Strike Up the Band! The Legacy of Patrick S. Gilmore

★ by Jere T. Humphreys ★

Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore (1829–92) was one of the most influential band conductors in American history, second in importance only to John Philip Sousa. It is entirely fitting, as we approach the Sesquicentennial of American public school music education (celebrating the period from 1838–1988), to review the contributions of the man revered as “the father of the concert band in the United States.”¹

Gilmore began his musical career as a band cornetist in his native Ireland. He then joined a British Army band that was transferred to Canada when he was seventeen. A short time later he moved to Boston, where his first job was with the music publisher-dealer John P. Ordway. Gilmore subsequently opened his own music store. During the 1850s, he became well known as a cornetist

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Patrick Gilmore in the uniform of the Twenty-second Regiment Band of New York. Photographs in this article courtesy of the American Bandmasters Association Research Center, University of Maryland, College Park.

and conductor, and conducted several Massachusetts bands, including the Boston Brigade and the Charlestown, Suffolk, and Salem brass bands.

Gilmore's Grand Boston Band

In 1859 in Boston, Gilmore organized his own band, serving as conductor, music director, and business manager.

At the outset of the Civil War, the band enlisted in the Union Army with the Twenty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers, and Gilmore was appointed Bandmaster-General and Chief Musician of the State of Massachusetts. After a short tour of duty that included an assignment with General Ambrose Everett Burnside's North Carolina expedition, the band was mustered out of the army in 1862. Gilmore then returned to Boston, where he continued to develop and promote the band, which eventually became known as Gilmore's Grand Boston Band.

Impressario

Gilmore's abilities as a performer and conductor were substantial, but he is best remembered for his activities as a promoter, impresario, and showman. He became, unquestionably, "one of the most picturesque figures in American musical history."²

Gilmore seems to have been influenced early on by the popular and flamboyant French orchestra conductor Louis Antoine Jullien, who performed with his orchestra in the United States in the 1850s. The orchestra was one of the best to perform in this country during that era, and Jullien himself was a superb showman who decorated the stage with red and gold, dressed magnificently, conducted with a jeweled baton, and seated himself

between numbers on a golden throne. One of his most popular pieces was "The Firemen's Quadrille," complete with a fireworks display and a brigade of firemen who deluged the aisles with water.

Inspired by Jullien, Gilmore staged his first musical extravaganza in New Orleans near the end of the war in 1864. This show, which included 5,000 singers, 500 bandsmen, a large trumpet-and-drum corps, and a battery of cannon, featured performances of Gilmore's composition "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." Afterwards, Gilmore turned his attention to the two massive music festivals that made him famous: the National Peace Jubilee of 1869 and the World Peace Jubilee of 1872.

The National Peace Jubilee was a five-day celebration held in Boston in the summer of 1869. The festival was supported professionally by Boston Conservatory director Julius Eichberg and Boston orchestra conductor Carl Zerrahn, and financially by contributions from music publishers, an organ builder, and several local hotels and merchants. A building designed to seat 50,000 and the largest pipe organ built to date in the United States were constructed for the occasion. The performing cast consisted of 20,000 singing schoolchildren from the Boston public schools, a chorus of 10,000 members of music clubs and choral societies from throughout the nation, six bands (with a specially constructed 25-foot bass drum), a 1,000-member orchestra, and a battery of cannon. Discount railway rates were negotiated for those attending the jubilee, and a cough drop manufacturer even gave each participating chorister a box of cough drops. The musical program included renditions of the Bach-Gounod *Ave Maria* by a soprano soloist accompanied by 200 violinists, and many other works by major composers. The new auditorium was filled to capacity for every performance. Among the audience

were Oliver Wendell Holmes, who composed a "national anthem," the elderly Lowell Mason, who served as guest of honor, and President Ulysses S. Grant and his Cabinet.

The success of the National Peace Jubilee spurred Gilmore to attempt an even larger festival: the eighteen-day World Peace Jubilee and International Musical Festival held in Boston in 1872 to celebrate the end of the Franco-Prussian War. A 100,000-seat building and a new organ were constructed (the auditorium and organ built for the 1869 jubilee having been destroyed by a storm). Johann Strauss and his Viennese orchestra of fifty-six members appeared on the program, as did several famous bands: England's Grenadier Guards, France's Garde Républicaine band, Prussia's band of Kaiser Franz's Grenadiers, the Irish National Band, and the United States Marine Band. Other attractions included renditions of Verdi's "Anvil Chorus" by a 2,000-member orchestra, a 20,000-member chorus, a battery of cannon, and 100 Boston firemen performing on anvils. Although Gilmore realized a handsome profit on both the 1869 and 1872 jubilees, attendance was not what he had expected at the latter event, so he once again turned his attention to developing his own professional band.

Bandmaster extraordinaire

When Gilmore began his career as a bandmaster in the 1850s, most American military and community bands were brass bands. This instrumentation had been made possible by the introduction of keyed and valved brass instruments earlier in the century. Beginning with his Boston Brigade Band in 1859, Gilmore followed the lead of European band conductors and added large numbers of woodwinds to the band's instrumentation. In 1873, when he assumed control of what was to become his last and most famous band—the New York Twen-

1. Paul E. Bierley, *John Philip Sousa: American Phenomenon* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1973), 4.

2. George R. Leighton, "Bandmaster Gilmore," *The Etude* 52, no. 4, April 1934, 217.

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altimore's Grand Boston Band served briefly in the Civil War, and then performed at events all across the United States.

ty-second Regiment Band—he added even more woodwinds. By the time Gilmore's band toured Europe in 1878, it had grown to sixty-six pieces, about one-third of which were clarinets, one-third other woodwinds, and one-third brasses. Gilmore's reintroduction of woodwinds helped standardize concert band instrumentation, and this in turn facilitated the publication of band music, both original and transcribed. The popularization of woodwinds as the backbone of concert band instrumentation was one of his most significant achievements.

Beginning in 1873, Gilmore's band presented an average of more than one concert per day for the next nineteen years. Some highlights included a relatively modest event (300 bandsmen and 1,000 choristers) held in Chicago in 1873 to celebrate rebuilding efforts following the great fire, and the American centennial celebration in 1876, during which he shared the spotlight with French composer-conductor Jacques Offenbach and popular American orchestra conductor Theodore Thomas.

Gilmore's band was considered to be one of the best concert bands in the world during the 1870s and 1880s. He earned this distinction by hiring the best professional musicians he could find, including several European orchestral musicians and such famous performers as trombonist Frederick N. Innes, saxophonist E. A. Lefebre, and cornetists Matthew Arbuckle, Jules Levy, and Herbert L. Clarke, and by insisting upon the highest performance standards from the band.

Patrick Gilmore and his band were at their height of popularity when he died unexpectedly on September 24, 1892. Two days later, John Philip Sousa paid tribute to his elder colleague during his professional band's first concert, when he "arranged and played as the first number ever played publicly by my band, a composition of Gilmore's,

"The Voice of a Departed Soul."³ Soon thereafter, fourteen of Gilmore's ninety-nine players joined Sousa, and the Gilmore group disbanded. Gilmore's death thwarted Sousa's planned competition for supremacy of the professional band world, leaving Sousa the undisputed leader.

Gilmore's legacy

Although Gilmore achieved most of his fame from his festivals, he made his greatest and most lasting contribution to bands and music education through his influence on other professional bandmasters and conductors. These men and women in turn inspired the formation of countless municipal, industrial, school, and college bands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The American band movement eventually became so popular that it, like the singing school movement of an even earlier era, came to be fully supported by the public schools.

Given Gilmore's influence, it is not surprising that many of today's school bands bear his stamp. The modern American band movement is characterized by high performance standards, flashy promotional activities, a patriotic and militaristic flavor, a "motherhood and apple pie" image, and strong ties to the American middle class, all of which were characteristic of Gilmore's personal life and career.

Patrick Gilmore, who personified the American band movement, deserves more credit than he usually receives for his importance as an innovative educator with high musical standards:

The passing of Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore...saddened the musical world. Mr. Gilmore had organized and gathered together the very best woodwind and brass players of both Europe and

America. He had gone into the highways and byways of the land, playing Wagner and Liszt, and other great composers, in places where their music was absolutely unknown, and their names scarcely more than a twice-repeated sound.⁴

Most importantly, he should be honored for his key role in the development of public school band programs:

Touring the country with his band after the War..., [Gilmore] introduced the hinterlands to the bassoon, the bass horn, and Beethoven. In his wake, amateur bands sprang up. Bandstands of his era still remain in some towns. Following his footsteps, John Philip Sousa and scores of other band leaders covered the country with crack concert bands. That so many school kids play in a band today is largely because of Patrick Gilmore.⁵

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4. Sousa, 133.

3. John Philip Sousa, *Marching Along: Recollections of Men, Women, and Music* (Boston: Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1928), 127.

5. Doron K. Antrim, "The Immortal 'Pat': America's Super-Salesman of Music." *The Etude* 58, no. 1, January 1945, 24.