

The Unique Demands on the Marching Musician:

When to watch, when to listen, and how to make it work

Michael Reed and Scott Ward

We all want a cool marching band production. We want a show that will be loved by performers and audience members alike. However, in an effort to do so, we, as a band community, have created a variety of new issues that have increased the demands on both the individual performers and the ensemble as a whole (not to mention, the directors!). While this article won't fix all of your problems, we hope to address some of the most common issues faced by today's marching bands and provide several methods by which to address them. As you encounter some of these road blocks, just know that you are not alone. Our goal is to share with you a few solutions we have learned along the way. While there are no "quick fixes" for these issues, *there are three ways for dealing with timing problems: avoiding them, re-writing them, and working on them.* All three methods involve understanding, musicianship, and a fair amount of effort.

Avoiding timing problems comes from a combination of clever staging and writing on the parts of your drill writer and arrangers. A design team focused on both the content and execution of the show

can help eliminate or alleviate many problems before the performers ever step foot on the rehearsal field. However, when a designer presents you and your students with some great ideas that end up being too lofty, you have a choice: re-write it or rehearse it to death?

Sometimes the wise thing to do is to "pull the plug" on a great idea and settle on cleaner achievement scores. Only you and your staff can determine this tipping point. Ask yourself this: "Will 30 more minutes fix this, or will we end up tired and frustrated and 30 minutes behind on learning the closer?" Maybe there are some drill and music re-writes to be worked out over a pot of coffee. An hour or two of an adult's time might save an entire band four hours of rehearsal time, countless headaches, and improve the overall performance.

More often than we would like, clever writing and re-writing are just not enough. This is what we get for attempting to run around playing Hindemith, Bartok, and Stan

Kenton charts, right? Often, we just have to work through the problem. We'd like to tell you that "working smarter, not harder", is all you have to remember. In reality, you have to work both smarter and harder. We are all willing to put in the sweat and the time to make it work; *knowing how to spend your time*

and what to tell your students to do is the real challenge.

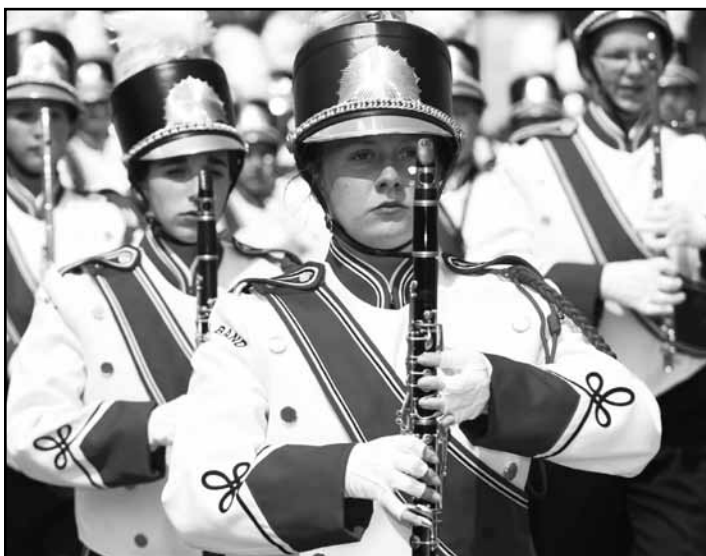
To "Experience" is to "Know"

Knowing how to teach and how to perform only comes through wisdom; wisdom comes from the application of experience, intellect, and artistry. For many of us, it's been quite awhile since we performed a field show. Some of

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us never performed a show quite like the shows we are asking our students to perform. If this sounds familiar, we invite you to come down from the tower and experience a portion of the rehearsal from the field level. Here are some exercises that will put you “in the kid’s shoes” and increase your understanding.



- Stand next to your metronome behind your center snare drummer and listen to the sound delay that your marching percussionists experience.

- Stand next to your drum major, while the backfield metronome is on, and experience how difficult it is to conduct with the feet of the center snare drummer (rather than the sound of the metronome).

- Stand “inside” your front ensemble (facing away from the field, of course) during a tutti moment in the show. When the brass is playing and the tam-tams and cymbals are ringing, ask yourself if you can actually hear the battery parts. This might make you think twice before shouting the all-too-popular phrase: “Hey, pit! Listen back!”

- Shadow a wind player on the far outskirts of the drill and experience how difficult it is to ignore the sounds of the battery and only march with the conductors’ hands. If that seems easy, attempt to play that student’s part

(while marching). Placing your feet “with the hands” is one thing; ignoring the fact that your sound is not being created with many of the sounds occurring around you is another thing all together.

Now that your awareness level has been increased, let’s examine some intellectual points surrounding our timing issues.

- The ensemble sound should only be perceived as “together” from the vantage point of the press box. That is, only a staff member in the press box (or along a direct path from the drum major podium to the press box) can comment on “true” timing precision. Hopefully, your tower places you (or a staff member) somewhere along this path.

- Sound travels slower than light. After a certain distance, even casual observers will notice that the sound waves reaching them are occurring after the accompanying motion of feet, hands, equipment, and instruments.

- Tempo can be determined only after two occurrences of a sound or image. Therefore, we should defer to any audio or visual cues that occur more frequently when selecting our focal points. Therefore, clear sixteenth notes give and control pulse more easily than quarter notes. The same can be said of eighth notes played by the battery versus quarter notes being conducted by the drum major.

- In general, on-field performers should rarely, if ever, listen forward. On-field performers should listen side-to-side only within reasonably close distances (less than 10 yards). The conductors must never conduct to the sound of the ensemble. The front ensemble should always listen back and rarely watch the conductor.

- Remember: Our job is not to get the performers to “play together”. Our job is to get the performers sounds to the judges’ ears at the same time. These are two mutually exclusive tasks; we cannot have both.

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Common Scenarios

We have all faced, or will face, some situations in a developing show that lead to a certain level of frustration. Here are some scenarios that most of us are familiar with and some effective rehearsal strategies that have helped us in the past.

#1 - *The Cold Attack: Your arrangement calls for a fortissimo attack (out of silence) from the entire ensemble.*

Really? Good luck! Consider re-writing the percussion parts for a battery lead-in (provides pulse) and a front ensemble crescendo with tam-tams, concert bass drums, and suspended cymbals (obscure “duts” from the field and can cover-up some minor precision issues).

Here is a rehearsal method: First, setup up a metronome with headphones for the drum major. There must not be any metronome “bleed through” sound perceived by the front ensemble or any other performer. All pulse must be received visually from the conducting pattern. Next, have only the furthest backfield players practice the attack following the drum major’s “start pattern”. Layer in voices to each repetition from back to front. Add the front-ensemble last. This should help train the performers’ brains to make miniscule allowances for the sound-delay as they perceive it on the field. Each performer sees the DM begin the “start pattern” and their brain learns when the ensemble sound (traveling from back-to-front) reaches them on the field. Hint: In this situation, the FE should not play when the DM conducts the downbeat; they’ll be early every time. Don’t ask the FE to watch the DM. Rather, after observing the beginning of the drum major’s “start pattern”, the front ensemble should divert their eyes (subtly) and both internalize the adjusted pulse (allowing for delay) and listen for the breath of the wind players nearest them. This is extremely difficult. Consider whether you and your students have the time, energy, patience, and skill to



pull this off. Is this attack worth the trouble, or, are there “bigger fish to fry”?

#2 - *The Battery Entrance in the “Ballad”: The battery has been tacet for the majority of the “ballad” and must now enter and take over pulse-keeping responsibilities.*

A small “slip” in precision might be perceived if there are active rhythms leading up to the battery entrance. Consider re-writing some of the rhythmically active front ensemble parts for a more seamless entrance. Also, try to write (or re-write) the battery entrance to occur during longer note values in the wind book. The closer the battery is to the front ensemble (and drum major), the easier this challenge becomes. Consider adjusting the battery drill to increase their proximity to the rest of the ensemble.

Here’s how you might tackle this one: First, you will need to work “off metronome”. If the ensemble is listening to the metronome, you are not allowing them to experience the “real world” environment. Use some key personnel in the battery to serve as “dutters” for their section (Please, though, keep the “dut” volume to a minimum). The drum major should use the feet of one of the dutters as their visual focal point and not be distracted by the lateness of the battery attack (as they perceive the attack relative to their ictus). This

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dilemma isn't too tricky; the key lies with as few as two people (the DM and the battery member that will serve as the visual focal point before becoming the auidial focal point). Both must understand how far ahead of the ensemble sound they must conduct/march/dut in order to clean the entrance. Simple trial-and-error can fix this so long as the students get the feedback they need to make appropriate adjustments.

#3 – The Large Company Front or “End-zone to End-zone” Spread: Everyone hypes the field coverage; but, if the musical lines are too active, this gets sloppy in a hurry.

Please tell us that the battery is staged in the center of the field. Ok, good. Now, consider less of a spread. If the path into and out of this form allows, you could adjust a two-step interval to a one-yard interval. This might decrease your lateral spread by many yards. If possible, this drill re-write could lead to a slightly more manageable staging, allow for all marchers to cover down to a painted yard-marker on the field, and still give you and your audience a fairly large company front.

Now for the tricky part: rehearsing the ensemble in this set. Begin by setting up your drum major with a metronome and headphones. All repetitions of this phrase should be started silently by the drum major (no dutting allowed). The drum major must stay with their metronome at all times. The first goal is to get the performers outside the 30 yard-lines watching the drum major and getting their feet and sounds together. Ignoring the other side of the field should be easier than ignoring the battery and performers toward the 50 yard line. Next, layer in the performers outside the 35 yard-lines, then the 40 yard-lines, then



add the entire field ensemble. Lastly, layer in the front ensemble. The FE, and marchers between the 40 yard-lines should listen straight back to the battery and block out all other sounds. Marchers outside the 40 yard-lines should watch the drum major and learn to ignore the sounds coming from inside the 40 yard-

lines and from outside of their position. Again, this is difficult! The performers must “live on the edge” in this staging. If they listen around them, they will perceive a dirty mess. They must be taught to watch and remember the specific “craziness” that they experienced in that moment when the staff finally told them that it sounded good from up front!

#4 - Phasing While the Battery is Tacet: The ensemble is performing at a moderate to fast tempo and the musical ensemble is struggling to stay together without the battery. Should we employ “cheater beats”?

Sometimes, the absence of drum parts is exactly what the music demands. You have three choices: Continue on with no battery percussion music, add battery percussion music, or use “cheater beats”. Many people carry on with the hope that the band will eventually just “get it”. Often, they run out of time and add “cheater beats” from a snare drum or bass drum just before a performance as a last-minute fix. Hopefully, you can develop the ensemble past this issue. Many times, the “cheater beats” become a crutch that the ensemble can't live without. When the need for “cheaters” arises, explore the following route: On the fly, a smart battery instructor can identify the right player(s) and rote-teach them an ostinato (perhaps derived from existing thematic material) that is more

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interesting than quarter notes. Later, in a battery rehearsal, the part could be developed to include different pitches from the bass drums, or different implements from another battery voice (i.e. brushes in the snare drum voice, bundled rods played on the drum rims, or a combination of voices). Eventually, this should sound like a planned part of the show, not a trouble spot that needed some quarter notes. Use only as much rhythmic activity and volume as is necessary to maintain an audible focal point. Your original intent to provide contrast through the tacet battery is still valid. If the battery now sounds like a low-volume auxiliary percussion loop, you may have found the right balance for ensemble precision and musical effect.

Knowing When to Say What

There are other common scenarios to explore and discuss, but after awhile, the solutions are just “variations on a theme”. The bottom line is that you must fully understand the role of the drum major, the audible focal point, and everyone in between. You, or someone on your staff, should have some experience level with each of these positions. Be a student of physics; be an intellectual. Avoid guessing. Often, the “stock” solutions are just plain wrong.

“Hey, listen to the drum line!” – In reality, you should only listen back to the drum line. Avoid listening over to the drum line and do not listen forward to the drum line.

“Keep your eyes on the drum major!” – Well, actually, if you are a member of the front ensemble or marching near the front of the field, playing with the drum major’s hands will only result in your sound arriving early to the judges’ ears.

There is no “right answer” for every issue. The goal of ensemble precision stays the same, but the methods vary from teacher-to-teacher and ensemble-to-ensemble. Don’t be afraid to try new things. When in doubt, get out there on the field with the students and struggle along side of them. Don’t rule out asking for help. We have many experienced colleagues in this activity from all parts of the state. Hiring a clinician to work with you during the development of your show can be of great benefit to you and your students. Don’t get discouraged too easily; often times, complicated problems have complicated solutions. If this activity were easy, it wouldn’t be nearly as much fun for the audience.

Michael Reed was named the Percussion Director for McKinney North High School in McKinney, Texas in June of 2013. For the previous ten years, he served as the Percussion Director for the L.V. Berkner High School Bands in Richardson, Texas. Before his tenure at Berkner High School, he was the Assistant Director of Bands and Percussion Director at Langham Creek High School in Houston, Texas. Michael received a Bachelor of Science (emphasis in music education and percussion performance) from Texas A&M University - Commerce, where he was a student of Dr. Brian A. West, Dr. Jeff Emge, and Mr. Bobby Francis. Michael is a member of the Lone Star Wind Orchestra, the Texas Music Educators Association, the Percussive Arts Society, the Texas Bandmasters Association, and Kappa Kappa Psi. He lives in Plano with his wife, Kristyn, and their Labrador retriever, Mousse.

Scott Ward is in his seventh year as the Percussion Specialist at L.V. Berkner High School in Richardson, Texas. While at Berkner, his students have performed at the 5A UIL State Marching Contest in 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012 and have been finalists in a number of BOA Regional and Super Regional Competitions. Also, Mr. Ward is the wind and percussion arranger for a number of award-winning marching bands and drum lines throughout the state, and his arrangements have been performed at the UIL State Marching Band Competition at the 2A, 3A, 4A, and 5A levels. Previously, Mr. Ward served as the drum line instructor and adjunct percussion teacher at Texas Christian University in 2004-05. He received his M.M. in Percussion Performance from Texas Christian University in 2004 while serving as the percussion graduate assistant and received his B.S. in Music Education in 2002 from Texas A&M University-Commerce. Scott is a member of Texas Bandmasters Association, the Texas Music Educators Association, Percussive Arts Society, Kappa Kappa Psi National Honorary Band Fraternity, and Pi Kappa Lambda National Music Honor Society.