



UTAH PERCUSSIVE ARTS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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MARCHING ISSUE

PAS has many different groups of people who read our newsletter. Each issue, we strive to create appropriate content for the season. It is now time for marching bands to kick in at high schools and colleges around the state. We feel that the articles presented here are important to all areas of our readership.

For students. These articles can provide wonderful information on how you can better benefit your drumline. We hope you will also notice that many of the techniques presented in these articles will also apply to your concert percussion and encourage each of you to make concert percussion an essential part of your percussion career.

For band directors. It is sometimes difficult to know how to work with a percussion ensemble on the marching field. We hope that the articles will give you some extra insight into how to get the drumline to be a part of and benefit to the entire band. In reality, there are no real secrets. You just need to treat the drumline like any other musical element. Drummers should be musicians first and foremost.

To the professional. It is easy to turn up a nose at marching percussion, but the reality is that it is one of the greatest draws into the world of percussion for the young student, especially here in Utah. If we take a moment to really look at the marching percussion world, we will see hundreds of eager minds waiting to be taught. What a better place for experienced percussionists to have influence on these open minds. If we ignore the marching field, many of these students will not have the exposure to concert percussion

they should. We encourage you to “adopt” a local high school, and help them learn to apply appropriate elements of marching percussion to the concert stage, and vice versa. You will be amazed at how these students respond to humble advice from great percussionists, and you will have an eternally grateful new friend in the band director. ●

THE FOUR STEPS

By Michael Huestis

I have been asked on many occasions the seemingly broad scoping question, “How do you clean your drumline or percussion ensemble”. While this seems to be a question that requires a Doctorial Thesis to answer, I have tried to scale back my answer to four simple steps. When cleaning, or fixing, the percussion section I focus on the following things when preparing for rehearsals:

- 1 – Play the correct part
- 2 – Play in time
- 3 – Play the correct volume
- 4 – Play the correct interpretation

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Developing the Percussionist-Musician

A book by Michael Huestis

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PIT PERCUSSION

By Tim Fellow and Michael Huestis

The front ensemble (or pit percussion) is perhaps the greatest musical tool of the marching band, and yet, most directors and drum instructors do not take full advantage of the colors, dynamic range and musical muscle that is available to the performing ensemble. I have said on more than one occasion that a band with an "O.K." drumline and a great pit will always be competitive. The same cannot be said if the strengths are reversed. If an instructor or director invests in this philosophy, than some fundamental changes will, and must, occur.

The pit must become a section that is as celebrated, competitive and honored by peers as playing a battery percussion instrument. The days of the "cool kids" playing snare and the "other kids" playing in the pit are long gone. With the highly specialized techniques required to perform in today's front ensemble, there is no place for prima donnas. The good keyboard section of a marching band can earn a band more competitive points than a good snare drum or tenor section. Performers these days are expected to play with great two mallet technique show some four mallet technique and often display some of the most demanding timpani pedaling technique I have seen at the high school level for any musical activity. These kids are "rock-stars" as far as I am concerned, and they need to feel that way.

One device that helps to create a sense of unity and accomplishment is a well established warm-up routine. The pit should have a sequence of warm-ups just like their battery percussion counterparts. Exercises that work on proper strokes, scale patterns, dexterity and endurance will give the section confidence. The muscle

memory and musical training will have long lasting effects that go far beyond the marching band field and will carry over into concert season. Two great resources for warm-up material are "Instruction Course for Xylophone" by G.H. Green and "Mental and Manual Calisthenics for the Modern Mallet Player" by Elden "Buster" Bailey. These books have a wealth of exercises that work on double stops, scales, arpeggios, sight-reading, and endurance. A steady diet of these books is a very healthy thing.

When it comes to musical selections and arranging for the pit there are many things to consider; difficulty, instrumentation, balance, musical style, etc. In the past the pit parts for marching band often doubled the wind parts. While this is a simple and fairly uncreative way to do things, it doesn't use the pit to its fullest potential. More contemporary composers use percussion as an equal partner in the music making process. Ostinados, world music patterns and layers of metallic sounds creating a texture for winds to perform upon are examples of these new compositional devices. If you have questions about having an arrangement updated or rewritten, contact your local university professor and get some feedback on some possible arrangers. Often a few changes can make a big difference in the quality of the music being performed.

When rehearsing the pit, make sure that you send the message that every part has musical value. Often times we help create biases by spending 90% of the time with the keyboards and timpanists and only a few moments with students playing cymbals, gongs, tambourines, triangles and bass drums. This makes students playing these instruments feel as though their contribution is less important than a vibraphone part or snare drum part. A mistake on a concert

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bass drum is far more devastating than a wrong note on a mallet instrument. A suspended cymbal played without integrity can cover up the entire woodwind section, ruining the hours of effort out forth by the winds. Spend as much time discussing the auxiliary percussion parts as any other instrument in the pit.

Timing is always a problem with the pit. Because the instruments are often spread out and the tempo behind them is moving, it can be very difficult to know where the ensemble timing should be coming from. It is a good idea to identify the direction the pit should be listening. If the drumline is way off to the side of the field then the pit performers should know that they need to listen back and left. Have the pit turn around and watch the drumline move from the middle of the field to the side for a few repetitions without performing. Then add the pit back into the rehearsal and see if this helps. Many times a timpanist, concert bass drummer, or gong performer can turn his or her head and make visual eye contact with the drummers on the field. This will help with lining up loud attacks and give the pit one more tool to aid with ensemble timing.

When the front ensemble has started to accomplish the note learning, begin talking about performance etiquette. The pit is up front and stationary. Generally the pit does not wear a hat of any kind and they are the most visible part of the entire band. Making an emotional connection to the music and being as professional looking as possible should be immediate goals. Non-verbal communication between players should occur constantly, just as if the students were playing in a small chamber ensemble. A little time and attention to these details will go a very long way.

Hopefully these ideas will help your pit percussionists to have a wonderful experience.

The marching band experience should be a "launching pad" for the remainder of the school year. The training, repetition and technical training should spill over into all of the other ensembles that your school offers throughout the year. Good luck and have a great time! •

HOW TO CORRECT ENSEMBLE TIMING ON A FOOTBALL FIELD

By Andy Garcia and Michael Huestis

O.K. it's time for us drum instructors and band directors to have a heart to heart talk about ensemble timing. Marching band is a fairly crazy idea and it is only getting crazier each year. Bands are trying to perform increasingly difficult music, with tougher drill and at faster tempos. As the degree of difficulty of the shows has increased, ensemble timing has gotten worse. Many of us have watched a marching band perform with the preverbal "knot in the stomach" caused by a band that seems to be moments from falling apart. We hope to shed some light on some common problems and give a few strategies for correcting those horrible timing blunders that those amazingly creative drill writers have caused for us by placing all over a football field.

In order to demonstrate the problem of timing on the field to your students, try the following exercise.

- 1- Place three drummers on the football field. The first should stand four steps from the front sideline, the second at approximately the center X and the third about eight steps behind the back hash mark.
- 2- Have them attempt to play a unison attack three times. Each time the tempo

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should be established in a different way.

- a. The first time, the tempo should be established from the front of the field. Have the snare drummer on the front sideline count off the unison note. The result will be an attack that is extremely poor from the audience perspective.
- b. The second time have a drum major silently conduct a “count off” and have the drummers play the attack. The result should be much improved, but it will not be flawless.
- c. Finally, establish the tempo from the back of the field. Have the drummer behind the back hash count off the attack. This note will be the best one so far.

This should drive home some important points.

- 1- This isn’t easy
- 2- Tempo from backfield is best
- 3- Tempo from the drum major is a really close second
- 4- Tempo from the front field should be avoided altogether

So now that we’ve decided that the tempo should come from backfield whenever possible, here are some simple strategies for implementing this “physics lesson”

- 1- Try and have the drumline back field whenever possible.
- 2- If you use a metronome, make sure it is backfield (behind the band)
- 3- Performers who are furthest back should not adjust to what they hear, they should stick to the established tempo (keep on truckin’) or they should watch the drum

major.

- 4- Performers who are near the front portion of the field should listen back and place their sound “on top of” the music coming from behind. This will ensure that all of the music hits the audience and adjudicators at the same time.
- 5- Have the drum majors learn the drumline parts and work on visual communication with the line. They should be able to sing the parts and watch the feet of a section leader.
- 6- If the drumline plays in time (check this with a metronome often) and the drum major is always with the drumline, there should never be a debate over tempo. The band listens back, watches the drum major and the ensemble timing should fall into place.

What happens when establishing the tempo backfield is not an option? What if the drumline is not playing for an extended length of time? What if the drumline is in front of a large portion of the band?

- 1- Watch the drum major with the greatest focus possible.
- 2- Let the performers know which section is furthest back and re-focus the drum major onto this section.
- 3- The drummers need to listen back. This can be a real problem, because in the above example we’ve told them NOT to listen. The drumline needs to understand that the listening environment has changed. Another problem will be volume. If the drummers are playing louder than the instruments behind them, they will never hear those instruments. In these situations I suggest rewriting the

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The first two steps seem to be self explanatory, and in my experience most groups are heavily focused on these two things. It is the third and forth steps that separate the great groups from the good ones. Let's break each one of these goals down and talk about some strategies.

PLAY THE CORRECT PART

I don't know how more plainly it can be said. Students need to be motivated to do the individual practice. I have often used the analogy of a "pot-luck" picnic. Each person needs to bring something to the picnic that they have worked on at home; some ground beef, hot dog buns, punch, a pie, and so forth. This is the only way everyone will have a good time. Everyone needs to do some work in "the kitchen" and show up with a dish to contribute. Otherwise, everyone will be eating chips from the grocery store!

PLAY IN TIME

Playing in time is the responsibility of every musician. Percussionists are often given the overwhelming burden of playing in time for everyone when in fact; it is the responsibility of every musician in every ensemble. Having said that, it is much easier when the percussion section has their collective act together and the pulse is secure for a woodwind or brass player to have musical success. Students must use a metronome in individual preparation and a metronome is vital to the success of any marching band. Directors need to get a digital metronome and some kind of amplification device (Lone Ranger is the industry standard) and get the entire percussion section playing in time. In my opinion, not having a metronome at a rehearsal is like not having a musical score at rehearsal. It is time wasted.

PLAY THE CORRECT VOLUME

This first half of this category deals with balancing percussion to winds. Playing with proper balance and dynamics is one of the greatest contributions a percussion section can give to a musical ensemble. A drumline has the power to destroy the musical integrity of an ensemble with relative ease. This places a huge responsibility on every percussionist in every section. All it takes is one or two drummers to get carried away, overplay their instruments and the music is ruined. Directors need to be very particular and make sure that the percussion is scored with dynamics that match their wind counterparts. I am amazed at how many marching band pieces, published by top publishing companies, have glaring discrepancies in dynamics between the winds and percussion. Use the front ensemble as a tool to gain musical points with adjudicators. Well placed cymbal rolls, concert bass drum impacts,

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and delicate keyboard playing can earn a group far more points than all of the flam rudiments in the world. It is also worth mentioning that a well placed “Tacet” section in the drumline is often the greatest musical decision a director can make!

The second half of this category is “heights”. Rudimental drummers need to match their stick heights in order to create a uniform sound. Many instructors use a level system that consists of inches assigned to dynamics. i.e mezzo piano = 3 inches or forte = 9 inches. This is a quick and easy way of getting students to play with a matched stick height. I personally feel as though this type of level system trains students to use their eyes instead of their ears. So, I try not to speak in terms of three inches, but rather stick to musical terms at all times. Asking students a question like, “Do you feel like you are playing softer or louder than the person next to you?” or “What dynamic are we playing at this point in the music?” will achieve the same results and foster a more musical performer.

PLAY THE CORRECT INTERPRITATION

This is the category reserved for great percussion sections. Only great players and teachers seem to take the time to work on these nuances. These little details make all the difference in the world. Ask yourself the following questions,

- “Are we all interpreting those accents the same?”
- “Do all of the students understand that the second crescendo should have more impact than the first?”
- “Are the students playing that six stroke roll with a strict or swung roll

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The Utah PAS Chapter Newsletter is looking for quality articles on percussion technique and reviews of percussion literature (large and small ensemble and solos).

To submit an article or music review for inclusion in the Utah PAS Newsletter, please e-mail that article in Word or WordPerfect format to Lance LeVar (leva786@alpine.k12.ut.us) Please include your name, e-mail, and a one or two sentence bio. All submission are due on the 1st of the prior month.

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interpretation”

- “Does the pit understand the way their part is articulated in the woodwind section?” “Would a different mallet help?”
- “Does the entire band interpret the accelerando the same way?”
- “Do the performers understand that this is the happiest – saddest – coolest – hippest – most joyous part of the show?”

These sorts of questions will lead the students towards a great performance, which is the most rewarding aspect of any musical activity. The beauty of marching band is most often lost on the dogmatic approaches of “the good ole’ days” or a lack of musical understanding. Percussionists who perform with great technique, musical sensitivity and control their performance will have a great experience and be able to carry that though to other performing ensembles. Keep these four steps in mind as you travel through the season this Fall and hopefully they will help you in your musical endeavors for the entire school year. •

...“Timing” from page 4

parts. When the drumline can finally hear the band the ensemble timing will be corrected and the music will be better balanced.

- 4- If the drumline is not playing, then the band must be held responsible for the tempo. The drumline needs to watch the drum major and be extremely focused when the re-enter the musical ensemble.

Finally, what else can strengthen the bands ensemble awareness?

- 1- Don’t have a snare drummer “tap off” each repetition of a drill segment. If the field is silent and the only tempo being established is the drum major, it will force every student on the field to watch!
- 2- If you are using an amplified metronome (which I highly suggest), turn the metronome on, and have the drum major wait a few moments and “count off” the segment. Again, this forces each performer on the field to watch. The performers will “miss the step-off” a couple of times until they get the message. But in the long run it builds the correct habit.
- 3- Try and incorporate a drum major into marching basics. Instead of an instructor beating on a jam-block or using a metronome, have the drum major conduct the marching exercises. If the field is silent, the only way for the students to “get tempo” is by watching. This is very effective for fixing slow tempos; when drumlines are often tacet during ballad sections of the show.
- 4- Use a metronome to start the band and then turn it off after four to eight counts. At the end of the segment, turn it back on for the last four to eight counts. This will let them know how solid their tempo is, or how poorly they are executing. Slowly wean the band off of the metronome and let the muscle memory take over.

We hope that these ideas can help your groups have a more successful year and that they might help you all to have many restful nights knowing that your band will not fall apart! Good luck and have a great year! •



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