

Long after his death, Sousa still entertains

By Steven Brown

Patriotic occasions can hardly take place without "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and other snappy works by John Philip Sousa. Yet that's all that most anyone knows about the United States' March King.

Keith Brion has spent

three decades fleshing out the picture. Garbed in an old-school uniform, medals and gloves like Sousa once wore, Brion conducts concerts patterned after those Sousa and his band performed as they crisscrossed the United States 100 years ago.

The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra joins

Brion's crusade Saturday, when it brings the former Yale University band director to lead a concert of Sousa-style Americana. Brion helped provide some insights about the musician.

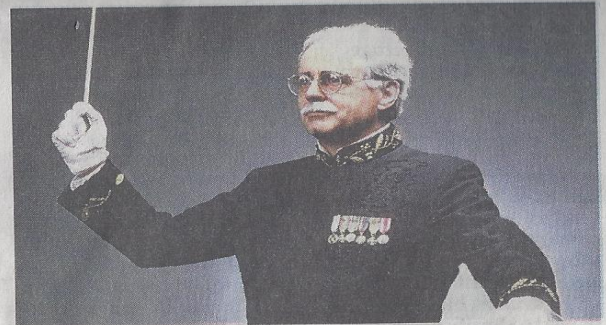
Melting pot

Sousa's heritage exemplifies the American

immigrant experience. His father, John Antonio Sousa, was a native of Spain; his mother came from Germany. Sousa — the third of 10 children — was born Nov. 6, 1854, in Washington, D.C.

Starting young

John Antonio Sousa
Sousa continues on E9



Courtesy photo

Conductor Keith Brion, costumed as John Philip Sousa, directs pops concerts patterned after Sousa's.

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Sousa's first published work was a waltz

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played the trombone in the U.S. Marine Band, and John Philip Sousa began to take music lessons around age 6. He studied an array of instruments, but the violin became his specialty.

When Sousa was 13, he enlisted as an apprentice to the Marine band, with duties that ranged from playing in the group to handing out sheet music to sweeping floors. Meanwhile, a European-trained teacher grounded him in harmony and other skills. "You might think of Sousa as an American primitive. But nothing could be further from the case," Brion says.

Before the March King

Sousa's first published work was a waltz, "Moonlight on the Potomac," which came out when he was 18. After leaving the Marine band at 20, he became a violinist and conductor in theaters

Rivers Oaks Chamber Orchestra

When: 5 p.m. Saturday

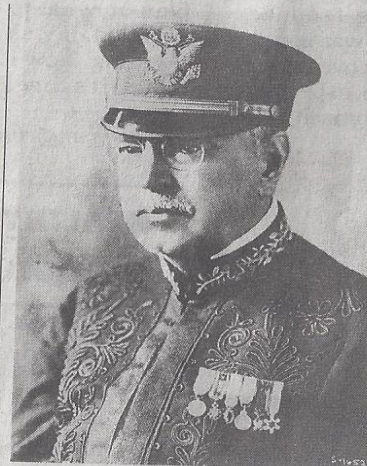
Where: Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks

Tickets: \$25; 713-665-2700, rochohouston.org

— including a prominent Philadelphia one that helped him win acclaim. In those days, theater orchestras were practically in the audiences' faces, rather than in a pit like today's groups, and Brion says the exposure taught Sousa what held their attention. "I think that never left him," Brion says. "He was more proud to be known as an entertainer than as a musician."

Back to the band

The Marine Band brought Sousa back as its director in 1880. He molded it into the best military band in the world, historians say. After 12 years, with backing from a music promoter, Sousa left



Courtesy photo

John Philip Sousa is mainly known for his marches, but he also wrote operettas and other works.

to form his own professional band. Patterned after a theater orchestra, including strings, it was more like one of today's classical chamber orchestras than what we think of as a band, Brion says. During

the next four decades, the group played more than 15,000 concerts, including four European tours and a world tour in 1910-11. From a handful of the band's recordings, Brion says, today's listeners can hear part of what made the group special: "Their playing is so perfect. It's quite amazing."

Pioneer of the pops

Sousa's recipe was a mix of light classics and crowd pleasers that symphony orchestras turned into the pops concert, Brion says. That's the format Brion will follow Saturday, drawing entirely from the Sousa band's repertoire. The program will include a couple of glimpses of lesser-known Sousa: a showpiece based on George Gershwin's "Swanee" and a medley of sacred music created for Sunday concerts. A specialty number called "Fluffy Ruffles" will spotlight the xylophone, which was in vogue during Sousa's time. "You have to see it," Brion says. "The notes

come flying out like you won't believe."

No apologies

Sousa wrote 15 operettas, including the hit "El Capitan," a tale of intrigue and love set in 16th-century Peru. "El Capitan" enhanced Sousa's international fame. Nevertheless, he didn't apologize for his marches. "I would rather be the composer of an inspired march than of a manufactured symphony," he said.

No time to retire

After World War I broke out, Sousa signed up for the U.S. Navy, establishing a 300-piece band at a training center near Chicago. And he kept his own ensemble going until 1931. The next year, guest-conducting a band in Reading, Pa., Sousa collapsed after a rehearsal; he died on March 6, 1932, at age 77.

The last piece he conducted: "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

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