

Steven Maxwell, Associate Editor

## A Chat with Alex Serwatowski

Technical Sergeant Alex J. Serwatowski performs with the Brass in Blue brass ensemble, Offutt Brass, Concert Band, and Ceremonial Band of the United States Air Force Heartland of America Band, Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. In addition to his musical responsibilities, Sergeant Serwatowski serves as Operations Representative for the Brass in Blue brass ensemble.

A native of Detroit, Michigan, Sergeant Serwatowski is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music and the St. Louis Conservatory of Music, earning the Diploma and Graduate Diploma in Music Performance, respectively. His primary teachers include Gene Pokorny, Ronald Bishop, Wesley Jacobs, Michael Sanders, Rex Martin, and Toby Hanks.

Prior to his Air Force service, he was an active freelance musician, performing with the St. Louis Symphony, the St. Louis Brass Quintet, and with numerous ensembles through the auspices of Young Audiences, Inc. He has been principal tubist of the St. Louis Philharmonic, the Mighty Mississippi Concert Band, the Gateway Festival Orchestra, and the Fox Theater Orchestra.

As a music educator, Sergeant Serwatowski held faculty appointments at the University of Texas-San Antonio, Southern Illinois University, and the University of the Incarnate Word.

*(Bio adapted from the Heartland of America Band Website <http://www.heartlandofamericaband.af.mil/ensembles/BandBio.asp?BandBioID=1410>)*

**Steven Maxwell:** Can you tell us about your early musical influences, even before you began playing the tuba?

**Alex Serwatowski:** My earliest exposure to music was largely limited to radio and TV. I can remember as a little boy being especially drawn to those 60's instrumental rock classics and TV programs like "The Lawrence Welk Show," which I watched religiously!



**SM:** Did you hear much live music at a young age?

**AS:** Not until around the 7th grade. At that point I started attending recitals and concerts at the local colleges. I was also lucky to be heavily involved with several youth orchestras and community music groups through high school.

**SM:** How did you begin your musical training? Did you have a musical family? What age did you begin playing tuba?

**AS:** I'm not from a musical family, but my parents and siblings always had music playing in the house. When I expressed an interest in playing an instrument, my parents hoped I would take up the accordion, being the huge Polka fans that they were. Much to their dismay I wanted to play the drums, and talked my way into private lessons at the age of eight. By the time I signed up for 6th grade

beginner band, there weren't any spots available in the percussion section. I went with my second choice, starting tuba at 11 years old.

**SM:** I see in your bio that you have had a number of wonderful teachers along the way. What specifically did you learn from these teachers that helped you in the military bands?

**AS:** Each one had a huge influence on my development with where I was as a player at the time. Prior to my audition for this job, I spent a lot of time working with Mike Sanders of the Saint Louis Symphony, and have to credit him the most for helping me win this position. Over the years, I had developed a very muscular approach to playing band excerpts. To combat this, Mike had me mentally reframe the audition as a recital. This simple thought changed my entire approach. I was suddenly relaxed and thinking far more musically. He also had me record the audition excerpts a lot, and then listen to tape as a committee member would. The final round of my audition was sight-reading with the brass quintet, and I was very fortunate to have lots of experience in this area that pushed me over the top. In the end, it comes down to how well we can play with others that actually counts the most.

**SM:** What drew you to the military? Also, what specifically drew you to the USAF Heartland of America Band?

**AS:** I was hooked on military music after attending my first military band concert—the Air Force D.C. Band. They were touring in Ann Arbor, MI, conducted by Colonel Gabriel with Brian Bowman as the featured soloist. I remember being completely amazed by everyone on stage—truly a life-changing experience for me. Although I was only in the 7th grade at the time, I knew that I wanted to be part of this someday.

I joined the Air Force Band of the West (San Antonio, TX) in 1997 and after 14 years on station, I had an opportunity to move back to the Midwest in 2011.

**SM:** When did you begin to take auditions?

**AS:** I started taking auditions in 1988. My first military band audition was with what is now known as the USAF Heritage of America Band. I won the audition but declined acceptance because I was offered a very well-paying management position with United Parcel Service in the same week. About a year later, I was runner-up at a D.C. Marine Band audition. Although I didn't win, I made some very important personal connections and learned quite a bit just from listening to all of those great players, especially from a then 20-year-old Pat Sheridan, who completely blew the rest of us away!

**SM:** Could you describe what a typical day is like for you?

**AS:** In addition to performing, I am in charge of the brass quintet and I am an operations representative for the large brass ensemble. Unless we are on tour or performing locally, my typical day is filled with scheduling upcoming tours, coordinating music for military ceremonies, personal practice, group rehearsals, and completing general Air Force training requirements.

**SM:** Some of the readers may not be familiar with the Heartland of America Band. Could you explain the band's mission and what duties may differ from a D.C. Band?

**AS:** The USAF Heartland of America band essentially has the same military mission and purpose as the USAF D.C. band but is smaller in size and scope and has a specific geographic area of responsibility. Other differences to note are the starting pay grades: Premier band members start at the advanced grade of E-6 while regional band members start at E-3. Premier band members are only assigned to Washington D.C. whereas regional



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band members have the opportunity to volunteer for overseas assignments and, under special circumstances, move to other bands within the United States. All Air Force musicians are required to graduate from the 8-week basic training course at Lackland Air Force Base, TX, prior to assuming duties, and do not attend the Armed Forces School of Music.

**SM:** What is your typical touring schedule like from year to year?

**AS:** We generally tour for 7-10 days at a time, with 6-8 weeks between the tours. Most of my tours now are with the 12-member brass ensemble, Brass in Blue.

**SM:** What kinds of things have you found yourself doing differently, stylistically, playing with the ensemble?

**AS:** Our concerts are 90 minutes long without intermission, so I generally strive to play with the least amount of physical effort needed. I also record almost every rehearsal and concert to hear what is actually getting out into the hall and I make playing adjustments from those recordings almost daily. On the jazz/pop tunes, I use a clip-on microphone and bass amplifier which allows me to lighten up even more on those never-ending bass lines. Even on concert days, I practice at least 2 hours in the morning to maintain a high level of endurance & technique.

**SM:** What has been your most enjoyable piece of music to play with the group?

**AS:** Playing all of the military services songs, along with "Stars & Stripes," is by far the most enjoyable portion of the program for me. It's our chance to recognize and honor those who have come before, and at this point, the audience is usually worked up into a patriotic frenzy!

**SM:** What has been the least enjoyable piece of music you have played with the ensemble?

**AS:** I don't actually have one. Within every piece there is a challenge, regardless of how simple it may first appear.

**SM:** What advice do you have for students interested in auditioning for a military band?

**AS:** All branches of the military select musicians through a highly competitive audition process, so don't enlist without first passing an audition. Know that military band programs differ widely between each branch of the service. Do your research to find out what might be expected of you as a prospective member. Before a live audition, many military bands have a screening process that includes a resume and sample recording- start polishing these now. Finally, in order to win the job, focus on having solid fundamentals and be very familiar with the classic repertoire and typical excerpts.

**SM:** What other type of playing do you enjoy outside of the military bands?

**AS:** I enjoy brass quintet playing the most. At the moment, I play with the University of Nebraska at Omaha faculty brass quintet (where I teach as well) and with a quintet comprised of Omaha Symphony members.

**SM:** What is the make and model of your instrument? Is there a standard make/model for the ensemble?

**AS:** There is no standard model- it is purely the player's choice. The band here owns a PT-6, Meinl-Weston 2165 and 2000, and a Yamaha 822 F tuba. In spite of this, I prefer to play my personal Hirsbrunner HB-21 most of the time.

**SM:** I did not hear about the downsizing of the Heartland of America Band until just recently. Will you be affected by this?

**AS:** We actually just found out about all of this on March 6th. The Air Force Band leadership controlled the release of the information until 4 p.m. that day. There will now be seven bands in the continental US, a 46-member band in Germany, a 15-member band in Hawaii, and a 24-member band in Japan.

The Heartland of America Band will be reduced from 45 members to 15. Although it is not definite, it looks like the remaining 15 members will be split into two groups: a brass quintet (possibly with percussion), and a rock band with saxophone, trumpet, and trombone. Personnel not needed at Offutt AFB will be reassigned to the Air Force Bands in other states.

In summary, The Air Force has been tasked to make challenging decisions to find efficiencies in all areas. Some of these decisions will create reductions in manpower authorizations



Serwatowski during a brass quintet performance in Grand Forks, North Dakota

and numbers of units across the entire Air Force, and bands are no exception. Officers and enlisted leaders from the band community developed a course of action congruent with overall Air Force manpower reductions. Below is the projection.

For the record:

- Two AF bands were deactivated (USAF Band of Liberty, Hanscom AFB, MA and USAF Band of the AF Reserve, Robins AFB, GA).
- Two AF Bands were reduced in size, going from 45 down to 15 members (USAF Heartland of America Band and USAF Band of Flight, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH).
- The brass quintet and rock band at Elmendorf, AK, were also dissolved (considered an "operating location" of the USAF Band of the Pacific).
- The remaining AF bands were increased in size, going from 45 to 60 members.

**SM:** Why were two bands downsized?

**AS:** Leadership determined that while other regional bands could cover the bulk of the AOR currently belonging to the bands at Wright Patterson and Offutt Air Force Bases, the mission to support USSTRATCOM and the USAF Museum were key mission areas for outreach and support to Airmen.

**SM:** Why wasn't The USAF Band cut?

**AS:** Due to the fact that The USAF Band had recently completed a CSAF-directed transformation plan that reduced Premier bands from two to one, the panel was directed to exclude The USAF Band (premier band) from the restructure plan.

**SM:** What's the deadline for closing/downsizing bands?

**AS:** Bands will maintain their current rate of operations until June 1st, 2013, at which time projected manpower shifts will begin. The restructure will be complete by September 30th, 2013.

**SM:** How do cuts to U.S. Air Force bands compare to what other services are doing to their bands?

**AS:** Each branch of the military is creating their own plan for budget cuts. We don't have visibility on the other services' plans.

**SM:** Will you remain with the Heartland of America band as one of the 15 remaining members?

**AS:** Yes, I will remain with the Heartland of America Band. It's looking very much like a rock band and brass quintet at this point, with the area of responsibility confined to the state of Nebraska.

