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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Strain</th>
<th>Second Strain</th>
<th>TRIO</th>
<th>“Break Strain”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Dynamic contrast is often indicated between repetitions.

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

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)

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