

Editing for Marching Band

by John Kirsch

Musically, the more potential problems you can eliminate, the easier your rehearsal time. Many people I've noticed get caught up in all of the other logistical problems of running a Marching Band and leave the musical ones and hence have ensemble problems on the field that could have been avoided or minimized.

You know your band (and don't lie to yourself). So examining your score and fixing any problems is going to help.

Here are some problems I've dealt with over the years, and I'm sure you have many more to offer. So, I hope you'll open up and present your views.

1. Does your scoring give you enough bottom? Why have high F's and G's in the 1st trombone part, when those pitches lay so easily for French horn. Lowering the 1st trombone and possibly the 2nd will give you more depth.
 2. Unless you're using a bass trombone, a 3rd trombone part written too low is a waste. It sounds bad and won't project. So at times, consider only two trombone parts, which will give you more power and increase your low brass sound aiding in a more balanced band.
 3. You also might want to have your baritones reinforce your weaker 2nd trombone part or a weak tuba line (8va of course).
 4. Do you use mellophones? Since they project rather aggressively, divide them on harmonic spots so that the sound stays within the ensemble.
 5. Are you having trouble hearing the 1st trumpet part or just want more impact on that line? Have the Mellos play the part an octave lower (5th down from written trumpet).
 6. Can you consolidate a musical line? Sometimes composers divide musical figures between like sounding instruments. On the field (and many times on stage), no one can tell if there is a sixteenth note battle in the trumpet section.
 7. With regards to woodwinds doubling brass, you might have your altos double your trombones instead of the mellophones. Clarinets can be used in like manner. All of this depends on the strength of your trombones and field placement. Altos are also great for reinforcing a weak 3rd trumpet part.
 8. In harmonized situations, make sure each instrument is voiced in a comfortable part of their range. You'll get a nice controlled sound. Some composers overlook this because they're used to working with college students who are much stronger players.
 9. In ensemble situations, if possible, revoice bad tuning notes (trombone F#'s, saxophone C#'s, trumpet low C#'s, & etc.) Being spread out on the field makes it harder to hear, so avoid the problem.
 10. What are your woodwinds playing when they're marching on the backside of the field? They can't be heard up front. So, if they're playing ornamented lines, you might have them double one of the brass lines. This will help stop phasing problems.
 11. Sometimes upbeat entrances or a series of consecutive upbeats can be a problem. Is there a way to alter the line and not lose its effectiveness? Maybe adding a chordal tone on the beat would make the line easier to play while marching yet retain the musicality of the figure.
- Remember most composers aren't thinking about field problems. They're thinking about musical flow. It's your job to recognize these problems and make minor adjustments. You'll save yourself a lot of frustration on the field.
13. Woodwind Features: If the Tenor, bari sax, and bass clarinets, are playing a background part, reinforcing with baritones can help shore up the bottom.
 14. In harmonization of flutes, clarinets and altos (not miked), I would not do anymore than two part with flutes and clarinets on the main line and altos on the harmonized one. Tenors and bari's could possibly be on a third line.
 15. If the melody is in the chalumeau register of the clarinet, I would not do any harmony.
 16. If you're having phasing problems, can you rewrite some parts, usually instruments in the middle of the drill. Maybe simplify the percussion part.
 17. Percussion: Are your percussion parts effective? Do they compliment the music? Many Percussion writers overwrite, destroying the sound of the band. Finding the right combination is crucial.
 18. If you don't like the way a chord sounds, change it. Change it to what you want to hear. Don't be afraid to eliminate notes that you don't like.

19. In balancing a traditional chord, have more instruments on the root, less on the fifth and the least on the third. In a soft situation, you might want to have just the root and the third. It'll help keep the edge of the sound.
20. When dealing with extensions (7th, 9th & etc), try to have the note under the extension be the interval of a third.
21. On technical lines, write an easier version for your weaker players. For example, if your trumpets have a sixteenth note figure, have your weaker players play every other note in eighth notes.
22. On the other hand, sometimes the tempo is too insane for a sixteenth note run. Maybe play the run in eighth notes, starting it two beats earlier.
23. Horns to the audience is a must, unless for effect. Having a counter line played to the end zone diminishes the potential effectiveness of your band's performance.
24. And finally, don't be afraid to change your drill. Make it compliment and impact your musical performance.

In general, analyzing and editing your score will make life musically a lot easier, giving you time to deal with all of the other enjoyable tasks in creating a great field performance.

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