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An American Military Music School in France

The A.E.F. Bandmaster and Musicians' School at Chaumont (1918 - 1919)

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On April 6, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany, turning the initially European war into a World War. The French and British, on the verge of collapse, welcomed the news with all the more relief because they could no longer rely on their Russian ally, weakened by the revolutionary movements. The first American soldiers landed in the summer of 1917, but they would only be involved in the fighting a year later. In the summer of 1918, of the 211 divisions available to General Foch, only a dozen were Americans and, moreover, their equipment was supplied by France, boosting the arms factories, tanks, planes and cannons that were still missing across the Atlantic! But General John Pershing's 1st U.S. Army launched its first offensive at Saint-Mihiel, near Verdun, on September 12, 1918, and this late deployment was enough to convince the Germans of their inferiority and the inevitability of their defeat.

General **John J. Pershing**, American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) Commander, considered that music was of capital importance for the morale of the troops.

The medical staff of the A.E.F. stated about the role of band music in the convalescent camps behind the front lines:

There unquestionably being a psychological element in the reconstruction of these men, the assignment of bands and other means of providing music and entertainment at these convalescent camps must be recognized. It has been the experience of our Allies, extending over a much longer period than our own, that a good band is of the first importance in restoring the moral fibre in a man who has been shaken by the ordeal of battle.[1]

Besides acting as stretcher-bearers, bandmen were also often called on to bury soldiers fallen on the battlefield as was reported in the history of the 353rd Infantry Band conducted by bandmaster Meyers.[2]

Pershing was committed to a thorough improvement of the musical level of the American military bands. That is why he called on the well-known conductor Walter Damrosch (Wrocław, Poland, 1862 - New York, 1950)[3] to investigate the competence of the American military band conductors. Damrosch, sponsored by YMCA, was sent to France in June 1918 to search for a French symphony orchestra that could perform for the American soldiers in France and came into contact with Nadia[4] and Lili Boulanger[5] in Paris.



Nadia Boulanger and Walter Damrosch visit the ruins of Reims in 1919

When Damrosch attended an American parade on the Champs-Élysées in Paris on July 4, 1918, he heard the dreadful testimony of an American military band conductor named Tyler. He had trained a band of 28 musicians to accompany the troops to France. They had the status of stretcher-bearer and in this capacity took part in the Battle of Seichepray (Meurthe et Moselle) in April 1918. Nine musicians were killed, three were injured and two suffered shell shock.[6] The elimination of the band had a huge impact on the morale of the soldiers! Damrosch was very impressed.[7]

On July 14, 1918, Damrosch received an invitation to meet General Pershing and on July 18 he proceeded to the American headquarters situated at Chaumont in the Department of Haute-Marne where he had lunch with Pershing at the *Château du Val des Escholiers* where Pershing had established his headquarters.[8] Damrosch related:

"I had again begun to speculate on the uselessness of a middle-aged musician in war time, when, like a ray of sun-shine, I suddenly received a visit from Colonel Dawes, a friend of our Commander-in-Chief, General Pershing, with a message from him asking me if I would come to General Headquarters, at Chaumont, and consult with him regarding possible improvements of the army bands of the American Expeditionary Force, which were not in particularly good condition, owing to the haste in which they had been assembled, and, above all, the scarcity of routined and competent bandmasters." [9]

The conversation was exclusively devoted to military music. The U.S. Congress had agreed that military band conductors should be awarded the rank of lieutenant, but Pershing felt that many of them had to undergo thorough training before receiving that promotion.

Damrosch agreed to test all American military band conductors in France and Pershing decided to send them all (two hundred), in groups of fifty, to Paris, together with an American band with which Damrosch could test the candidates during several weeks. As a working instrument they had the **329th Infantry Band**[10] at disposal.



The 329th Infantry Band

Damrosch told: *"General Pershing had sent me the band of the 329th Infantry, on which these young applicants could try their teeth."* [11]

Damrosch was mindful of the story of the band at Seichepray and pleaded for the musicians to be no longer used as stretcher-bearers. On August 24, 1918 Pershing issued a general order: *"The practice of using members of the band as stretcher bearers will be discontinued, except in cases of extreme urgency."*[12]

In Paris, Damrosch submitted each week fifty military band conductors of the American Expeditionary Force to a thorough test of their musical skills and conducting technique; he had had a spacious room in a hotel near the Place de la Bastille at his disposal.

He was assisted by the French conductor **Francis Casadesus** (1870-1954), a pupil of César Franck, who tested the knowledge of instrumentation while Damrosch assessed the conducting technique. Every week in July, August and September 1918, about fifty military band conductors from all over France (ports, training camps and even front lines) were tested. They first had to conduct an overture (often *Oberon* by Weber) or a part from a classical symphony and then an own choice piece. After a week it was already clear to Damrosch that, despite musical talent, a thorough training in conducting technique was lacking. Only a school for military band conductors could remedy this. Pershing immediately approved Damrosch's proposal to establish a school for American military band conductors on French soil.



Francis Casadesus

In addition to a military band conductor's training, Damrosch also felt an urgent need for thorough training of oboists, bassoonists, horn players and flugelhorn players.

Damrosch remembered:

"It seemed to me at the time remarkable that, in the midst of war and all its immediate necessities weighing upon him, General Pershing should have had the acumen to perceive the value of music in war time and to interest himself in its improvement."[13]

The establishment of this school (Bulletin 84. *G.H.Q. A.E.F. France, October 28, 1918*) was just one part of Pershing's four-step plan to take American military music to a higher level.

(1) First, he urged Congress to increase the number of bands. Congress responded in July 1918 by admitting 20 additional bands for the duration of the war.

(2) Secondly, Pershing, entirely on his own hook, increased the strength of the American regimental bands from 28 to 48 musicians. Consequently the Army Bands got their first complete instrumentation:

2 flutes/piccolos - 2 oboes - 2 bassoons - E flat clarinet - 10 B flat clarinets - 2 alto clarinets - 2 bass clarinets - 3 saxophones (alto, tenor, baritone) - 1 contrabass sarrusophone - 4 French horns - 4 B flat trumpets - 2 B flat cornets (or flugelhorns) - 2 baritone horns or euphoniums - 3 trombones - 1 bass trombone - 4 bass tubas - 2 percussionists.

(3) He founded the school at Chaumont.

(4) He gave all bandleaders the rank of First or Second Lieutenant and sought to grant them the authority appropriate to their responsibility.

In addition, Pershing also recommended that a Drum and Bugle Corps be added to each infantry regiment, which was also approved later.



General John J. Pershing

I. 1. A school is established at these headquarters, to be known as the "American E. F. Bandmasters and Musicians' School." The purpose of the school will be:

- (a) The training of bandmasters.
 - (b) The training of musicians in the study of certain instruments.
2. In conjunction with the school there will be an examining board appointed by these headquarters for the examination of candidates for the grades of first and second lieutenant (band leader).
3. The course for bandmasters will be 8 weeks, and will include theoretical and practical tuition in conducting, the latter with a full practice band; a course in harmony and instrumentation, and a course in administrative work. Upon the completion of the course, candidates who are not already commissioned will be examined for promotion to the grades of first or second lieutenant. All band leaders in the A. E. F. will be required to attend the school, excepting those who have been examined in the American E. F. and have been recommended for a commission. These latter may attend the school upon their own application.
4. The course for musicians will be for 12 weeks and will include the following classes:
- (a) French horn.
 - (b) Oboe.
 - (c) Bassoon.
 - (d) A course for sergeant buglers.
5. Candidates for commissions as band leaders who have not already been examined in France, will make application to be examined by the board prior to attending the school. In case of failure to pass said examination they will be required to attend the school and be examined upon completion of the course.
6. In making appointments for commissioned band leaders those band leaders now in the service will be given the preference; those who have had five years or more service as band leaders in the Regular Army, or National Guard, or National Army, or altogether, being eligible for commission as first lieutenants, and those who have had less than five years of such service being eligible for commission as second lieutenants. Application for examination for a commission as band leader will be accompanied by the following:
- (a) A statement by the regimental commander that such a vacancy exists.
 - (b) Name in full.
 - (c) Home address, and emergency address.
 - (d) Place and date of birth.
 - (e) Citizenship. (If naturalized, documentary proof thereof.)
 - (f) Detailed report of physical examination by a medical officer.
 - (g) Report of prior service, with special reference to length of time served as a band leader.
 - (h) Evidence as to whether applicant has been rejected for a commission in any branch of the military service, or as to whether applicant has another application for a commission pending; if previously rejected, reason for rejection.
 - (i) Letter stating whether or not the regimental commander recommends the applicant for a commission.
7. Except as noted in Par. 5 above, all students for the bandmasters and band musicians' course will be detailed from these headquarters.
- II. 1. An agreement has been entered into with the French authorities whereby all animals condemned and ordered sold will be turned over to the French military authorities.
2. Notification will be sent by the officer concerned, through the American liaison officer, to the French commanding general of the region in which the animals are located, or if in the Zone of the Armies to the authority designated by the Directeur de l'Arriere of the French general headquarters, of any animals which have been condemned, and the French authorities will call for them.
3. Receipt in duplicate will be taken from the French authorities for all animals turned over to them; one copy of receipt will be retained with the organization and one copy forwarded to the C. Q. M., Headquarters S. O. S.
4. All animals condemned for sale will be branded "I. C." on the neck, as provided for in Par. 3059, Manual of the Quartermaster Corps. (10973-A-512 A. G. O.)

By command of General Pershing:

JAMES W. McANDREW
Chief of Staff

Damrosch asked for help from the French War Ministry and obtained the cooperation of eight prominent French musicians who had been called to arms and who were deployed as instructors at the American military music school.[14] They had all graduated from the Paris Conservatory. The teaching team was composed as follows:

André Caplet	- orchestral conducting
Jacques Pillois	- harmony
Francis Casadesus	- instrumentation
Marcel Durivaux	- oboe
Charles Dermes	- oboe
Antoine Mathieu	- bassoon
Arthur Barboul	- bassoon
Charles Albert	- horn
Louis Chanton	- horn

Captain Charles J. Ellacott was military commander of the school. The French lieutenant Michel Weill, liaison officer at the headquarters in Chaumont, opened all doors for Damrosch.

An old spinning mill in a hamlet five minutes' walk from Chaumont Castle (Pershing's headquarters) was set up as a music school with classrooms, rehearsal rooms, dormitories and refectory.[15]

Damrosch had vetted about two hundred military band conductors in five weeks and ranked them according to skill. Only 26 Military band conductors were found capable! Yet Damrosch enjoyed his tiring task:

"I may truthfully say that these six weeks were among the happiest of my entire thirty-five years of professional life, but it is true that I had to work day and night, like a galley slave, in order to get the thing accomplished and to work out the entire curriculum of the school in such a way that it could be properly started and carried through after my leaving for home"[16]

After Damrosch returned to New York in August for a few weeks, the school was able to start on November 1, 1918 and about two hundred students studied there twelve hours a day. Every two months a different group came in for its turn. There was no final exam but a weekly evaluation and those who really did not meet the standard were sent back to their unit.

There were actually three separate course sessions of orchestral conducting, composition and instrumentation for military band conductors of eight weeks each and all candidates passed and were nominated for promotion to Second Lieutenant.

Selected musicians followed oboe, bassoon or French horn lessons for twelve weeks, but this turned out not to be a real success, though the school had received 77 French horns, 19 bassoons and 46 oboes, all made in France. However, the quality of the bassoons and oboes was not so good and many

instruments had to be sent to Paris for restoration, which seriously disturbed the teaching. The French horn instruction went much smoother.

Damrosch also did his utmost so that the regimental commanders would realize that they had to show more respect for the musicians and should not impose humiliating tasks or chores on them out of contempt for the music, but on the contrary grant them five to six hours of musical practice a day.



Walter Damrosch

All pupils, military band conductors and musicians, formed an excellent band that played at all the ceremonies at the A.E.F. headquarters and gave a weekly concert.



American Expeditionary Forces General Headquarters Band

Damrosch himself led the school for six weeks to put everything on the tracks and commuted between Paris and Chaumont. But in the end, he rejected Pershing's proposal to join the Army.

"But while the temptation of wearing the uniform of the U.S.A. under the illustrious Commander-in-chief Pershing, was very strong, I was not quite vain enough to believe that my remaining in France would "win the war," and so, after six hectic, but ecstatically happy weeks, during which I vibrated continually between Paris and Chaumont, I sailed for home" [17].

He returned to the US where the New York Philharmonic awaited him as conductor for ninety concerts from December to April.

Next to Francis Casadesus, the composers André Caplet and Jacques Pillois (1877-1935) were also part of the teaching staff. André Caplet became the headmaster of the school in October 1918.

André Caplet (1878-1925) had enlisted in the 129th Infantry Regiment, part of the 5th French Division that combated in Picardy and Champagne. He was injured twice at the front, suffered CO (carbon monoxide) poisoning by the explosion of a stove and took part in multiple attacks leaving the trenches with bayonet on the rifle. He was successively a liaison agent and "*sergeant colombophile*" (responsible for carrier pigeons). Nevertheless, he still had the opportunity (and the energy) to give chamber music concerts for the soldiers with the string quartet he had founded.

A few months before the armistice, the wounded Sergeant Caplet was asked by the Americans to head a school for American Military band conductors at Chaumont. The fact that Caplet had been conductor of the Boston Opera from 1910 to 1914 undoubtedly played a role in this choice. He was transferred to Chaumont on October 14, 1918. Caplet wrote a small manual for orchestral conducting for his American students; but this work was not published.[18]



André Caplet

In 1917 Caplet wrote a work in honor of the heroes of Verdun: the march *Douaumont - Marche Héroïque de la 5^{ème} Division d'Infanterie*, written for wind band with drums and bugles, and he included the regimental song "Les gars d'Mangin" composed by Theodore Botrel[19]. Caplet made a piano reduction of the march for General Mangin, commander of the 5th Infantry Division. At the farewell ceremony for General Mangin, Caplet conducted his march with the band of the 5th Division (cf. picture). Caplet made a first orchestration in the pigeon-house of the military camp of Suippes (Marne) in September 1918. The published orchestration for military band with drums and bugles was written by Guillaume Balay, conductor of the Paris Garde Républicaine Band.[20]



Caplet conducts his march at General Mangin's departure

In October, Caplet offered a copy of his religious composition *La Croix Douloureuse* (for voice and piano/organ) to General Lebrun and a year later he ordered a version for wind orchestra (military band). However, there is no trace of this and apparently this version was never realized. Caplet, who was a friend of Claude Debussy, remained a well-known conductor. Gradually however, his health declined and he died of pleurisy on April 22, 1925.

In April 1919, at Pershing's request, Damrosch returned to Chaumont to inspect the school and he was extremely satisfied with the result achieved. André Caplet had meanwhile been succeeded as orchestral conducting teacher by the American lieutenant **Albert Stoessel** (1894-1943).[21] Composer, violinist and conductor Albert Stoessel had already had a busy career when he enlisted as military band conductor in the U.S. Army at Camp Devens in 1917. In 1918 he went to France as military band conductor of the 301st Infantry Band and eventually succeeded Caplet as director of the A. E. F. Bandmasters' School at Chaumont.



Albert Stoessel

After his demobilization in 1919, he successfully resumed his musical career. Stoessel succumbed to a heart attack during a concert he conducted in New York in 1943.



Pershing's Band in Paris

On July 4, 1917, Pershing had received an aubade from the Musique de la Garde Républicaine and was so impressed that he attended a rehearsal of the band. Since then, he dreamed of an American equivalent and that dream was realized thanks to the A.E.F. Bandmasters' School.

In July 1918, Pershing ordered the formation of an A.E.F. General Headquarters Band. Lieutenant **Louis H. Fischer** was selected as conductor and transferred to Chaumont on October 4, 1918. This band boasted 112 musicians including 36 "field musicians", buglers and drummers. The musicians were selected from all A.E.F. bands (all American military bands on French territory); normally one from each regiment, but sometimes also two or three and even four from the 6th Field Artillery.

One of the musicians who were transferred to Chaumont was **Philip James** (1890-1975) who later got known as composer, conductor, organist and music critic and became a professor at New York University. Military band conductor Fischer knew James's reputation and immediately appointed him as arranger. Despite his classical training as a composer and organist, James was studying saxophone when he was called up for military service in the Infantry in October 1917 and thus became a member of the 308th Infantry Band. He was active in this 36-strong band as a musician, arranger and assistant conductor (assistant to bandmaster Miller), first in Camp Upton, Long Island, the embarkation port for American troops to Europe, and then in France. The regiment and its band constantly changed places.[22] In the morning the chapel rehearsed and in the evening there were concerts for British and French troops in castle parks, YMCA theaters, on market squares or somewhere in the field.[23]



Philip James

After many wanderings with the band, James received an invitation to enroll in the school for American military band conductors at Chaumont and so he arrived in Chaumont on November 22, 1918, together with his fellow musician Eugene Corrado. From every American military band on French soil, two musicians (usually also the military band conductor) were summoned and they formed a band of 70 musicians (cf. supra). Philip James began his new training by writing an arrangement of melodies from Puccini's *La Bohème*. On December 20, 1918, James conducted the band for the first time.

Together with forty fellow students, Philip James took the orchestral conducting exam with Francis Casadesus and Jacques Pillois[24] as examiners. He had to conduct part of the 1st act of *Madame Butterfly* by Puccini. In April 1919, James was promoted to lieutenant and returned to the U.S. as conductor and officer in command of the Allied Expeditionary Forces General Headquarters Band, known as *Pershing's Band* (cf. infra), with which he undertook a Victory Loan Tour in nineteen U.S. cities. In June, all the musicians were demobilized.

James composed some works for wind orchestra; *Colonel Averill March* (1917), *Festal March "Perstare et Praestare"* (1942), *E.F.G. Overture* (1944) and *Fanfare and Ceremonial* (1955).

The war ended on November 11, 1918 before the A.E.F. GHQ Band was fully organized, but the operation continued. On December 8, 1918, the band was operational and marched at the head of the triumphant entry into the city of Metz. On December 15, 1918 the first concert for the inhabitants of Chaumont was given, with on the program *Slavonic March* and *Overture 1812* by Tchaikovsky, the overtures *Guillaume Tell* and *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini and *Phèdre* by Massenet. It was not easy to find suitable music as the French arrangements were not quite suitable for this American band. Arranger Philip James received the help of four copyists including a German prisoner of war. The concerts at Chaumont and the solemn waiting deliveries at Pershing's headquarters took place until the beginning of April 1919. Pershing maintained personal contacts with the band and promoted military and conductor Fischer to captain and James to lieutenant. At the last waiting change ceremony with the band on April 5, 1919, Pershing gave a farewell speech.



Pershing inspecting an American band in France

Among the students at the school in Chaumont we mention: **Thomas Francis Darcy Jr.** (1895–1968) who was to become leader of the United States Army Band in Washington D. C. from 1935 to 1946 and, **James Eugene Stuchbery** (1894-1978), trumpeter in General Pershing's Band in WWI, who later played first trumpet with the Houston Symphony.

Pershing allowed the A.E.F. General Headquarters Band to return to the U.S. in April for a Victory Loan Tour[25] on the condition that the band would return to Chaumont afterwards or become the core of the future new Army Band in Washington. The band arrived in the US on April 19 and the concert tour, led by Fischer and James, started on April 21 on the steps of the stock exchange building in Wall Street in New York and lasted three weeks. The closing concert took place on May 1 in Washington D.C. Since no musician with the same status wanted to stay in the band, the A.E.F. General Headquarters Band was definitively disbanded on June 6.



Pershing's Band in Paris

On June 1, 1919, the school in Chaumont was also permanently closed and the (demobilized) American musicians and military band conductors returned to the United States.

At Damrosch's farewell, Casadesus pointed out the seriousness of the American students and convinced Damrosch of the continuing need of American conductors for a thorough education. Damrosch urged Casadesus to continue the work and the talks eventually led to the foundation of the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau. With the full support of the French authorities, as well as that of composer and organist Charles-Marie Widor (who became the first director) and Francis Casadesus, the American Conservatory, as it was called, was granted permission to open in 1921 in the Louis XV wing of the Palace of Fontainebleau.

On the other hand, always under the impulse of General Pershing, the Army Music School in Fort Jay (New York) was founded in February 1920 and soon moved to Washington. Pershing once again called on Damrosch's expertise. [26]

Still at Pershing's initiative, the U.S. Army Band (*Pershing's Own*) was founded in Washington in January 1922. But that's another story.

For the centenary of the end of World War I, a commemoration of the American presence at Chaumont was organized by the "Mission Centenaire 14-18" and the "WWI Centennial Commission (WWICC)".

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White William Carter, *A History of Military Music in America*, New York, 1944.

- Footnotes

[1] United States Army in the World War 1917-1919. Reports of the Commander in Chief, Vol.14, Washington, 1991, p. 105.

[2] Charles F. Dienst, *History of the 353rd Infantry Regiment*, Wichita, 1921, pp. 203-205.

- [3] Walter Damrosch was conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted e.g. premiere performances of Gershwin's compositions
- [4] Nadia Boulanger founded a section of the "Comité Franco-Américain" at the Paris Conservatory in 1915.
- [5] Lili Boulanger was the first female composer to win a Grand Prix of Rome in 1913.
- [6] Shell Shock is a term coined during World War I by British psychologist Charles Samuel Myers to describe the type of post-traumatic stress disorder that affected many soldiers during the war. It is a reaction to the intensity of the bombing and fighting that caused a helplessness that appeared in various ways as panic and fear, flight or an inability to reason, sleep, walk or talk.
- [7] Damrosch, Walter in "The Etude", March 1920, p. 151.
- [8] This Renaissance castle (1889) was actually situated in Verbiesles, a rural suburb of Chaumont.
- [9] Damrosch, Walter in "The Etude", Ibid.
- [10] The 329th Infantry Regiment was part of the 83rd Infantry Division formed on August 30, 1917 at Camp Sherman, Ohio and demobilized there on February 15, 1919.
- [11] Damrosch, Walter in "The Etude", March 1920, p. 152.
- [12] General Order Nr. 139 III, mentioned in United States Army in the World War 1917-1919, General Orders CHQ, AEF, Volume 16, p. 438.
- [13] Damrosch, Walter, My musical Life, New York, 1930, p. 248.
- [14] Damrosch, Walter in "The Etude", March 1920, p. 152.
- [15] Next to the American military music school, General Pershing gathered five more schools in the Chaumont area: headquarters school at Langres, interpreters' school at Biesles, engineers' school at the fort of Saint-Menge, bridge builders' school at Bannes and chemical warfare school at Choignes and Chaumont.
- [16] Damrosch, Walter in "The Etude", Ibid.
- [17] Damrosch, Walter in "The Etude", Ibid
- [18] Francis Casadesus in La Presse, December 25, 1922 p.2.
- [19] Théodore Botrel (1868–1925) was a French singer-songwriter, poet and playwright, known for his popular songs about his native Brittany. During World War I he became France's official "Bard of the Armies".
- [20] CD recordings: Musique des Gardiens de la Paix, dir. D. Dondeyne, Reader's Digest RD 3137 & Musique Principale de l'Armée de Terre, dir. J-M. Sorlin, Choréa CC 874709.
- [21] Albert Stroessel's 1920 book, "The Technic of the Baton," was inspired by the author's conversations with André Caplet.
- [22] <https://www.shutterstock.com/fr/video/clip-1026932771-circa-1910s---308th-infantry-band-marches>.
- [23] In his diary Philip James wrote that the regiment never stayed in the same place for more than two days!
- [24] Composer Jacques Pillois (1887-1935) was a pupil of Louis Vierne and Charles-Marie Widor.
- [25] The Victory Loan Tour was a concert tour promoting shares to help cover the costs of the war.
- [26] The New York Times, December 7, 1921, p. 18.

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