The Clarinet Soloists of the Sousa Band: 1892-1929

ClarinetFest® 2006
Jesse Krebs

Established in 1892, the John Philip Sousa Band toured throughout the United States, made four trips to Europe, and one thirteen-month tour completely around the world. The band was recognized everywhere as one of the premiere ensembles of its kind. This lecture will focus on the clarinetists who were featured as soloists with the band and the music that they performed.

The term “clarinet soloist” has often been used to denote a first chair player, and many clarinetists who played with the Sousa Band, such as John Carrol Carr, William Schueler, Robert Willaman, and James Borrelli, have been given this title without actually performing a solo with the band. For the purposes of this lecture, the title “clarinet soloist” will be reserved only for those clarinetists who performed a solo or duet with the band that can be documented by either a concert program or concert review. Between 1892 and 1929, nine different clarinetists soloed with the Sousa Band, including C.L. Staats, Gustave August Stengler, Joseph Lacalle, William Foerster, Otto Fritzsche (Fritsche), Joseph “Dad” Norrito, Louis Christie, Roy Schmidt, and Edmund C. Wall. They were featured over 130 times, most frequently performing opera variations, such as those on themes from Rigoletto, Norma, and La Sonnambula. They also performed concertos by Klosé, Weber, and Baermann; obbligato parts to vocal solos; and other various pieces like Lazarus’ “Scotch Fantasie” and Mayeur’s “Caprice and Polka.”

These clarinetists represented the highest caliber musicians of their time and came from all over the world including France, Italy, and Germany. They studied at prestigious institutions like the Paris Conservatory and the Leipzig Conservatory, and along with the Sousa Band, they performed with such organizations as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York City Ballet Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the Band of Jardin d’Acclimation (Paris) and the Grand Opera House (London). Furthermore, music journals like The Musical Messenger regularly included their photographs and quotes endorsing various brands of clarinets. Sousa paid well for the services of these accomplished clarinetists (see the salary table below).

Sousa Clarinetists’ Weekly Salaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEKLY SALARIES</th>
<th>1896</th>
<th>1921</th>
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On a concert in Chicago, IL, in 1892, the Sousa Band performed melodies from Ferdinand Hérold’s Le Pre aux clercs arranged by French clarinetist Henri Paradis (1861-1940). This performance featured Sousa clarinetist C. L. Staats. Staats began playing clarinet in a small band in Connecticut, and was one of the first Americans to study clarinet in Paris. He graduated from the Paris Conservatory and his clarinet teachers included Cyrille Rose, Henri Paradis, and bass clarinetist Albert Bretonneau. Before joining the Sousa Band, he played solo clarinet with the Band of Jardin d’Acclimation (Paris) and was principal clarinetist in the Grand Opera House (London) and in the Royal Italian Opera.

In September, 1898, Staats organized the Bostonia Sextette Club, a chamber ensemble made up of clarinet and string quintet that toured throughout the United States. After one of their performances, the Chattanooga Times commented, “Splendid musical organization. Mr. Staats is an artist of the first rank, and his playing was masterly.” Furthermore, the Sacramento Bee described their performance: “Unusually demonstrative.
C. L. Staats displayed splendid technique. Many of the pieces that Staats performed with the Bostonia Sextette Club were the same pieces used by the Sousa Band, including an arrangement of Hérold’s Le Pre aux clercs. They also performed Mayeur’s “Caprice and Polka” and Schubert’s “Der Hirt auf dem Felsen,” with the assistance of a soprano soloist.

Staats was well-known for his editions of The New Imperial Method for Clarinet, The Otto Langey Tutor, and Klosé’s Celebrated Method for the Clarinet (1898). The New Imperial Method for Clarinet includes instruction on playing position, tone production, articulation, and phrasing. He also provided various finger exercises, scales, articulation studies, and etudes. Staats wrote, “The clarinet is, without contradiction, of all wind instruments the one which presents the greatest richness of tone and extent of compass, comprising sounds from great depth to extreme height, it is indispensable in a military band and one of the most important instruments in the orchestra.”

In military band music the clarinet is called upon to play what corresponds to the violin part in an orchestra, which is in many cases entirely suited to the instrument, and impossible of performance as written, on account of the rapid staccato, which is very easy on the violin and very difficult on the clarinet. Notes must be omitted in many passages on account of the necessity for taking a breath. When there are several players on the same part it is best that they take breaths at different points, so that every note can be played by one or the other of them.

The next significant clarinet soloist of the Sousa Band was Gustave August Cercello Stengler, primary clarinet soloist from 1892 to 1897, already famous by virtue of his performances with the Gilmore Band. During his time with the Sousa Band, Stengler was featured fifty-one times, including thirty-two solo, five duet, and fourteen trio/quartet appearances. He most often performed fantasies on opera themes like Verdi’s Rigoletto and Bellini’s La Sonnambula, and occasionally played an encore, like Schumann’s Traumerei.

Stengler regularly soloed with the band at both the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the annual series of concerts held at Manhattan Beach, New York. He was often featured with other members of the band including clarinetist Joseph Norrito, flutist Frank Wadsworth, oboist Robert Messinger, flutist Giacomo (Jack) Norrito, and horn player Bernhardt Baumgartel. They most often performed Val Hamm’s “The Three Gossips” for clarinet, oboe, and flute (“The Four Gossips” if performed with horn).

Newspaper reviews of the Sousa Band concerts describe Stengler’s brilliant clarinet playing. In a concert review from 1892, the Woonsocket Call from Woonsocket, RI wrote, “The clarinet solo by Signor Stengler was one of the gems of the concert; it received warm applause.” After a Sousa Band concert on Sunday, November 20, 1892 at Boston’s Broadway Theatre, on which Stengler performed Baermann’s Concerto for
Clarinet, the Boston Globe wrote, “A solo for clarinet by Signor Stengler revealed the possibilities of that instrument when in the hands of a master.”

Furthermore, Stengler was one of the first clarinetists to be recorded as a soloist in America. In 1897 and 1898 Stengler participated in recording sessions for the Berliner disc label. He recorded sixteen solo pieces and eight duets with clarinetist George McNeice. Several of the solo pieces recorded by Stengler were also the solos that he performed with the Sousa Band, including an arrangement of Bellini’s La Sonnambula (Berliner 341) and Bishop’s “Lo, Here the Gentle Lark” (Berliner 319). Other pieces he recorded included nostalgic songs like Foster’s “Old Folks at Home,” Bishop’s “Home, Sweet Home,” and the popular “Blue Bells of Scotland.”

Figure 2: Gustave August Cercello Stengler (Courtesy of Paul Bierley)

Stengler also composed music, including a solo clarinet piece entitled, “Fantasy on Mercadante’s Il Giuramento.” He apparently left the band because of a problem with alcohol; the Salt Lake City Tribune reported in 1901, “Herr Stengler, the former solo clarinet player with the band, is with the band no more. ‘Ach zu viele booze,’ was the explanation one musician gave ere leaving for the West yesterday. A man cannot drink and tend to business in any line of action.”

On Friday, July 28, 1893, the celebrated E-flat clarinetist from Gilmore’s band, Joseph Lacalle (1859-1937), was featured as a soloist during a Sousa Band concert at Manhattan Beach, NY. He performed the “petite clarinette obligato” to “Jours de mon enfance” from Hérold’s Le Pre aux clercs. Lacalle also soloed at the Mid-Winter Exposition in 1894. He had emigrated from Spain and in addition to playing in the bands of Gilmore and Sousa, he performed in the 7th Regiment Band, the Hoadley Musical Society Amateur Orchestra, the Columbia Spanish Band, and conducted the Lacalle Band and the 23rd Regiment Band all of which were based in New York. He composed eight marches and participated in recording sessions for Columbia, Indestructible Cylinders, and Lakeside Cylinders. Lacalle also wrote the tune “Amapola (My Pretty Little Poppy)” in 1924 with Spanish and English lyrics by Albert Gamse. It was later recorded by Jimmy Dorsey’s band, sung by Bob Eberly and Helen O’Connell, and became a Hit Parade Winner in 1941. Since then, the tune “Amapola” has been recorded by numerous artists, including Plácido Domingo.
Clarinetist William Foerster performed “Fantasia on Themes from Rigoletto,” arranged by Bassi, on a concert with the Sousa Band for the Midwinter Fair in San Francisco on Tuesday, April 17, 1894. He later played alto clarinet with the band in 1899 and 1900.24

Before playing with the Sousa Band in 1898 and 1900, German clarinetist Otto Fritzsche (Fritsche) studied at the Leipzig Conservatory and played with the Gewerbehaus Orchestra in Dresden.25 Fritzsche would later play bass clarinet with the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1902 to 1907.26 He soloed with the Sousa Band on several occasions, including two performances of “Grand Fantasia on Traviata” on October 28 and 29, 1898 at the St. Louis Exposition. During the European tour of 1900, Fritzsche performed an improvised clarinet cadenza at the beginning of a waltz by the German composer Robert Vollstedt. The story was later published in the Sousa Band Fraternal Society Newsletter:

And so before a large audience, with the composer sitting in the front row, Fritzche launched into a long cadenza, got out of the key, and couldn’t get in again! He rushed up, then down, tried dominant and diminished sevenths, and was still nowhere. Great beads of perspiration appeared on his brow as Mr. Sousa stood, half turned toward him, patiently waiting. At last, in desperation, Fritzche went into a chromatic scale from the lowest note upward, broke off on a high note and triumphantly finished in the key. With a small friendly smile Mr. Sousa was heard to say, “Welcome home, Mr. Fritzche!” then continued on with the waltz.27 Fritzche also created a three part study for the Boehm-system clarinet that was published by the Cundy-Bettoney Company of Boston: Part One consists of a detailed fingering chart with examples,28 Part Two is a twenty-page collection of major and minor scales in various rhythms and articulations with fingerings provided,29 and Part Three provides challenging passages from standard classical and popular works.

Perhaps the most famous clarinet soloist from the Sousa Band was the Italian clarinetist Joseph “Dad” Norrito. He was with the Sousa Band longer than any other musician (1892-1922) and his brother Giacomo (Jack) Norrito played flute and piccolo with the group from 1893 to 1907.30 Before joining the band, Norrito played first clarinet at the Columbia Theatre in Boston.31 During his thirty years with the Sousa Band, Norrito soloed forty-four times and was featured in duets, trios, and quartets in nineteen performances. The earliest documented Sousa performance featuring Norrito was at the 1893 Chicago World Fair where he played two clarinet duets with Stengler: “Duet for Two Clarionets” by Baisio and “Air Varied” by Ponchielli.32

Norrito most often soloed when the band was performing a lengthy engagement at one venue like the concerts at Dominion Park in Montreal, the Steel Pier concerts in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the Pittsburgh Exposition concerts, or the concerts at the Willow Grove Park, located outside of Philadelphia. However, there are also several instances of him soloing at one-night engagements as well, including concerts during the 1907 tour through the Midwest states and the 1915 tour through Spokane, Washington.33
As with the other clarinet soloists with Sousa’s Band, Norrito regularly played solo fantasias from the famous operas of Verdi and Bellini, including *Rigoletto*, *Norma*, and *La Sonnambula*. In most cases, the programs list Norrito as the arranger of these selections. He performed duets, trios, and quartets with other members of the band, such as Bishop’s “Lo, Here the Gentle Lark” with flutists Giacomo (Jack) Norrito, Julius Spindler, or Louis Fritz. Norrito also performed “Villanelle for clarinet and saxophone” by Dell’Acqua with saxophonist William Schensley during a concert at the 1913 Pittsburgh Exposition.\(^{34}\)

Following a concert of the Sousa Band in Portland, Oregon in 1907, the Oregonian described Norrito’s clarinet playing:

> A large crowd attended the matinee concert in the afternoon. The feature was a clarinet solo by Signor Joseph Norrito, who acquitted himself admirably and was enthusiastically encored. Signor Norrito showed great breadth of tone, splendid execution and played with fine expression.\(^{35}\)

After a performance of “Air Italian” at a concert in New York in 1908, *Musical America* wrote, “Mr. Norrito, the clarinetist, in the performance of his own composition, delighted his auditors with the beautiful mellow quality of tone produced on this instrument.”\(^{36}\) Another review found the performance “excellently rendered and worthy of special mention.”\(^{37}\) Norrito also received praise for his duet performances. After performing at the Pittsburgh Exposition in 1907, the Mitchell Republican wrote:

> One of the gems of the evening was the duet for clarinet and flute by Mr. Norrito and Mr. Spindler, when they played, “Lo, Here the Gentle Lark.” The unison of these two instruments, played by artists, resulted in a most enjoyable and sympathetic tone number. Their execution was brilliant and they vied with the lark in the purity of tone and sweetness of tone. The gentlemen responded to a well merited encore.\(^{38}\)

Like Stengler, Norrito also participated in some of the early recording sessions for the Berliner disc label. On August 3, 1897, Norrito recorded “Original Schottische” in New York, and recordings were also made of him playing “Andante Original” and an aria from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*.\(^{39}\)

Along with his extraordinary abilities as a clarinetist, Norrito was also a considerate person. After a concert in 1918 when half of the band miscounted a tutti section during the last movement of Wieniawski’s Violin Concerto, Norrito thoughtfully told the soloist, “Oh, miss! I am so sorry for you.” She apparently did not seem to mind, replying, “Don’t feel sorry for me. I played my part correctly.”\(^{40}\) This poem, written by fellow clarinetist Edmund A. Wall during the World Tour, was a tribute to his caring nature:

> Now Joe Norrito, Grand old Joe,  
As Solo Clarinet his equal show.  
A friend sincere in heart and hand,  
A credit to his native land.\(^{41}\)

Sousa’s clarinet soloists like Stengler and Norrito represented the best clarinetists of the time and their pictures would often appear in clarinet advertisements in music journals. For instance, in the April, 1896 issue of *J. W. Pepper’s Musical Times and Band Journal*, an advertisement for J. W. P. Premier Clarinets lists Stengler as one who used and endorsed their clarinets.\(^{42}\) Also, in the July, 1922 issue of the *Musical Messenger*, a Selmer advertisement claims, “Mr. Joseph Norrito, First Chair Solo Clarinetist of Sousa’s Band, uses the GRAS Clarinet, saying: It is the finest clarinet he has ever played.”\(^{43}\)
Clarinetist Louis Christie joined the Sousa Band in 1898. In 1901, he performed the clarinet duet, “Nanine” by La Jarte with Norrito on two concerts at Manhattan Beach, New York. Along with performing in Sousa’s band, Christie also performed with the Arthur Pryor Band and conducted the Morgan Park Boys’ Band in Duluth, Minnesota.

Christie also took part in many recording sessions. As early as 1902, Christie recorded the solo piece “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye” with piano accompaniment for the Victor label (Victor 1454). He went on to record numerous duets, either for two clarinets or clarinet and flute, in Victor recording sessions in 1904, 1909, and 1912. Many of these recordings were of popular dances like “Golden Robin Polka,” “Ecstasy Waltz,” and Saint-Saëns’ “Tarantella.”

Clarinetist Roy O. Schmidt, who played with the Sousa Band from 1925 to 1927, made four solo appearances. On July 5, 1926 at Hershey Park, he performed a concerto by Carl Maria von Weber, and later that year performed Bassi’s “Fantasia on Themes from Rigoletto” twice: once at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City and once at the Willow Grove Park. Schmidt was also featured on Kreisler’s Schön Rosmarin at a Willow Grove concert in 1926. He later played clarinet with the Conway Band and second clarinet in the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. In a session in 1928, he used a silver clarinet to record Bassi’s Rigoletto Fantasy.

Finally, Edmund C. Wall (1895-1985) played solo clarinet with the Sousa Band beginning in 1926, and his father and brother were also clarinetists in the band at various times. He explains, “It was my good fortune to be associated with Mr. Sousa as solo clarinetist during a period of six years, including the final tour of 1931. As happened in a number of cases, I was of the second generation; my father had traveled many thousands of miles with him, including the famous World Tour in 1911.” Wall had a very distinguished clarinet-playing career that, along with the Sousa Band, included performances with the New York City Ballet Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the Goldman Band, the Pryor Band, and the 1940 World’s Fair Band (New York). Many years later, he became an important clarinet teacher as a faculty member at the Horace Mann School in Riverdale, New York.
Wall began playing clarinet at the age of six, and after several years of studying with his father, made his first public solo appearance when he was only nine years old. He then began a year of study with the French clarinetist Alexandre Selmer (1864-1953). Wall recalled, “He [Selmer] helped me a great deal. He was a very stern teacher . . . he didn’t believe in telling his students they were good; he told other people they were good but he never told me.” Wall recalled his first introduction to Sousa while his father was still playing in the band:

I can remember being at the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House where the band was rehearsing preparatory to going out on tour. At an intermission my father introduced me, a schoolboy, to Mr. Sousa, who shook hands very kindly with me. Incidentally, I did not dream at that moment that I would one day play solo clarinet for him for six seasons.

After joining Sousa in 1926, he soloed with the band in Atlantic City, San Francisco, Portland, Rochester, and Seattle, often playing Bassi’s arrangements of Il Trovatore and Rigoletto. Wall also performed a concerto by Klosé, and Bassi’s arrangements of “Carnival of Venice” and La Favorita. The Oregon Daily Journal commented on a solo performance by Wall with the Sousa Band in 1927, “Edmund Wall, principal clarinetist, won applause with the “Rigoletto” fantasia with its lightning speed variations.” Evidently Wall was a notoriously loud player. Keith Brion, director of the New Sousa Band, recalled that Eddie Wall told him, “The ‘old man’ [Sousa] was always bugging them to play softer.”

Edmund C. Wall and the saxophone soloist Owen Kincaid regularly played practical jokes on other Sousa Band members. Kincaid remembered:

First of all Eddie and myself were out drinking one glass of beer and we spied some dried fish, so we bought some and before the concert we rubbed them all over Deluca’s, Jim Slantz’s, and Whoopie Monroe’s mouthpieces. Well to make a long story short, Whoopie was plain mad and disgusted, Slantz never cleaned his mouthpiece, so he never noticed the difference, and Deluca got so mad he dam near chewed the mouthpiece off his tin pipe. This was such clean fun we thought it educational to test certain reactions on different members.

As the principal clarinetist, Wall assumed various responsibilities. He describes his daily routine during the Steel Pier concerts in Atlantic City, “The music was laid out in the folios for the day every morning in a room above the stage on the Pier. I as a section leader went down there every morning to study the programs for the day and to try to out-guess the Old Man [Sousa] as to what his tempos might be.” In 1929, Wall took part in several radio broadcasts with the Sousa Band in New York. He recalled, “These [radio broadcasts] were for General Motors in the winter of 1929. They were played in the big studio of NBC at the old premises at 711 Fifth Avenue. Mr. Sousa conducted them and the band was made up of New York men and members of the band, augmented where necessary.” Wall later became the Secretary-Treasurer of the Sousa Band Fraternal Society and in 1967 he became the third editor of the Sousa Band Fraternal Society Newsletter. He also wrote a band arrangement of “Caprice Brilliant” by F. and M. Jeanjean featuring solo clarinet. He most likely composed this arrangement for his own solo appearances.

The clarinet soloists of the Sousa band were phenomenal musicians and well known in their day. August Stengler, Joseph Norrito, and Edmund C. Wall became famous from solo appearances that showcased their skill. They were regularly featured in advertisements for clarinets in music journals and were among the first clarinetists to take part in recordings for the Berliner and Victor companies. Many also performed with other prestigious ensembles, including the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York City Ballet Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the Band of Jardin d’Acclimation (Paris) and the Grand Opera House (London).
Yet today, many musicians are unaware of these clarinetists and their accomplishments. Sousa once wrote, “Why does the world need bands? Why does the world need flowers, sunlight, religion, the laughter of children, moonrise in the mountains, great masterpieces of art? Why indeed? Because the world has a soul, a spirit, which is hungry for beauty and inspiration.” Truly, Sousa's clarinetist soloists added to that beauty, for their music was enjoyed by all who had the great fortune to hear it. Hopefully this research will bring overdue recognition to these forgotten clarinetists.

1 From the payroll lists at the Sousa Archives at the University of Illinois.
3 Talent brochure for The Bostonia Sextette Club from the Records of the Redpath Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.
6 Talent brochure for The Bostonia Sextette Club from the Records of the Redpath Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.
7 Ibid
8 Concert program of the Bostonia Sextette Club from Bay City, Michigan (Friday, Oct. 30, 1908) from the Records of the Redpath Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.
12 Ibid., 78.
14 Ibid, (#1, p. 22).
15 Ibid, (#1, p. 29).
17 From the personnel file for Stengler at The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois.
21 From the personnel file for Lacalle at The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois.
24 From the personnel file for Foerster at The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois.
25 Weston, Yesterday’s Clarinetists, 70.
26 Ibid.
28 Otto Fritzsche, Chart For Boehm System Clarinets: With Examples Showing Use of Fingerings (Boston: Cundy-Bettony Co., 1941).
29 Otto Fritzsche, Fingered Scales for Boehm System Clarinet (Boston: Cundy-Bettony Co., 1903).
30 Bierley, “All-Time Roster,” 33.
34 Ibid. (#38, p.23).
35 Ibid. (#27, p.54).
36 Ibid. (#21:3, p. 279).
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid. (#21:3, p.239).
39 Charosh, Berliner Gramophone, 23.
40 Mary Gailey Mangrum, “Experiences as Violin Soloist with the Sousa Band: As Told to
41 From the personnel file of Norrito at The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois.

45 Bierley, “All-Time Roster,” 8.

46 From the personal clarinet recording collection of Dr. Stan Stanford that can be viewed online:
http://www.clarphon.com/clarinetrecordings.htm
48 Willow Grove Concert Programs from the Sousa Archives: Paul Bierley Papers, boxes 87-88.
49 Ibid.
51 Ibid.

54 Bierley, “All-Time Roster,” 46.
55 Edmund C. Wall’s obituary from The International Musician (June 1985).
57 Edmund C. Wall, to Paul Bierley, 25 April 1977, Bierley collection at the Sousa Archives, University of Illinois.

59 Keith Brion, E-mail correspondence with the author (21 February 2005).
61 Edmund C. Wall, to Paul Bierley, 21 October 1982, Bierley collection at the Sousa Archives, University of Illinois.
62 Edmund C. Wall, to Paul Bierley, 15 December 1965, Bierley collection at the Sousa Archives, University of Illinois.

64 F. and M. Jeanjean, “Caprice Brillant,” arranged by Edmund C. Wall. Available for purchase from The Detroit Concert Band, S 1089.

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