

MUSIC

From "Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History"



Copyright © 2000 by David Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler

Music was a pervasive and distinctive element of the overall atmosphere surrounding the Civil War. As an art form it reflected the national obsession with every facet of the conflict, and as a commodity it was used by participants and nonparticipants alike for a myriad of purposes. Within the military of both sides, music was used to provide signals, enhance the formality of ceremonies, and sustain morale among soldiers. At home, it served to help recruit volunteers and create public consensus for the war effort. The war itself also had profound effects on the new music of the day, as it provided a wealth of inspiration for folk singers and composers, especially those involved in the booming industry of sheet-music publishing.

Military music comprised two distinct types: field music and band music. The field musicians included the company drummers and fifers, as well as the cavalry buglers, who signaled troops during operations and in daily routine. At times, such as on the march, the infantry musicians came together to form regimental fife-and-drum corps. Classified as noncombatants, the company musicians were often too young to enlist as regular soldiers. Sometimes as young as twelve or thirteen, these were the drummer boys celebrated in postwar battle lore and such popular parlor songs as "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" (composed by Will Hays, 1863).

The band of music was a brass-and-percussion ensemble of from eight to twenty-four instrumentalists, usually attached to a regiment or brigade. The musicians' pay, which averaged seventeen dollars for those in Union bands, was usually supplemented by contributions from the unit's officers. It is estimated that over the course of the war more than 400 bands saw service in the Federal army, while the Confederate forces included as many as 125. An excessive number of volunteer bands and musicians in the first year of the war caused the U.S. War Department in July 1862 to limit the size of the ensembles to sixteen musicians and restrict their use from the regimental to the brigade level. Confederate army regulations allowed for bands of up to sixteen musicians to be attached to regiments.



Band of the 107th U.S. Colored Infantry at Fort Corcoran (Arlington, Virginia), 1865

(Library of Congress)

Although many combinations could be found, the most common instrumentation for a full military brass band included two E-flat cornets (or saxhorns), two B-flat cornets (or saxhorns), two alto horns, two tenor horns, one baritone horn, one bass horn, and a percussion section of one side (snare) drum, a bass drum, and cymbals. Some bands employed more brass instruments, while a few included woodwind instruments, such as a piccolo or clarinet.

The most prevalent brass instruments in the bands of both sides were the upright valved bugles known as saxhorns. Developed in Paris in the 1840s by Adolphe Sax, these instruments were available in all of the necessary sizes, offered great carrying power, and were comparatively easy to play. A popular version of the saxhorn incorporated a bell pointing back over the performer's shoulder, so that music could be heard by troops on the march behind the band.

Besides playing as troops marched into battle, bands entertained during periods of recreation and supplied music for ceremonies and special events. A favorite pastime was the serenade, a special performance given for a particular honoree, usually an officer, and paid for by a group of friends. The bandsmen also performed nonmusical duties; for example, in the latter stages of battles they generally carried stretchers and assisted with medical operations in field hospitals.

The repertoire of Civil War bands included marches and patriotic music, quickstep versions of popular melodies, polkas, waltzes, and funeral dirges. The more accomplished ensembles often performed concert arrangements of classic overtures and opera arias. Although many pieces were popular with bands of both sides, several were used to express partisan sentiments. Such favorites among northern bands included "Yankee Doodle" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Southern bands countered with melodies like "Dixie," "La Marseillaise," and "The Southrons' Chaunt of Defiance."



An unidentified regimental fife-and-drum corps

(National Archives)

The level of musicianship among Civil War bandmen varied widely. Some, like the members of the band of the 25th South Carolina Infantry regiment, had worked as professional musicians before the war, while others had obtained instruments and learned to play only after volunteering for enlistment. Many of the best musicians were Irish, German, or Italian immigrants. Notable bandleaders included Patrick S. Gilmore of the band of the 24th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, and Francis M. Scala, director of the U.S. Marine Band.

In addition to the band music, Civil War soldiers enjoyed singing and dancing to music provided by peers on banjos, fiddles, fifes, Jews' harps, and other portable instruments. Among the most popular songs in camp were such sentimental favorites as "Lorena," "Home, Sweet Home," and "Kathleen Mavourneen." Music for dress balls was often supplied by civilian orchestras or, in the South, ensembles made up of slaves.

At home, music served to foster patriotism. Civic brass bands in cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago led parades and performed martial airs at recruiting rallies and political gatherings. The published sheet music of the period—parlor songs and works for solo piano—often reflected themes associated with the war. Some songs, like "Tenting On the Old Camp Ground" (Walter Kittredge, 1864), offered images of the soldiering life, while others, such as "The Children of the Battlefield" (James G. Clark, 1864), related sentimental stories of fallen heroes. Another genre celebrated the advent of emancipation; examples include "Kingdom Coming" (Henry Clay Work, 1862) and "Sixty-Three Is the Jubilee" (J. L. Greene and D. A. French, 1863). Both of the latter show close kinship to the music of blackface minstrelsy.

Many piano pieces glorified military leaders or commemorated battles, such as the "Beauregard Bull Run Quickstep" (J. A. Rosenberger, 1862) or "General Bragg's Grand March" (P. Rivinac, 1861). The war also contributed material to a type of concert music popular since the time of the American Revolution: the "battle-piece," an extended composition that depicted the progression of a specific engagement. Examples include "The Fall of Fort Sumter" (E. Menger, 1861) and "The Battle of Gettysburg, July 3d, 1863" (James C. Beckel, 1863), both published for piano.

See also

"Battle Hymn of the Republic"; "Dixie".

For further reading:

- **Crawford, Richard**, comp. **The Civil War Songbook** (1977).
- **Currie, Stephen**. **Music in the Civil War** (1992).

- **Garofalo, Robert**, and Mark Elrod. **A Pictorial History of Civil War Era Musical Instruments and Military Bands** (1985).
- **Olson, Kenneth E.** **Music and Musket: Bands and Bandsmen of the American Civil War** (1981).

Charles E. Kinzer

Persistent URL to the Entry: <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/music/0>

APA

Kinzer, C. E. (2000). Music. In D. Heidler & J. Heidler (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American civil war: A political, Social, and military history*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/music/0>

MLA

Kinzer, Charles E. "Music." *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Eds. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000. *Credo Reference*. Web. 7 Oct 2015.

Chicago

Kinzer, Charles E. 2000. "Music". In *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, edited by David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. <http://ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/music/0>

Harvard

Kinzer, CE (2000) Music. [Online]. In D Heidler & J Heidler (eds.). *Encyclopedia of the American civil war: A political, Social, and military history*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Available from: <http://ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/music/0> [Accessed 7 October 2015].