American March Form

Model Composers:
John Philip Sousa
Henry Fillmore
Karl H. King (circus music)
Scott Joplin (rags)
Kenneth Alford (British)

Many European marches (especially concert pieces) feature an A-B-A form, but American military marches prefer a tonally open structure as appears below. This form was most popular between ca. 1860 and 1925, with some composers continuing to write in the form throughout the twentieth century.

First Strain
Second Strain  TRIO
“Break Strain”

Keys: C major and flat keys with no more than four flats are most common for band; Joplin’s piano rags employ some sharp keys, as do orchestral versions of Sousa’s marches. Nearly all marches in this form “add a flat” to the key signature at the Trio.

Sections tend to be of equal length, except for the introduction, which is much shorter.

Time signatures: 6/8, 2/4 and “cut time” appear almost exclusively. A march in 4/4 is not likely to follow this form.

Introduction

Variations:
1. First strain in minor (2nd strain in III, Trio adds a flat and is in major; example: Sousa, The Gladiator)
2. Trio adds a sharp (rare)
3. Trio stays in the same key (rare)
4. Meter change at trio (example: Sousa, El Capitan)
5. Extra or missing strains (between A and C or missing break strain, example: Bagley, National Emblem)

Analytical Conundrum—is the home key at the beginning or the end of the piece?

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Usu. 4-8 bars

Dynamic contrast is often indicated between repetitions.

Key Signature Changes Here!

This repeat may be written out to allow a third version of the C theme.

A powerful repetition of the last chord on a short note to indicate the end of the march… optional, but substitutes for a return to the home key.

Often modified by addition of a countermelody.

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