advertisements, neither for the “classical” works that night (including Wagner’s Rienzi overture) or the more popular selections. With this action, Sousa clarifies to reader and listener alike not just his intentions for the piece, but also his expectations from the audience. Sheridan’s Ride is music. It may feature exhilarating programmatic scenery and aspire to bring listeners to a historical Cedar Creek, but underneath its galloping woodblocks and bugle calls exists a meticulous network of audial interrelations. The second descriptive work is not merely about entertainment and “fun.” It challenges the audience to delve deeper, to listen closer to the music behind the effects, and discover the rich audial tapestry hiding in plain sight. The resources have been provided; discovery is now in the listeners’ hands.

Without any doubt, Sousa’s attention to melodic themes takes on a more traditional Romantic and “elitist” appearance than in his prior descriptive work. Whereas both The Chariot Race and Sheridan’s Ride provided program notes for his audience, the latter piece expounded a complete narrative and garnered greater excitement from its historical legacy, musical development, and variety of textures and tempos. His portrayal of the Battle of Cedar Creek exists not just as a patriotic effort, but as an opportunity for the audience to immerse themselves in the events of that day via the poetry of the past, and for them to be reminded of sacrifices made during the Civil War; Sousa becomes as

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41 [Display Ad—No title], Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 8, 1892. The advertisements are located under the section “Amusements.”
much an educator for his public as he does an entertainer. This being said, his move to recent American history—and his distancing himself from the bygone eras of antiquity stereotypically associated with highbrow music genres and Romantics such as Wagner—was an intentional one. As Sousa mentions in the same 1892 interview where he describes the work’s leitmotifs:

Had I given a mythological title to this composition…some fellow with green goggles and long hair would probably have slapped me on the back and congratulate me on my ‘classical’ composition. By this I do not mean to say that there has been any adverse criticism on this composition, but I do mean that it will redound more to the credit of our native composers if they use American instead of mythological subjects.

Sousa clearly associates ancient history and mythology with “classical” music and boldly claims that his work epitomizes this style despite his modern topics. What then are the critical “classical” components he feels he has adequately provided in the work’s context? When he suggests an alternate title to the work, it stands to reason that the remainder of the program’s synopsis would likewise change—or would it be included at all? It is difficult to take Sousa’s claim at face value in either instance, given the work’s overtly American bugle calls and his incorporation of the same key and rhythmic pattern of Frédéric Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2—more familiarly known as the “Funeral March”—for the opening of “The Death of Thoburn.” This leaves the musical content: the aforementioned leitmotifs and music symbolism, the scope and progression of the material in comparison to the rest of his repertoire, and general quality of the

orchestration itself, all of which were positively received by audiences (much to Sousa’s pleasure). He takes this opportunity to call upon other American composers to embrace their indigenous history and mythology, but not completely reject the European methods that preceded them. Although certain musical devices allude to the cultured classical tradition, by no means should it be barred from American composers or restrict them in their endeavors.

Regardless of Sousa’s opinions on the dreaded label of “classical” music and its association with *Sheridan’s Ride*, it was a label that became attached to the work and proved difficult to shake. An article in the “Music and Musicians” section from *The Los Angeles Times* appeared on April 13th to recapitulate the Sousa Band performances that week. With all the attention given to the descriptive work prior to the concert and the audience’s ecstatic response to its performance, the writer labels it “the *piece de resistance* of the programme;” The article goes on to describe the work’s encore as “a comic selection, in which an imitation of a clog-dance was the leading figure.” 43 Yet immediately following these passages of glowing praise for Sousa and his organization, the review takes a more critical turn:

No doubt Mr. Sousa, from his long experience, is the best judge of what will please his audience, and his success last night is another proof, if any were required, of the correctness of his judgment. But it will seem to many who give a second thought to the matter, that his programme is sadly marred by the trivial, not to say trashy, airs that he offers with singing, whistling and clog-dancing accompaniments as ‘encores’ for classical selections. 44

43 “Music and Musicians.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 13, 1892.
44 Ibid.
As previously emphasized, the encore system in the hands of Sousa was something both cherished and despised by his listeners; the writer for the *Los Angeles Times* here clearly leans towards the latter, concerned that including streams of immediate encores would mar not only the remainder of a given concert’s material but the reputation of the Sousa Band overall. The inclusion of clog-dancing in the writer’s list of gripes is too particular to ignore, especially when considering the attention just given to the descriptive work paired with the encore presenting that specific feature. The claim simply may have been made out of frustration, and the encore was iconic enough for the critic to use it as a target. Nevertheless, he appears to accept or at least encourage considering *Sheridan’s Ride* as one of the “classical selections” on Sousa’s programs. It remains somewhat ironic then that the reviewer’s complaint against Sousa’s encores stems from their inclusion of effects and non-instrumental devices, while such elements remained a critical constituent for the descriptive piece. It would seem that Sousa’s high aspirations for *Sheridan’s Ride* were not completely lost on his audience, nor did the piece deter less musically-experienced listeners; he had discovered a workable balance between the different demographics of his audience that he could pursue alongside the more “substantial” programmed pieces and the lighter fare typically assigned to the encores.

Sousa would eventually release *Sheridan’s Ride* to the public in a published score, as was the case with *The Chariot Race*. Yet this time, there was a substantial delay between its first performance and publication. Whereas the first descriptive work was published in 1892 by Oliver Ditson and Company—two years following its premiere—it wasn’t until 1908 that John Church Company printed an edition of *Sheridan’s Ride*. It is
likely that Sousa postponed the descriptive piece’s public release to keep it with the Band longer and exploit its popularity; the piece was repeatedly met with wild enthusiasm, as in one instance in Philadelphia in March 1892, when Sousa was called back by the audience a total of six times.\footnote{“Sousa Called out Six Times,” \textit{The Washington Post} (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 20, 1892.} This explanation of Sousa’s retention of the piece is further supported by the fact that only the copyright on \textit{Sheridan's Ride}’s was renewed later on and not \textit{The Chariot Race}.\footnote{Bierley, \textit{The Works of John Philip Sousa}, 105.} Most marches and songs with decent success saw a quick turnaround to publication, which isolated \textit{Sheridan's Ride} even more from Sousa’s normal procedures at the time. In this way, he becomes not so much a “preserver” of music, but its retainer—the shrewd businessman safeguarding his aesthetic creations, only to finally release them to the public when popularity dies so that they may still live beyond the Band.

The descriptive pieces proved to be reliable workhorses for Sousa’s early band. They remained generally favorable works for many years, although enthusiasm undoubtedly became more subdued as time progressed and the topics behind the pieces lost their initial luster. Yet popularity was not Sousa’s sole intention with the genre, as revealed through the interviews and marketing surrounding \textit{Sheridan’s Ride}; it was the result of him exploring new ways of expanding the Sousa Band’s musical capability to bridge the gap between concert listeners. Beyond their descriptive flair wowing the audience, the works proved successful simply because they demonstrated a compositional formula that departed from Sousa’s other personal works while still retaining a sense of familiarity. The bulk of his output at the time consisted of framework-focused marches
and programmatic songs. The descriptive works combined the instrumentation power of the former with the storytelling of the latter, comfortably nesting themselves somewhere between the two. Perhaps the most significant factor for Sousa individually: The pieces helped him develop as a composer. He desired to create new works that were not only entertaining, but also musically and programatically unique from the rest of his current repertoire. The support he received for the descriptive works encouraged Sousa to branch out further as a composer and experiment, rather than stay with tried-and-tested “safe” genres such as songs and marches. This growing support and faith in Sousa as a musician could not have come at a more critical time for him, as the years shortly following the conception of Sheridan’s Ride proved a turbulent, crucial period in American popular music.
Chapter 3: The Suites

The Turning Point of 1892

Both *The Chariot Race* and *Sheridan’s Ride* predate David Blakely’s pivotal 1892 business offer that led to the creation of Sousa’s New Marine Band and ultimately the Sousa Band. The year prior, Blakely convinced government and military officials to permit the U.S. Marine Band under Sousa to leave the Washington D.C. area for their first-ever national tour. The event not only tested the feasibility of a commercial travelling band but exposed a much larger portion of the American population to the March King and vice versa. Witnessing the musical pride of the American capitol in full uniform was invaluable for Sousa and Blakely and continued to be so even after Sousa’s official resignation from the Marine Band later on. Following the tour, Sousa made his first trip to Europe for his health and as a chance to experience European band music and the first act of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* at Bayreuth.\(^{47}\)

However, even more critical to the fledgling March King was the death of several significant figures in band music around the same time as the establishment of his band. On September 24\(^{th}\), 1892, Patrick Gilmore passed away during the St. Louis Exposition

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\(^{47}\) Warfield, *Making the March King: John Philip Sousa’s Washington Years*, 190-191.
in Missouri. The New Marine Band was to have its first concert only two days later in Plainfield, New Jersey.\(^4\) Gilmore was considered the *de facto* master of American band music throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, and his sudden passing caused a vacuum that many groups rushed to fill. The issue was further compounded by the death of the leader of the New York’s Seventh Regiment Band, Carlo Alberto Cappa, during the following year.\(^4\) The sudden collapse in hierarchy proved advantageous for Sousa’s group: Without their signature leaders, Sousa’s competitors quickly declined in quality and provided him and Blakely the opportunity to acquire veteran members leaving the groups in the midst of quarrels over succession rights. On top of these benefits, the sudden upheaval also marked the possibility for change. With Gilmore’s passing and a brand-new organization quickly rising in his wake, Sousa’s compositions and programs held the potential to push preexisting boundaries and redefine American band music.

Around the same time of the establishment of the New Marine Band, the suite as a musical genre had recaptured considerable attention in Europe and the United States. While historically remembered for its most basic, “classical” form of four movements, each of which named a European dance style—allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue—the genre during the twentieth century encompassed a diverse range of forms and styles. The aforementioned classical style involving dance movements (now referred to as

\(^4\) Ibid., 206-207.
\(^4\) Harris, “John Philip Sousa and the Culture of Reassurance,” 16.
“suite à l’antique”\textsuperscript{50}) enjoyed a period of rejuvenation through the works of Richard Strauss and Claude Debussy, amongst others. Alternative variations placing greater emphasis on programmatic components simultaneously arose and opposed the “suite à l’antique”: “characteristic” and “geographical” suites.\textsuperscript{51} As a result, the suite around Sousa’s time enjoyed newfound versatility and an expanding repertoire of works for ensembles to choose from. The Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg produced several notable works in the genre during the eight years prior to the Sousa Band’s formation: His \textit{Holberg Suite} was completed in 1884 and the \textit{Peer Gynt Suites} in 1888 and 1891, the first of which was performed repeatedly during the New Marine Band’s first year alone.\textsuperscript{52} The earlier \textit{Holberg Suite} reflects the more historical suite formula, given its neoclassical emphasis and adaptation of dance styles for each of the five movements and their titles (“Praeludium,” “Sarabande,” “Gavotte,” etc.); \textit{Peer Gynt} in contrast originated as incidental music for Henrik Ibsen’s play in 1875. Both \textit{Peer Gynt Suites} span four movements, and their titles and content directly refer to the events within the narrative: “Morning Mood,” “The Death of Åse,” “Anitras’ Dance,” and so on. While the suites’ movements retain their programmatic identities, their order is rearranged for a well-rounded, conclusive musical experience in a concert setting. Tchaikovsky made a similar suite reduction of his \textit{Nutcracker} in 1892, an arrangement that the Band frequently programmed in its early years.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Bierley, \textit{The Incredible Band of John Philip Sousa}, 359.
The suites coming from these composers seemed to fit perfectly into Sousa’s typical concert format: the works came with programs and offered the potential for rich imagery, the individual pieces were concise, and the pieces could be reorganized or excluded as necessary, given that the original composers of the suites often had already done so themselves from their original dramatic settings. The two orchestral suites by the American composer Edward MacDowell in the 1890s were noticeably affected by this selective, modular nature, as movements from each tended to be performed in concerts as standalone pieces. It stands to reason that, given the popularity of suites at the beginning of the Band’s history and his own success with the descriptive works, Sousa decided to explore the genre himself as grounds to develop his compositional style. Each composition up unto this point reflects an expansion on its predecessor’s scope: The Chariot Race consisted of a single musical event, which Sheridan’s Ride answered with its knitting-together of multiple historical scenes into a more developed narrative. The Last Days would push this a step further and officially break the musical context into individual movements that would not only cover an overarching plot or theme but would suffice as separate entities. While it is impossible to deny that Sousa had—as Patrick Warfield described his accomplishment—“learned the value of a fresh descriptive work for each season” and likely adopted the suite with the intention of continuing his

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53 “Forest Spirits” from the first suite and “In War-Time” from the second (Indian) suite were often performed during seasons without the other movements present. See Bierley, The Incredible Band of John Philip Sousa, 377.
compositional success, the change in length and framework from earlier comparable pieces suggests a transformation in aesthetics and intention.\textsuperscript{54}

Sousa composed numerous works that were referred to as “suites” between 1893 and 1925. However, most of the works thus described were rearrangements of his own works—and those of others. For example, the “reference” suite titled *The Three S’s*—or *The Internationals*—consisted of pieces by three “well-known composers of lighter works”: Johann Strauss, Jr. (*Morning Journals*), Arthur Sullivan (*The Lost Chord*), and Sousa (“Mars and Venus,” incidentally coming from another of his own suites called *Looking Upward*).\textsuperscript{55} Excluding works with reused or borrowed material, there exist eleven original suites by Sousa—I have included a chronological list of these works along with the names of each of their movements as an appendix.

*The Last Days of Pompeii*

In adapting the English novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Sousa returned to the world of Antiquity he had left behind after *The Chariot Race*. Both texts center on iconic tales of the past—the life of Jesus Christ and the devastating eruption of Mount Vesuvius—but weave new fictional narratives around them. By redirecting his efforts in descriptive music to the suite format, Sousa now found himself with considerably more time to explore and represent his topics in a single composition. The typical Sousa composition ran no longer than four or five minutes. With the suite, the pause between each movement allowed him to adhere to this time

\textsuperscript{54} Warfield, *Making the March King: John Philip Sousa’s Washington Years*, 218.
length by creating a chain of pieces linked by an overarching context. Compared to *Sheridan’s Ride*—which needed to summarize the entirety of its narrative in a single, continuous body of music—the suite’s multi-movement form provided more overall space for musical and programmatic details. Individual significant events in the narrative could be isolated and focused on in dedicated movements, and thus, Sousa could allow for more time for their musical development.

Yet even with several independent movements, the suite was limited in what it could portray, considering the length of Bulwer-Lytton’s novel and the available space in the New Marine Band’s programs. Unlike the classical symphony and its domination of orchestral concert programs—both in regards to magnitude and duration—Sousa’s concert formula involved myriads of short works in a wide array of formats comparable to vaudeville or variety shows of the day. Listeners were treated to a new composition roughly every three to ten minutes with this format. A larger pool of musical experiences and emotions equaled a more dynamic concert experience and subsequently fewer lulls in excitement for the audience. Due to this quicker turnaround, he settled upon three different elements in order to illustrate but a portion of the novel’s contents: a descriptive depiction of the characters’ Burbo and Stratonice’s house, a character portrait of the tragic blind slave Nydia, and lastly a climactic representation of Mount Vesuvius’ eruption and the main protagonists’ escape from Pompeii. Sousa’s choices offer a practical balance of setting, character, and dramatic development within the scope of the suite; essentially, it is a miniaturized drama.
The first movement, “In the House of Burbo and Stratonice”, incorporates various descriptive percussive effects similar to the earlier works. Given the presence of social drinking and gambling at the establishment from the text, Sousa calls for the “clinking of stone cups” and rapid clapping of castanets to represent the rolling of dice.56 It is interesting to note that the published edition of the suite specifically states the instrument “castanets” over the more descriptive label “rolling dice,” as has been the case prior with the descriptive elements. It is possible this was done to recommend a fitting percussive representation with enough volume to be heard alongside the rest of the ensemble, considering the low audibility of dice clacking together. The musical framework of the movement altogether likewise departs from the practices observed with the descriptive pieces, as it is now much more reminiscent of Sousa’s popular march formula: It is predominantly set to a rigid time signature of 6/8 and contains several iconic melodic sections similar to the various strains and contrasting “trio” section. The first movement of his second suite—“The King of France” in Three Quotations from 1895—features this stylistic parallelism as well. The immediate, transparent employment of march characteristics in his early suites suggests that Sousa intended to soften the appearance of the larger genre for his audience by beginning with what they were already familiar with and expected from his concerts. Sousa bore his “March King” title by this time, and the genre was appreciated and anticipated by his listeners more than ever. By adapting elements from his familiar genre, Sousa painted the larger work in a more approachable context yet could incorporate longer movements and more thematic elements.

56 As marked in the John Church Company 1912 edition.
Of the three-movement suites Sousa composed, *The Last Days of Pompeii* was programmed the most often. Sousa further revealed in interviews that he felt the work was his greatest composition and the piece that best reflected his musical abilities. This opinion was primarily due to his pride in the musical advancements the work demonstrates. In his autobiography, Sousa holds the suite in the highest regard: “...I prefer it to everything else I have done. Some of the orchestral effects have never been invented before I hit on them.”\(^{57}\) *The Last Days* remained his personal preference amidst the entirety of his repertoire even in 1928, just four years prior to his death. Sousa went so far in his championing of the composition as to proclaim that with it, he had “carried chromaticism about as far as it can be carried. It is a piece which will maintain my reputation after I am dead.”\(^{58}\) Here exists one of the strongest personal assumptions Sousa makes on his repertoire. Not only does he proclaim *The Last Days* successful from a popular standpoint, but that it outshone his work in all other genres and would be remembered years later for doing so. It was his belief that the suite would ultimately iconize him as a composer and revolutionize music more broadly—chromaticism can go *no further*, he suggested, either in the hands of commercial writers or cultured composers.

Retrospectively, such a claim can only be considered overzealous, though it reveals Sousa’s desire to serve as both a popular and innovative figure in musical culture. In this specific instance, such was not to be the case. Chromaticism is copious within certain portions of the suite, but it functions in a formulaic, embellishing manner. Sousa’s


\(^{58}\) As quoted by Warfield. See Warfield, *Making the March King: John Philip Sousa’s Washington Years*, 218.
harmonic language has expanded, but he never fully abandons diatonic roots due to the appeal tonality continued to hold for casual music audiences. The majority of the chromatic occurrences are the result of common techniques including neighboring and passing tones, running melodic lines, and frantic succession of diminished chords. *The Last Days* might have attracted the attention of music analysts for a moment, but its “advances” were quickly overshadowed by the simultaneous efforts of contemporary European composers, as well as American revolutionists later on such as Charles Ives and Henry Cowell.

Sousa’s claim should not be dismissed as simple arrogance on his part; he was far from the only person at the time to anticipate a lasting presence stemming from the work. Although the suite no doubt had its detractors across Sousa’s career—*A Chicago Tribune* article appearing later in 1907 curtly described it as “a piece of ‘picture’ music which the title fits about as well as any title would”\(^{59}\)—the majority of newspapers and critics lauded the suite after it was introduced to the public, and praised it for several years as “the strongest of Mr. Sousa’s compositions.”\(^{60}\) The writer of the *Atlanta Constitution* article covering the December 8\(^{th}\) all-Sousa concert was as enthusiastic over the suite as the composer was. The writer introduces their analysis of the suite with one simple statement: “‘The Last Days of Pompeii’ is a piece that will live.”\(^{61}\) But it is not just the quality of the composition or the musical innovation that the writer feels causes *The Last

\(^{59}\) “News of the Theaters.: Sousa's Band. Say Sousa is Improving,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL) Nov. 29, 1907.

\(^{60}\) “Amusements,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), May 25, 1895.

Days to shine so brightly. The important aspect is its contribution to Sousa’s expansive identity, an identity, the article argues, showcased nowhere better than the periodic all-Sousa concert:

If there is one thing which has put to shame the murmurs of those who once thought Sousa’s greatness lay solely in his title “the march king,” it is the great success these purely “Sousa concerts” have had wherever they were given, for they show the man up not only as the greatest march composer, but also as a composer of brilliant parts of soulful classics.\(^\text{62}\)

Sousa proved to his audience his familiarity with the classical music tradition through the countless transcriptions he crafted for the Marine Band and his own group. Now, with compositions from his own pen performed by his own ensemble, Sousa strove to prove himself again. Not only was he capable of adapting the orchestral score to the band setting, he could create a dramatic, meaningful, and robust brass and wind ensemble that was fully autonomous from the orchestra and its canonical repertoire.

The final movement of The Last Days, “The Destruction”, contains the most chromaticism in the suite and relies on rapid flourishes of notes and dramatic dynamic swells. The majority of the movement offers a steady meter that frames the dissonant melodies and effects into a rhythm that less musically-versed listeners would be able to follow. As with the descriptive pieces, the band would occasionally go an extra step in helping the listeners interpret the piece, by providing programmatic notes in either a

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\(^{62}\) Ibid.
concert program bill or newspaper articles covering the event. Naturally, Sousa had to omit many of the events in the multi-hundred-page novel. In his effort to reduce the total content of the text to adapt it as a musical suite, however, Sousa ended up transforming Bulwer-Lytton’s tale by shifting the subjective perspective of the program from the heroic Glaucus to the pitiable Nydia. Nydia outright supplants Glaucus as the main character of the suite, considering that all three movements explicitly relate to her and her presence in the novel; furthermore, she is the only individual represented by a definitive theme, which overtly returns at the end of the piece after the eruption subsides. In the novel, Nydia falls in love with the protagonist Glaucus after he purchases her, saving her from Burbo and Stratonice’s cruelty. They and the other protagonists later flee from the cataclysmic eruption of Mount Vesuvius by sailing out on the Bay of Naples, but while on the water, Nydia realizes the deep affection that Glaucus holds towards another woman: the beautiful, elegant Ione, the tale’s primary female protagonist. Upon realizing that her love will go unrequited, Nydia commits suicide by stepping off the escape boat and drowning. While Sousa focused on outward effect and more grandiose emotions in The Chariot Race, he reflected Nydia’s somber heartbreak in the Last Days suite, resolving the otherwise energetic final movement with a soft, lyrical, and submissive ending. Her tragedy repurposes and builds on what might have otherwise been a third

63 Like The Chariot Race, some advertisements provided selected quotes from Bulwer-Lytton’s novel with the intent that the reader follow or recall the composition alongside the text. See “Music for To-Day. Numbers Selected for the Afternoon and Evening Concerts,” San Francisco Chronicle (San Francisco, CA) Apr. 4, 1894.
descriptive piece solely depicting the awe-inspiring eruption of Vesuvius and the escape from Pompeii.

*Three Quotations* and the Progression of the Suite Genre

Following the success of *The Last Days*, Sousa decided to continue writing suites for band and composed *Three Quotations* two years later. The three movements within it mirror what we might consider the previous suite's “formula”: a pseudo-march opening the work, a middle lyrical piece emphasizing the woodwind sections and featuring the English horn, and ending with a thrilling descriptive piece featuring various effects in the band. In a slight deviation from the literary emphasis seen in his previous descriptive works, in *Three Quotations* he settled on various unrelated phrases and expressions from different portions of society. “The King of France”—fully expanded to read “The King of France with Twenty Thousand Men (Marched up the Hill and then Marched Down Again)”—was a familiar couplet of the time⁶⁴, stemming from a fourteenth-century European nursery rhyme.⁶⁵ The movement is a satire of monarchic power: Sousa situates the listener as an onlooker to the approaching king and his massive army, portrayed by building the band’s texture from the bass instruments up while simultaneously increasing in dynamics. The second appearance of the E-flat “trio” section (if we are to adopt the terminology of the march form) boldly proclaims the imminent appearance of the king. Normally, a Sousa march reserves the full brass section for the final occurrence of the trio; “The King of France” introduces this full, bright texture sooner than expected, and

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the third and final statement of the section is instead left with the thinnest orchestration of all, centering on the piccolo and glockenspiel. Even the cymbal comes across as a farcical, toy-ish version of itself, as the percussionist lightly taps a suspended cymbal with drumsticks instead of the more traditional crash cymbal pair. Thus, the king of the great entourage is personified: “a legend in his own mind,” as succinctly analyzed by Mark Rogers in his editorial notes for the 1996 publication of the piece—containing no real weight of authority of majesty. To further underline the king’s feebleness, a fanfare of brass reenters and returns to the initial theme. The king and his army do not remain exposed for long; just as soon as they arrive and make their appearance, the group hastily retreats in a reversal of the instrumental layering witnessed at the movement’s opening, withdrawing until every player fades away in the distance.

Sousa’s satire in “The King of France” lies in both the program and the music. Alongside his tale of a foolish, inept king and an army dragged back and forth, Sousa uses the piece as a chance to poke fun at the American march that was at this point perhaps even over-familiar to his audiences. His manipulation of the trio format robs the section of the climactic payoff it usually contains and presents the listener with a comical shell of its regular potential. The ending fade-out similarly foils the audience’s assumptions and concludes the march with a whimper instead of a boisterous bang. Books and poetry indeed provide a reference for the audience to discern a plot in a piece of music, but here Sousa relies on his “trademark” musical genre for realizing his wit and

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humor: the same pieces just heard as encores between the listed pieces of his program. Even if a given listener was hearing an American march for the first time (and thereby struggling to grasp the full humor of The King of France), Sousa’s concert structure serves as a kind of remedial course in preparation for the suite; he acts as both educator and entertainer within the boundaries of his own musical syntax.

The second movement of Three Quotations, “I, Too, was Born in Arcadia,” might likewise be considered as purveying standard components of concert programs, in this case the presence of a soloist (the English horn). Both “Nydia” from The Last Days and “I, Too, was Born in Arcadia” feature the English horn as a soloistic instrument in the ensemble, though here it is offered its own brief cadenza. Fermatas are employed extensively throughout the movement, sharply contrasting with the rhythmically incessant “King of France.” Sousa makes a brief return here to the topic of classical antiquity, as he did with The Last Days. His choice of setting, the land of Arcadia, was a popular setting of pastoral peace and rustic isolation from the modern world. His title comes from Goethe, specifically from that author’s Italian Journey. The English horn cadenza serves to interrupt the growing dissonant melodies in the ensemble, dissonances that programmatically represent some threat upon the Arcadian realm, and the instrument

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67 It should be noted that the phrase “I, too, was born in Arcadia” bears close resemblance to the Latin “et in Arcadia” appearing in the Roman poet Virgil’s fifth eclogue. The phrase has since been interpreted by various authors and artists as a contemplation of death, as seen with the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the seventeenth-century paintings by Guercino and Nicolas Poussin. It is unlikely Sousa is considering Arcadia in this light, considering the dissonant threat he presents to the pastoral scene in the movement that is overcome and allows the main theme to return; were this a message of death and the temporariness of life, the musical “threat” (death) would likely persist to the end of the movement or terminate it outright. See Elsie Russell, “On the Arcadian Theme,” www.parnasse.com, last modified Jun. 2, 1995, accessed Jan. 20, 2016, http://www.parnasse.com/etpnt.htm.
finally restores peace; the theme of the power and purity of music that Sousa seems to imply harkens back to the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice recounted repeatedly throughout European music history.68

The title of the final movement, “In Darkest Africa”—also known as “Nigger in the Woodpile”—is a notably more contemporary phrase reflecting the popularly-understood “barbaric” dangers of the unclaimed continent; the title stems from the book of the same name written by Henry Morton Stanley in 1890.69 If the previous movement may be considered a tribute to highbrow musical influences, this final section glorifies the popular, the exciting, and the exoticized: Sousa creates shocking dynamic contrasts through short cross-cut themes and various percussive effects. The John Church Company’s edition reveals the percussion to be split into two separate parts due to the overwhelming quantity of instruments. Required instruments are noted more specifically here, although Sousa’s call for “bones” and “cocoanuts” might allow for substitutions of claves, woodblock, or similar idiomatic instruments.70 Syncopation appears throughout the movement, reflecting the growing popularity of ragtime music at the time. Sousa also draws from minstrelsy traditions by introducing an accelerando section near the end and bringing the suite to “a rousing dance-like finale.”71

68 Sousa, Three Quotations, ed. Rogers, 2.
69 “Grave and Gay Mingle in This Afternoon’s ‘Pop’,” St. Louis Post – Dispatch (St. Louis, MO) Feb. 27, 1910.
71 Sousa, Three Quotations, ed. Rogers, 2.
While still relying on some historicity when he chose this topic, Sousa rejects the overarching narrative style he established in his previous suite and instead presents an otherwise random assortment of phrases. Each movement could stand on its own as a separate work, making the suite genre more of a formality. Response to *Three Quotations* was positive but somewhat lukewarm in comparison to the enthusiasm aroused by *The Last Days*. An article in the *Washington Post* reviewing the Sousa Band’s January 5th performance at the Lafayette Square Theater goes to great length to discuss the event in meticulous detail; *Three Quotations* was mentioned among the other works and encores that night simply as “a unique composition.”

This specific lack of analytical depth is unexpected, not only because the author talks about the other works in significant details, but also considering how extensively critics had discussed the earlier descriptive works and suite when they first came out. The suite was one of many Sousa compositions that would be later transcribed and performed by orchestras: Max Zach, conductor of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, included the piece in a Sunday Pops concert in February 1910. Zach wrote an article for the St. Louis Post on the concert, and it is here that we receive a clearer critical opinion of the suite: “[The three movements] are pleasing compositions […] but they need not be taken seriously.”

With *Three Quotations*, we find Sousa defining the suite in a way that was new for him: not so much as a group of works with an overarching narrative or common theme, but as a set of descriptive pieces that could just as well be heard separately.

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73 “Grave and Gay Mingle in This Afternoon’s ‘Pop’,” Feb. 27, 1910.
Looking Upward in 1902, with its focus on astrological bodies, and Dwellers of the Western World from 1910 and its depictions of Native Americans, European-Americans, and African Americans serve as cases of the more thematically cohesive suites, while Camera Studies in 1920 and Leaves from my Notebook in 1922 are comparable to Three Quotations in their application of a general common theme to unite what would otherwise be distinct character pieces. While generally all suites remained an active part of the Band’s library, the cohesive suites received greater attention and were played more frequently. Documentation is limited on the compositional process behind several of the “character piece” suites, but it is apparent that Sousa used the genre as a forum for bringing various images together in the minds of the audience and creating a more eloquent façade for the descriptive piece. As witnessed with The Chariot Race, such a piece by itself was forced to stand entirely on its own merits. Since Sousa grouped several together and unified them with a central theme, the popularity or depth of one movement could compensate for another, or the most popular portion could even be divorced from the suite and performed alone.

Perhaps the most unusual of Sousa’s eleven original suites is People Who Live in Glass Houses, from 1909. It was the only suite to break from Sousa’s three-movement format: he wrote it in five sections, representing different types of alcohol and their countries of origin which are then united in the finale. However, the piece was never officially published as a suite and ultimately was repurposed for ballet music in a 1923

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revival of the operetta *The Bride Elect*. No other suite was treated in this particular way, but its fate serves as a reminder of the fluid status of Sousa’s repertoire. In the efforts to elevate his operetta—one of Sousa’s more intricate and “cultured” musical outlets—the suite served as material for expanding and diversifying its total content. Sousa would never compose another suite with the same degree of dramatic or historical narrative as *The Last Days*. Ironically, the last suite—*Cubaland*, or *Cuba under Three Flags*—may be considered the closest comparison. Composed in 1925, *Cubaland* tells the story of Cuba’s various overseeing governments during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: “Under the Spanish Flag” occurs in 1875, “Under the American Flag” in 1898, and “Under the Cuban Flag” in 1925. Within each movement, Sousa quotes various recognizable popular tunes from the respective political overseer—such as *Swanee River*, *The Old Gray Mare*, and *A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* in “Under the American Flag”—as a means to evoke the musical landscape of the country.\footnote{Bierley, *The Works of John Philip Sousa*, 102.} \footnote{Ibid., 100.}
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Sousa’s general departure from more theatrical topics may relate to his return to the operetta as a medium in the mid-1890s. Prior to the creation of the New Marine Band, Sousa made several attempts at light opera but met with little success. After a several-year hiatus, *El Capitan* was produced at the Tremont Theatre in Boston in April of 1896 and became a hit. The potential for drama and extensive storylines in operettas outclassed that found in the suite. Not only was the suite limited in regards to how long it could be before losing the audience’s attention, opera was open to a whole other array of performance venues and opportunities for royalties, that is, from the whole work and from independent releases of popular arias. Because Sousa initially avoided releasing the descriptive works and suites publicly as an effort to retain their inimitability, he ran the risk of missing the suites’ highest period of popularity and making a profit from their sale; opera would require an external performing group to the Band regardless, negating any reason for withholding. With the ability to create more elaborate plotlines and musical depictions, the suite at times became a genre of gimmicks and amalgamation of marches, dance forms, or even quotations of preexisting works.

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77 Ibid., 19.
In addition to the dramatic competition of operetta, Sousa simply may have felt that the suites were progressively becoming less popular and worthwhile to compose. The genre was a prominent component to Sousa’s roster of pieces for his entire career, but they were unable to compete against his marches. In an ironic twist of fate, it would appear that Sousa’s indulgent habits regarding the encore system is largely to blame for the disparity in reception to his personal compositions:

While the beauty of the work produced and its very patent skill and cleverness made a sufficiently strong impression on the audience, it was the numerous encore numbers that drew forth the real enthusiasm of the auditors, who responded eagerly to the spirited rhythms of the old Sousa marches and two-steps and to the charm of the modern glides and tangoes which he presented with striking accent and rhythmic forcefulness.78

The suite was originally approached as a means for drawing attention to the fledgling Sousa Band and exploring new potential creative outlets in American music and culture. Neither motivation was as significant now in the twentieth century: The Sousa Band was now an internationally-known organization, and Sousa had become involved not only with music, but with writing and commentary through novels, articles, and interviews. More suites came to be written, but they no longer were the result of a pressing urgency as was felt with the descriptive pieces and early attempts at the genre.

78 “Sousa at the Lyric: He Again Displays His Great Gift As Baudmaster,” Sun (Baltimore, MD) Nov. 23, 1913.
While Levine remarks that Sousa’s success is at least partially due to his public appearance as “an apostle of order in an unstable universe,” it is far from the same “order” that Levine associates with highbrow culture. Sousa’s own repertoire reflects an ongoing system of experimentation and redevelopment in his efforts at becoming a kind of Renaissance man. Marches, songs, humoresques, descriptive works, suites, operettas, and orchestral transcriptions all reflected the diversity that was seen in American culture at the fin-de-siècle, and it was a diversity which Sousa himself was well aware of and eager to participate in. Likewise, audiences grew to expect a satisfying presentation of classical and popular music from him: “Sousa seems equally at home in both, and either din his programmes or his encores he alternates from ‘grave to gay, from lively to severe’ in a manner that never permits interest to pall for a moment.”

The descriptive pieces and the multi-movement suites represent a strange sort of testing ground for Sousa. While popular topics are employed and the composer certainly had a less musically-experienced audience in mind while writing them, Sousa’s own correspondence reveals the underlying presence of cultured music and European influence. Both sides of the supposed “spectrum” served integral roles in music, and it was an opinion that Sousa convinced many of his listeners to adopt; even by his death in 1932, Sousa was remembered for having “ignored the trite and popularized the best in

80 “Americans had to learn that the only real test of worth was ‘centered in authority,—the authority of the trained judgment of the wisest and the best.'” Ibid., 216.
music.” And while *The Last Days* never became as popular or influential as Sousa hoped it would, the fact that he emphasized this particular work so much speaks of his musical character and goals as a musician. Neither as popular as the marches or as intricate, dramatic, and expansive as the operettas, Sousa’s descriptive pieces and suites exist in what now seems a marginal area, one where he sought to mix the “highbrow” with the “lowbrow.”

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Appendix A: Table of Original Sousa Suites
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Table 1. The names, movements, and years of composition for John Philip Sousa’s original instrumental suites
Appendix B: Musical Examples
Figure 1. Page one of the percussion part from *Sheridan’s Ride* (Library of Congress)
Figure 2. Leitmotifs within *Sheridan’s Ride*, reproduced as emphasized by the *Los Angeles Times* concert advertisement, April 8th, 1892

Figure 3. Melodic direction of Bb Cornet in Sheridan’s Ride (transposed to concert C pitch)