

AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Volume XLII, Number 1

Fall 2012

Brass Band Music of the Civil War

By Raoul Camus

In the 1960s, the centennial of the Civil War inspired a renewed interest in the music of that period, especially performances in military ceremonies, camp duties, and social occasions by the regimental bands and field music. Around this time Frederick Fennell and the Eastman Wind Ensemble brought out two beautifully illustrated and thoroughly documented LPs, one for the Union side, the other for the Confederacy. It was a five-year labor of love. Released on CD in the 1990s, these recordings remain the standard in historically-informed performances of Civil War music.



Quickstep: Brass Band Music of the American Civil War

The sesquicentennial has prompted additional Civil War brass bands. We now have the 1st Brigade Wisconsin Band, the 11th North Carolina Regiment Band, the 26th North Carolina Regimental Band, the Federal City Brass Band, the Great Western Band of St. Paul, the 4th Cavalry Regiment Band, and the Dodworth Saxhorn Band, among others. A new group, the Coates Brass Band, has just issued a CD entitled *Quickstep: Brass Band Music of the American Civil War*. It features the music of Thomas Coates, leader of the 47th Pennsylvania Infantry Regimental Band. Curiously, the enigmatic Coates tried to hide everything about his personal life, including his birthdate and place. Michael O'Connor has done a fine job in tracking down this elusive bandmaster/composer, and has made performance editions of many of Coates's compositions, based on creative historical research.

Military regulations at the time, while limiting regular army bands to two principal musicians and twenty-four musicians for the band, did not regulate the instrumentation of the volunteer bands. Gilmore, for example, had twenty drummers, twelve buglers, and a thirty-six piece mixed wind band in his 24th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Band. On 14 August 1861 Thomas Coates and twenty-three musicians enlisted as the band for the 47th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers. Less than a year later, however, General Order 91 directed that all volunteer regimental bands be mustered out of service. While the musicians were offered the opportunity of transferring to the newly authorized brigade bands, none did. Three became company musicians and the other twenty-one presumably returned home to Easton, having served only one year while the regiment continued to serve until January 1866.

The reconstituted Coates Brass Band consists of a director/conductor and fifteen musicians performing on period instruments. The instrumentation is typical for a brass band of the period: three Eb cornets, two Bb cornets, three Eb horns, two Bb tenor horns, one baritone horn, two basses, snare and bass drum. There was no conductor as such, as the leader normally played the solo Eb cornet part. The instruments are a mixture of over-the-shoulder, bell front and bell upward. Considering the cost of these instruments in today's market, mainly caused by the renewed interest in this period, this mixture is not surprising, although Dodworth (1853) admonished, "care should be taken to have all the bells one way." The recording session must have been a challenge for the sound technicians. The playing is excellent—quite an achievement by musicians working on unfamiliar instruments. Since they go to so much trouble for authenticity,

Brass Band Music of the Civil War (cont.)

however, it would have been preferable if the conductor, Douglas Hedwig, an accomplished trumpet player, played one of the cornet parts instead of waving a baton, as indicated in the photo.

The music is typical of what a Civil War band would be expected to perform. The company fifers and drummers would provide the camp duties, and it was up to the band to perform at regimental ceremonies and social occasions. Therefore, their band books would include quick and common step marches, funeral marches, hymns, dances, and concert pieces. O'Connor has made an informed selection, typical of what a bandsman's daily requirements would be. Of the nineteen selections, six are quicksteps, three are patriotic songs, two each of funeral marches, hymns, minstrelsy and concert works, one waltz, one two-step, and one unidentified work, perhaps intended as a quick step. O'Connor might have included a common step march and perhaps more concert works, though that is a minor quibble. More important it would have been very helpful if more information were given about each of the pieces, including sources, other than simply giving titles. For example, since the two-step is normally associated with John Philip Sousa's "Washington Post" and the dance craze that swept Europe and America in the 1890s, how does one explain the inclusion of "Cottage by the Sea Two-Step" in a Civil War band book? Similarly, what do "Turk" and "Phantom" signify?

Military regulations at the time stipulated 110 steps per minute for the quickstep. It was therefore very disappointing to find that none of the selections marked "quickstep" were at that tempo. The closest was the "Cottage by the Sea Two-Step," the others ranging from ninety-two to 106. "Temperance," at ninety-two, is closer to the common step or grand march, which regulations stipulate at ninety. Even the waltz was too slow for that period; a proper tempo would have added a spirited change of pace to the selections.

Despite these criticisms, these musical performances are strong and the research sound. Hopefully the band will continue to bring this important repertoire of 19th century American music to the public through concerts and future recordings.