

Is There An Indoor and Outdoor Sound?

Frank Troyka

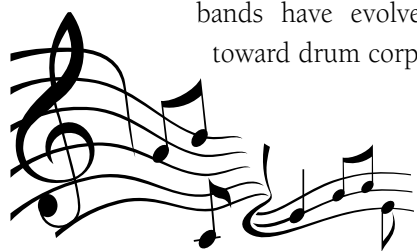
A colleague recently asked me how soon in the school year I would begin working on our “indoor sound.” I hesitated for a moment because I didn’t quite understand the question. “What do you mean, our ‘indoor sound?’” I responded.

“You know, there’s a sound you have for your marching band and one for your concert band, right? When do you flip the switch? Do you wait until marching season is over?”

Again, I hesitated.

SOUND: There’s only one.

In my experience, the bands that strive for their best, most characteristic “indoor” sounds are the ones that generate the most enthusiastic response from the outdoor audience. Back in “the day,” when drum and bugle corps played exclusively on instruments pitched in G with only two valves (or a piston and rotor!), there was most definitely a sound associated with the activity. Many marching bands erroneously modeled their approaches based on this sound. At that time, the equipment allowed by the rules restricted the color, intonation, projection, and timbre of these drum corps. These restrictions were never a part of the marching band idiom, yet the success and visibility of drum corps influenced the way marching bands approached musicianship. In the last 20 years, as drum corps adopted instruments pitched in orchestral keys, a strong case could be made that drum corps have evolved more in the direction of great marching bands than great marching bands have evolved toward drum corps.



STRATEGIES: There are many!

Although I don’t believe there is a dedicated “indoor” or “outdoor” sound, there are undoubtedly indoor and outdoor strategies that can be employed to generate musical effect—not necessarily for artistry’s sake, but to overcome the limitations, and to exploit the characteristics, of an outdoor environment or a large indoor space. In addition to the venue, these strategies are also driven by another unique aspect of the pageantry arts—the brevity of the shows.

One such strategy falls under the heading of “scaled effects,” such as the enumeration of dynamic levels as opposed to the traditional Italian terminology. In the marching environment, dynamics often carry numerical values (for example, ff=Level 7, pp=Level 2, etc.) with the specific objective of varying the exposure of woodwind or keyboard percussion instruments at specific moments as the show progresses. Perhaps it is because the marching band contains a more diverse cross-section of musicians than our smaller concert bands, both in terms of ability and experience, that this concrete approach achieves a more unified result. When working to balance the very powerful percussion presence in the overall ensemble sound, the enumeration of dynamics

can help create a common language that is more easily understood across sections. Even within the color guard, “Level 6” as a volume designation could equate to a particular level of intensity they are expected to convey emotionally.

In addition, I believe there is a greater range of nuance available on the concert stage, which necessitates a more subtle and relative approach to musicianship. Marching bands often have to compete with crowd noise, traffic, and other distractions. (How different might our concert bands sound if they were subject to those same intrusions?) But I would be reluctant to enumerate dynamics within the concert band setting, regardless of the skill or maturity of the individual players. Working with a concert band, I refer exclusively to the standard terminology and conventions of the orchestral idiom. Dynamics are defined as fortissimo, pianissimo, mezzo, etc., and a fortissimo in one context may not be the same volume “level” as a fortissimo elsewhere.

A distinguishing characteristic of the marching idiom is the condensation of large scale works into much smaller, concise, “best of” versions of the original. Though I would not take the liberty of abridging original works for the concert stage, I would, however,

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truncate works by Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Ticheli, and Mackey to accommodate the time limitations and “short attention span” of the marching activity. Musicianship, unlike form, does not necessarily have to be a slave to construction or brevity. However, form in marching band must acknowledge a symbiotic relationship between the musical and visual content (and rightfully so). Sudden, extreme, and frequent changes in dynamics, texture, and tempo might also mislead one to believe there is a marching band sound that is distinct from the concert band. Perhaps this is because the brass section is almost exclusively responsible for generating the characteristic “impact” the typical marching band fan will cheer for so enthusiastically. Maybe it’s that brassy “edge” that gave rise to the notion of an outdoor sound in the first place. Perhaps it’s the unique timbre of the drum corps wind section, with its absence of woodwind texture, that persuades some band directors that there are separate indoor and outdoor sounds. It bears mentioning at this point that I have NEVER been asked about indoor or outdoor woodwind sound; the very idea of pursuing distinct indoor or outdoor sounds for the clarinet is a curious one indeed! Again, I concede there are certainly indoor and outdoor strategies for achieving a high level of musicianship that are not necessarily shared on the concert stage.

Staging, Response, and Releases

I believe that the marching band idiom demands an inherently different approach when starting and releasing notes on wind instruments. Staging and field placement can make it very challenging to achieve rhythmic precision (a separate and complex discussion of its own). In my experience, timing problems are often the result of poor response by the individual wind players. There is no delay in response in the battery percussion when the stick hits the head; the sound is produced instantly at the

moment the implement strikes the drum. Even immature percussionists will achieve the same immediacy of sound when they play. But different wind instruments have very specific idiosyncrasies when attempting to achieve “instant sound,” and this variance is exaggerated by the expanse and acoustics of the outdoor environment and the skill of the individuals. Unless the winds have been taught proper embouchure, proper use of air, the proper role of the tongue when starting notes, etc., and unless those skills are applied consistently and uniformly, there is very little chance the band will play together on anything other than the most conservative literature performed at the most conservative tempi.

Similarly, the way marching band wind players finish sustained sounds may require a different strategy to exploit and overcome the performance environment. A slight “push” or crescendo toward a release is a common technique used by successful marching bands as a way of helping to create a “ring” or quasi-reverberation in an otherwise dry environment. When exaggerated, this is often a signal to the audience to applaud (something that would never happen at a cadence point in the middle of a concert performance!).

Our students will value what WE value.

In all cases, the concepts and goals of teaching musicianship must be the same. This is why I believe in only one basic sound for a band, marching or otherwise. I concede that this notion might meet with resistance from some. But who can argue that any band should strive to make anything less than the most mature and characteristic sounds possible? After all, that’s why drum corps evolved away from bugles pitched in G to more standard instruments in multiple keys. Consider the number of top drum corps now using the once-prohibited trombone in addition to the ever-present marching baritone!



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Regardless of the approach, our students will come to value what WE value based upon where we place our emphasis. If we encourage loud, distorted sounds, our kids will play loudly with distortion. They won't know the difference because their only band experience occurs through us. If we value playing fortissimo with a characteristic sound, they will strive to achieve an orchestral fortissimo, but only if we can define this for them through our pedagogy and through demonstration. If we constantly strive to help our students make their best, most mature sounds through solid fundamental training and well-planned ensemble concepts, the marching band can actually prepare its individual members for a wonderful concert season.

So, is there really an indoor or outdoor sound?

In my opinion, there is no distinct "indoor" or "outdoor" sound. Rather, there are strategies for achieving musical outcomes that are unique to the marching band, dictated by the environment as much as by artistic choice. If we put artistry ahead of everything, we'll achieve a satisfying, artistic result. Of course, we have to be artists ourselves, and that demands a lifelong commitment to our craft, not a momentary competitive strategy.

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