



## Counter-March to Choreography: How to Check and Adjust as We Evolve

*Kim Shuttlesworth*

I can vividly remember back in the early 90's I would travel with my parents to watch my brother perform with the Carthage Battlin' Bulldog Band in the NAMMB State Championships at Texas A&M University's coveted Kyle Field. As I watched band after band, I was fascinated by the sound of the execution, the silence of the crowd, the clicking of the instruments moving together as they brought them to their face, the powerful opening fanfares, and then what I later learned- the counter-march. The best part of the event was an exhibition performance from the one and only Texas A&M Aggie Band. Because of this experience, I looked forward to wearing the Bulldog uniform, centering the crossbar on my chest, adjusting my chords, and shining my white shoes. From my experience of the military style, I learned that there is beauty and simplicity that has become a foundation of skills that led to the activity of the march to build and evolve.

Military Band was the only thing I knew as I entered my first marching clinic at The University of Texas at Austin. As I began the marching portion of the audition, one of the section leaders came up to me and said, "Your mark time is too crisp." He explained that they were a more "relaxed style" approach. As I tried to adjust, I learned more and more about the organization and its name, "The Show Band of the Southwest!" Every show was fun and a crowd favorite.

My time at UT Austin gave me great opportunities to learn how my baseline understanding of marching band could be expanded upon by learning different styles of marching, different strides, and different facings.

As I prepared to graduate and begin my career of being a Texas Band Director, I thought I had a great understanding of the marching activity. I began volunteering at James Bowie High School after I finished my day-to-day responsibilities at my first job, Clint Small Middle School. I learned about what some would call a "corps style" band. I had never seen anything like it. The show was themed, and the music was classical, not military or showband style. Each day I would ask Bruce Dinkins 10-20 questions about "how" he would teach it or "what they were doing." He invited me to attend a marching contest that Bands of America was hosting in Arlington, TX. While there, my homework was to watch multiple bands, spend time in warm-up locations, and be prepared to talk

to him afterwards about what I learned, what concepts I discovered, and how I could implement those skills in the program.

The current day marching band has evolved to what I would like to call "Modern Day Production." With the advancement in technology, drill software, uniform design, color guard equipment, and much more, the shows are now theatrical explorations. We introduce different props and tarps to help create the atmosphere or story to really be understood. Choreography has taken over holds or the stillness that used to exist. It is truly a new age activity.

As I began thinking about this topic and taking notes, I learned some very important connections based on how each style builds upon the next style.

1. In Military style you learn about dressing, execution of stride, crispness of transitions, clarity of form. Musically it teaches you details of articulation, contrast in phrase, and release point.
2. Show Band style allows you to explore more pop culture works, allows you to program for crowd engagement, and creates an atmosphere. Visually it allows you to learn curvilinear formations, and shapes that are easily recognizable to the crowd.
3. Corp style expands upon understanding curvilinear form ideas, shoulder facings, different step sizes, addition of the front ensemble and color guards, and themed shows from start to finish. Musically it explores different styles, musical eras, and the integration of electronic production.
4. Modern Day Productions brings you to the audience, creates an atmosphere or storyline that spectators follow throughout the show, introduces props and soundscape designs to magnify the theme, expands marching fundamentals to things like flutter step and jazz run, and works to create buy-in from the audience. Musically it might explore abstract works or transcription of piano to winds, etc.

When you break down the approaches you begin to connect the dots of how the past has set up the future... how we wouldn't be able to do what we do now if we hadn't had the basic foundation. To me, everything points back to military style as the base. You cannot teach stride without understanding steps. You cannot teach music to feet without digging into the purpose of how it began- military marches. We wouldn't have modern day productions if we hadn't had showband and corps style to build upon.

All the styles are unique in their own, but similar in their baseline of information. The main ideas that are consistent across all genres of march style are this:

**You must play and play well  
You must march and march well**

I find myself daily thinking back to sayings that my past directors and mentors would yell from the tower... "check those diagonals... dress down... equal size steps." Each time those words exit my mouth I can give thanks to the military style, the show band style, etc. My goal is to educate students about how this came about and why it is crucial to understand basic concepts in order to perfect new ideas.

We spend so much time comparing and discussing why one is better than another, but in reality- the purpose is all the same: while you march and play, you build community and culture. That is what it is really about- getting a group of people together to do the same thing, the same way, to start and finish the journey together. Through all that, we can find ways to connect and appreciate the styles and how they have evolved over time.

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The big question that circles around programs and professional developments is "How do we check and adjust to the ever-changing time?" This is something I think about every year. As I watch programs perform year after year, the performances get more intricate, they are more athletic, they may explore art or topics that have never been attempted before, and they take risks to press the activity to higher levels. There have been times where I thought it has passed me up... I don't know if I can really do this. As those fears creep in I am reminded of a few things:

1. Just as literature has progressed and we have adjusted, we should approach the activity in the same light. Each year new composers are reaching for more creativity, more depth, and more risks in their works. The days of ABA form might be a part of the past but look at pieces like Aurora Awakes. John Mackey discusses Holst and how it influenced his approach to the ending. We are willing to take musical risks with concert programming, so why not with marching arts? Yes, it is out of our comfort zone, but that is exactly where I want to be in order to grow myself and our students. I am completely uncomfortable with trying to demonstrate, but I have learned to understand the "how" in order to correct.
2. There are great examples of all types of marching bands around Texas. You can travel in a 100-mile radius and pick up every "branch" of marching. I love to attend rehearsals and contests where I can sit, watch, and learn. Professional

Development isn't only saved for conventions- sit in another band hall or explore a different type of contest and observe. Then, ask all the questions you want. I have many times shown up at a contest, supported the boosters by grabbing something from concessions, and then just taking in all different styles of shows. One of my favorite contests is a drumline contest- talk about pushing the envelope!

Our job as educators is to help grow and advance the learning environment. Music is universal. It is the only activity where it needs to be 100%. So, regardless of where you are currently, focus on where you could take the activity. If you are deep rooted in a certain style, take hold of that, run with it, and make a difference. If you are thinking you can't try new things- take the risk. I know that the reward of seeing your students perform and putting their heart and soul into their product is worth more than the fear of the unknown of "Can I evolve?"

**KIM SHUTTLESWORTH** currently serves as the Director of Bands and Fine Arts Department Chair for Coppell High School. Shuttlesworth is currently in her seventeenth year of teaching in Texas. Shuttlesworth holds a Bachelor of Music Education Degree from The University of Texas at Austin. Shuttlesworth's ensembles have received recognition each year in both marching and concert venues. Each ensemble has received superior ratings at the UIL Marching Contest, UIL Concert & Sightreading Contest, and the Texas State Solo and Ensemble Contest. Under her direction, her programs have been UIL State Marching Band Contest Finalists, Bands of America Regional, Super Regional, and Grand National Finalists, and a recipient of the John Philip Sousa Foundation's Sudler Shield in 2013. Shuttlesworth's concert bands have consistently received superior ratings. Her bands have advanced through the Texas Music Educators Association Honor Band Contest, placing 11th in 2019 for 4A with Tom Glenn High School and 6th place in 2023 for 6A with Coppell. Shuttlesworth is an active adjudicator, clinician, and consultant across Texas, as well as the country in both marching and concert band. Ms. Shuttlesworth holds professional affiliations with TMEA, TBA, and Tau Beta Sigma.