

Special Challenges of Arranging for Marching Band

by Ed Gaston

Arranging for a marching band can present special concerns with which you, the arranger, should become familiar. The most common situation is one in which the arranger becomes part of a staff of “specialists”. This group works together as a whole to create the end product, the marching band halftime/contest show. Let’s explore 3 main areas that must be dealt with when writing for marching band.

SCORING: You need to know your band’s strengths and weaknesses. Remember that it is your job to make them sound good. Show off their strengths. Avoid their weaknesses. In an ideal world, you would write only for bands with 200 or so players. They would have a complete instrumentation and could play anything put in front of them, while standing on their heads. The reality is usually pretty far from this. Most groups have an odd instrumentation. Know where you may need to bolster certain lines and chords and how to deal with these limitations from the perspective of the orchestration.

PERCUSSION: Does your band have (as many do) a percussion specialist working with them? If so, find out what they may need from you as the musical arranger. Most would like some sort of “sketch”. This gives them an idea of how YOU hear things... the style, the feel or “groove” of the tune. I usually write a drum sketch similar to a drum set part. It is very basic, but with enough information for them to springboard on to the full percussion (pit and battery) section. If a “hit” needs tympani or whether an important line should be performed on xylophone, you need to let him/her know these kinds of things. Some band directors can be uptight about this. “How DARE this guy presume to tell me how to do my job...” But I have found that most feel these sorts of suggestions can be of great help.

DRILL DESIGN: When I was a Staff Arranger for the University of Tennessee “Pride of the Southland Band,” the drill was written first, then I had to fit the music to the drill. Talk about making MY life difficult! Thank goodness most groups do not work this way. Generally, the band director gets the chart from the arranger and then turns it over to the drill design person. You must be aware of the importance of drill design. It can make or break your chart. You can write a great chart but it might sound terrible on the field because of the drill. Try to point out the critical spots in the score that need attention. This can include big hits, a “push”, solos, and section tuttis. Address places that are more technically difficult where less movement will enhance the band’s sound, instead of spreading it all over the field.

If you pay heed to these key points: scoring, percussion, and drill considerations, you will be on your way to a successful marching contest season. Hopefully, this will lead to more calls for next season (Hey man, who wrote that chart for you?). Good luck and good writing!

Ed Gaston began his professional career as a Trumpet player at the age of fifteen. In 1981 he received his Bachelor of Music Degree from the University of Tennessee. Upon completion of his studies he moved to Nashville where he wrote and performed for 3 years with Danny Davis & The Nashville Brass. He spent the next 6 years working with Boots Randolph. While in Nashville, Ed began to publish his work, first with Arrangers' Publishing Corp. and later with CPP-Belwin and Hal Leonard. Ed was also the Staff Arranger for the University of Tennessee “Pride of the Southland” for 2 years. In 1991 Mr. Gaston moved to Orlando, Florida to continue his music career. For nearly ten years he has worked in the roles of professional musician/sideman and arranger/orchestrator in the Central Florida area. He has written for each of the Disney theme parks in Florida, California, Paris and Tokyo. Some of his key projects include orchestrations for the Toy Story Parade for Disney’s MGM Studios and Mickey’s Winter Wonder Christmas Show entitled “Country Christmas” for Disneyland Paris.

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