**Chapter 11**

**Music for Wind Bands**

A band consisting of woodwind, brass, and percussion instruments is one of the oldest types of ensembles in Western music—centuries older than the orchestra. For hundreds of years the wind band was the leading instrumental ensemble in art music and was only supplanted by the orchestra in the Baroque era. The band, throughout its history, has been associated with the military, court life, and civic ceremonies. It continues as such today and in the schools and colleges of the United States it remains the most popular type of ensemble both for participation and in concert.

Bands today perform everywhere, including out of doors! But they are easily at home in the concert hall much like the orchestra and a good deal of serious concert music has been written for the band.

Prior to the Baroque era most wind bands were small—sometimes only four or five players. These small groups were very versatile and could be used as watch and warning musicians in the towers of European cities, and on the same day could come indoors to the cathedral and accompany a church choir. This very versatility is what has made the band the most enduring of instrumental ensembles.

During the French Revolution the orchestra fell out of favor in France because of its association with the aristocracy. Composers replaced it with large-sized concert bands. These bands were sometimes up to about 75 players in number, much the same size as a modern day concert band. The French Revolutionary Guard band was a very powerful musical unit in Paris but the idea of using a large concert band in the opera house or concert hall to completely replace the orchestra never caught on in other parts of Europe. Instead, the band remained most important throughout the 19th century in the military and in civic or community ceremonies and performances. This also kept it of a lower quality of performance than most professional orchestras and indeed, the history of band membership since the 1800s has been one more of amateurs than professionals.

In America the concert band became very popular after the Civil War. Bands were used to recruit, as dance and entertainment groups, and to move the troops during the war. Returning soldiers started community bands all over America in the latter half of the 19th century. A similar amateur movement was happening in Europe at the time but inside companies. Companies such as coal mining companies sponsored bands made up of workers and eventually national and international amateur band competitions were started all over Europe. In America, professional bands were formed in the late 1800s to tour the vast United States, bringing art music to small towns that otherwise had none. These bands were led by such composer/conductors as Patrick Gilmore, Edwin Franko Goldman, and John Philip Sousa who lived from 1854 to 1932.

Sousa was the most famous band director and composer of the 20th century. He first led the United States Marine Corp band and turned it into the finest band in the world. After leaving the Marine Corp, Sousa formed a topnotch professional band that toured the world. He was a very prolific composer of all types of music, but his best works were his marches for band. Sousa wrote over 130 marches, some of them the most famous melodies of all American music. Today, his marches are everywhere—used as television themes, in commercials, in elevators. His *Stars and Stripes Forever* is the national march of the United States

The advent of radio killed the touring concert band. Rather than tour the nation, they simply went on the air, and throughout the 1920s and ’30s you could hear concert band concerts on radio every week.

The concert band became very popular in the United States in schools and universities starting in the 1920s. Organizations were formed nationally to encourage the formation of school bands and by the late 1920’s there was even a national high school band competition. As college athletics became more important in the early half of the 20th century, bands became more important. Marching on fields had always been part of the military bands and it was an easy step for bands to take to the athletic field as entertainment during halftimes. By the 1940s most colleges had band programs even if they didn’t have orchestras or music schools.

As more and more students at universities and schools became interested in bands more and more composers of merit saw the financial advantages of writing concert band music. Many of the world’s finest composers today write music for band. Today’s band is usually a large ensemble of more than 45 players and can be flexible in terms of what instruments are included. Concerts of wind bands are more common than those of orchestras. But, the wind band remains mainly an amateur ensemble. Few professional bands exist outside the military. The finest wind band playing can be found on the university campuses of the United States.