Stars and Stripes Forever, Break strain

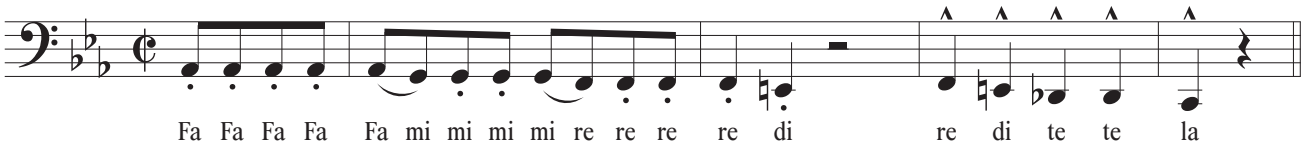
Transposition Inquisition No. 84

John Phillip Sousa

arr. Martorano

About the Composer:

"American composer, bandmaster, and author. Composer of the official national march of the United States, The Stars and Stripes Forever!, Sousa, who was known as the "March King," was the most important figure in the history of bands and band music. Both his parents were immigrants: his father, John Antonio, a trombonist in the US Marine Band, was born in Spain of Portuguese parents; his mother, Marie Elisabeth Trinkaus, was born in Bavaria. The family name was Sousa, despite stories that it was originally "So," to which "USA" was appended. John Philip, the third of ten children, was first educated at home because of poor health, and then attended local schools. In the evenings he attended the Esputa Conservatory of Music (a private school), where he studied singing, the violin, piano, flute, and several brass instruments. At the age of 11 he organized an adult quadrille orchestra. He was about to run off with a circus band when his father had him enlisted as an apprentice musician in the US Marine Band at the age of 13. During the early Marine Band years Sousa performed professionally as a civilian violinist with several Washington theater orchestras and probably also taught at the Esputa Conservatory.



About the Composition:

"In his autobiography, Marching Along, Sousa wrote that he composed the march on Christmas Day, 1896. He was onboard an ocean liner on his way home from a vacation with his wife in Europe and had just learned of the recent death of David Blakely, the manager of the Sousa Band. He composed the march in his head and committed the notes to paper on arrival in the United States. It was first performed at Willow Grove Park, just outside Philadelphia, on May 14, 1897, and was immediately greeted with enthusiasm. Following an Act of Congress in 1987, it was officially adopted as the national march of the United States of America.

Historically, in show business and particularly in theater and the circus, this piece is called "the Disaster March". In the early 20th century, when it was common for theaters and circuses to have house bands, this march was a traditional code signaling a life-threatening emergency. It subtly notified personnel of emergency situations and ideally allowed them to organize the audience's exit without causing the chaos and panic that an overt declaration might. Except for impending disaster, circus bands never played the tune under any circumstances. One memorable example of its use was during the Hartford circus fire of July 6, 1944. At least 168 people were killed, though some estimates are much higher.

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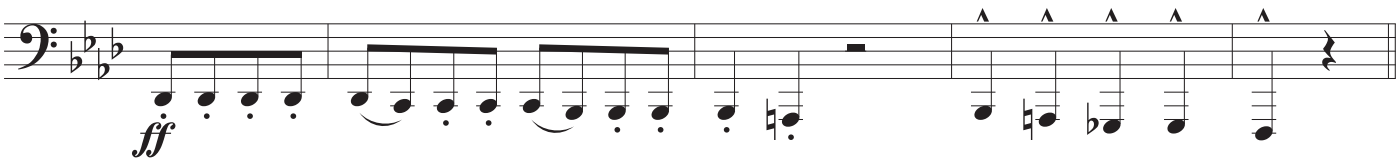

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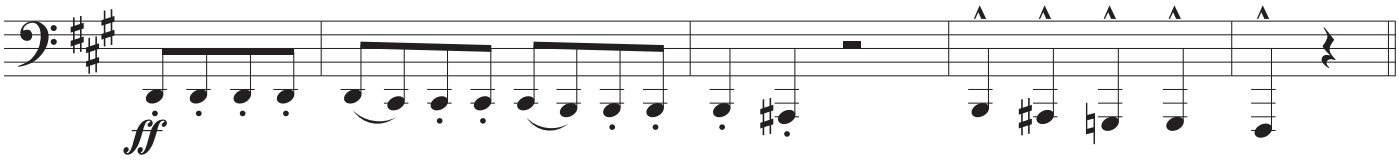

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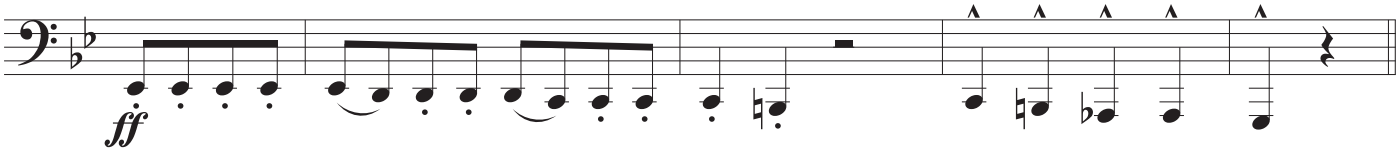

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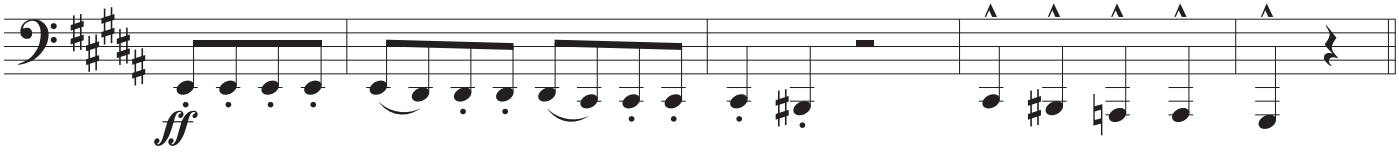

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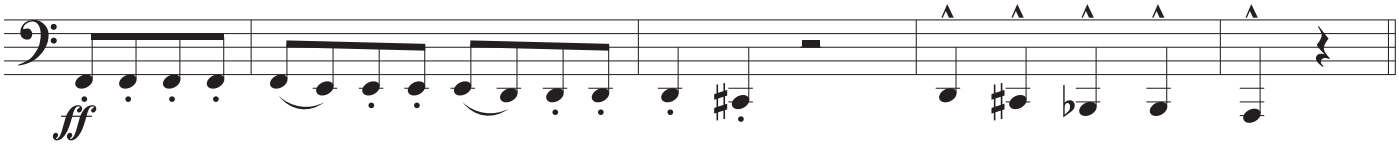

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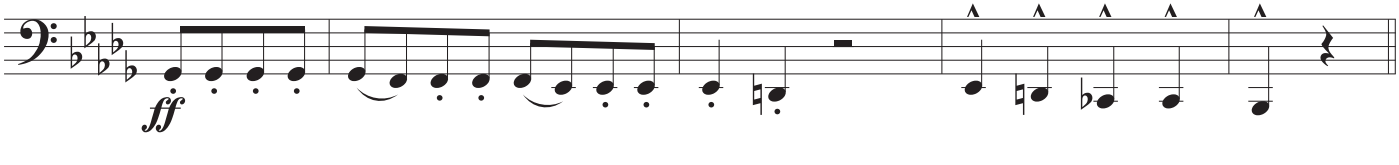

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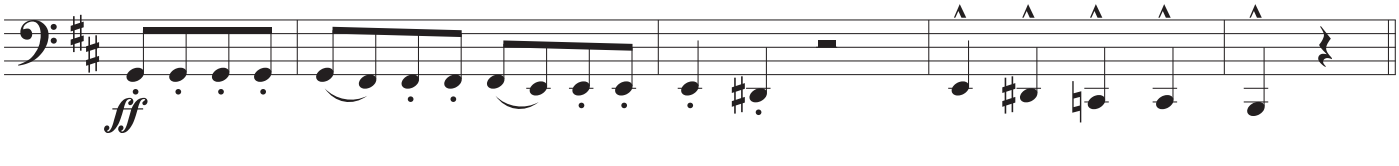

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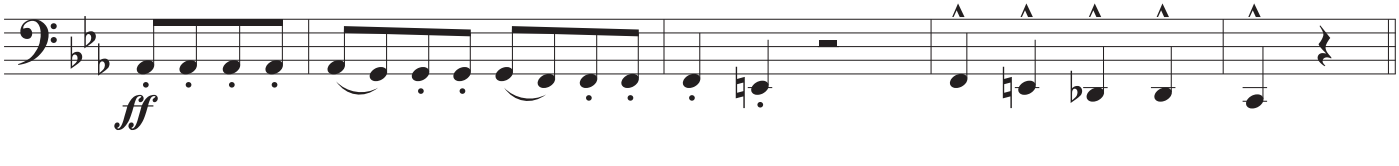

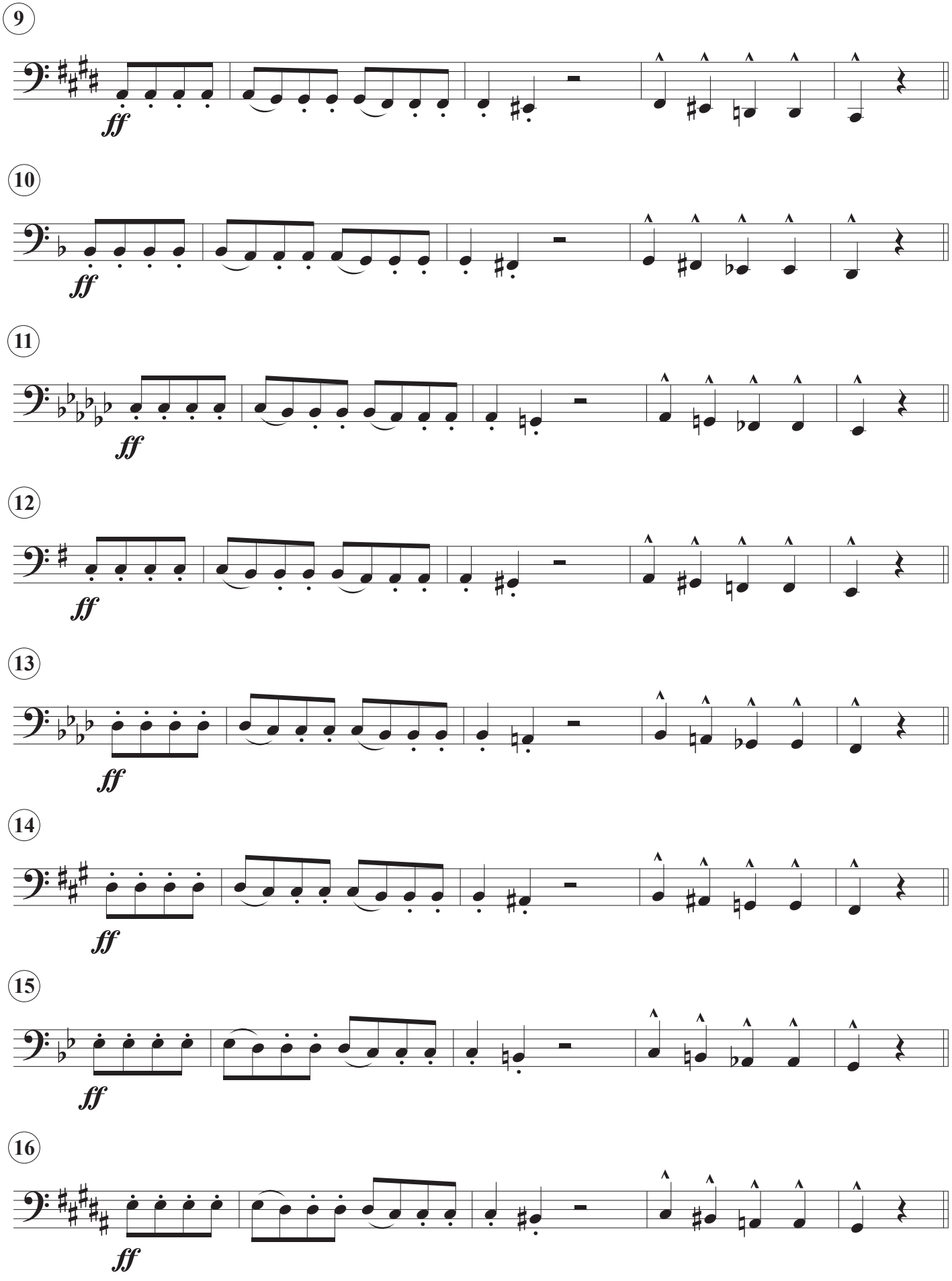
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