



The Unique Demands on the Marching Musician: When to Watch, When to Listen, and How to Make It Work

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THE UNIQUE DEMANDS ON THE MARCHING MUSICIAN: WHEN TO WATCH, WHEN TO LISTEN, AND HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

Presented by Scott Ward, Michael Reed, and Frank Troyka
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Basic Premises and Terminology

Before we can discuss the complexities involved in outdoor ensemble timing, we must clarify a few concepts and explain the vocabulary.

1. Sound Concepts
 - a. 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.
 - b. Sound waves travel in all directions. Waves can be aimed (to a degree), focused, and reflected.
 - c. Sound does not reach all observers simultaneously. Your proximity to the sound source(s) drastically affects your perception of timing.
 - d. 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. i.e. clear sixteenth notes give and control pulse more easily than quarter notes.
 - e. In general: performers should never listen forward and they should listen side-to-side only within reasonably close distances; the conductors must never conduct to the sound of the ensemble; the front ensemble should always listen back and rarely watch the conductor.
2. Terminology
 - a. *Audible Focal Point* (AFP) – the element of the ensemble that is furthest, or very nearly furthest, to the rear of the ensemble and providing a steady pulse through their playing.
 - b. *Battery* – aka “Drum Line”; the element of the percussion section that is carrying their instruments (usually drums and cymbals) on the field. Often the AFP for the ensemble.
 - c. *Drum Major* (DM) – the student conductor(s) of the ensemble. Can be a visual focal point, but not the AFP.
 - d. *Dutter* – any ensemble member assigned to vocalize the tempo during the show (usually on the staccato syllable “dut”). Can serve in lieu of the AFP or assist the AFP or DM in communicating pulse to other ensemble members.
 - e. *Front Ensemble* (FE) – aka “Pit”; the element of the percussion section that is “grounded” and typically found along the front side line of the field. Keyboard percussion instruments, timpani, etc...
 - f. *Side 1 / Side 2* – a.k.a. “Side A / Side B”; Left side and right side, respectively, of the 50 yard line from the perspective of the audience.
 - g. *Visual Focal Point* (VFP) – any person designated as a visual provider of tempo. There are often multiple VFPs and can be different VFPs for different segments of the ensemble. i.e. the DM/conductor, the feet of a marcher within the AFP, a secondary or backfield conductor, etc...

Common Scenarios

We have all faced (or will face) some situations in a developing show that lead to some amount of frustration. Here are some possible solutions that can be worked out in the design stage, the arranging, the drill-writing, and through effective rehearsal strategies. *It should be noted that nothing will supplant good musicianship.*

3. The Cold Attack

Your arrangement calls for a fortissimo attack (out of silence) from the entire ensemble.

 - a. Arrangement: 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 (obscures “duts” from the field and can cover-up some minor precision issues).
 - b. Drill-Writing: Did you have the fore-sight to request that the drill writer stage the ensemble between the 35 yard lines and not too deep on the field? A compact setup that is closer to the front ensemble will alleviate the side-to-side imprecision and leave only the front-to-back variable to compensate for.
 - c. Rehearsing/Executing: Can (should) you use dutters? Rehearse first with just the DM and the furthest back-field segment of the ensemble. Layer in voices to each repetition from back to front. Add the front-ensemble last. This trains the performers’ brains to make miniscule

allowances for the delay as they perceive it on the field. Each performer sees the DM begin their 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.

- d. Final Thoughts: This is a daunting challenge. 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"?
4. The Battery Entrance in the "Ballad"
The battery has been tacet for the majority of the "ballad" and must now enter and become the AFP. We just can't seem to line up the moving parts in the FE with the active battery rhythms. What do we do?
 - a. Arrangement: It would be wise not to have the active musical lines in the FE as the battery enters. Could the battery enter during a whole note in the wind arrangement and the FE simply play a crescendo on suspended cymbals?
 - b. Drill-Writing: Obviously, the battery needs to be staged to the rear of the musical ensemble and somewhat centralized. However, the closer the battery is to the DM and FE, the faster this moment will lock-in. In some instances, re-writing the battery drill for better field placement might be worth the writing time and the rehearsal time.
 - c. Rehearsing/Executing: Key personnel in the battery should serve as dutters one or two bars prior to their sections' entrance. The DM should use the feet of one of those dutters as their VFP and not be distracted by the lateness of the battery attack (as they perceive it relative to their ictus).
 - d. Final Thoughts: This one isn't too tricky; the key lies with as few as two people (the DM and the battery member that will serve as the VFP before becoming the AFP). 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.
 5. The Company Front or "End-zone to End-zone" Spread.
Everyone hypes the big spread. But, if the musical lines are too rhythmic, it gets sloppy.
 - a. Arrangement: If the battery is the AFP, be sure the writing is readable. Ensemble precision is more important than intricate beats.
 - b. Drill-Writing: Is the battery staged centrally? Could the instruments with more active lines be staged more centrally? Are related lines (i.e. horn & alto sax.) staged in close proximity to one another? Could the visual effect be accomplished with less of a spread? Does 20 to 20 get the job done?
 - c. Rehearsing/Executing: Use a metronome with headphones for the DM. All repetitions should be started silently by the DM (no dutting allowed). The first goal is to get the performers outside the 30 yard lines watching the DM 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. Second, layer in the performers outside the 35 yard lines, then the 40 yard lines, then add the entire field ensemble. Last, layer in the FE. The FE, and marchers between the 40 yard lines should listen to the AFP and block out all other sounds. Marchers outside the 40s should watch the DM and learn to ignore the sounds coming from inside the 40s.
 - d. Final Thoughts: 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 they experienced in that moment when the staff finally told them that it sounded good from up front!
 6. 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"?
 - a. Arrangement: 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
 - b. Drill-Writing: Maybe a wind AFP could have been identified prior to writing the drill. At this point, since we're considering "cheaters", a re-write of the drill is probably out of the question.
 - c. Rehearsing/Executing: 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 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.

- d. Final Thoughts: Use only as much rhythmic activity and dynamic as is necessary to maintain an AFP. Your original intent (providing contrast through a 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. On a related note, beware of using rhythmically active ostinati in the FE (16th notes on shakers, hi-hats, etc...). See item 1.d (above); this can be a very powerful sound that is difficult to ignore and listen through. If the music calls for such ostinati or texture, experiment with battery writing (and sounds) to provide that material.

7. Sub-section Features

You have a trumpet feature accompanied by the snare drums, followed by a horn and multi-tom feature, followed by a woodwind and FE feature. They're staged all over the place; now what?

- a. Arrangement: Attempt to end each feature before the next feature begins. Can you end the trumpet/snare feature on count 3 (in 4/4 time) prior to a count 1 entrance in the horn/toms? The empty time from the field (and a possible suspended cymbal roll from the FE) could mask any slight discrepancies in tempo that would have otherwise been noticeable.
- b. Drill-Writing: Separating the battery sub-sections is the trickiest aspect to this scenario. Care should be taken in how they are separated and later brought back together. If the featured groups are holding, the non-featured segments of the ensemble could be re-staged with a larger than normal step-size, if necessary.
- c. Rehearsing/Executing: All musicians should be rehearsing according to a tempo chart prior to putting this together on the field. At first, you could run a field metronome from the 50 yard line. You can experiment with side line placement or back hash mark placement. Eventually, like the "company front" scenario, you'll need to rehearse this "off the hands" of the DM. Key dutters from within the constantly changing AFPs can help convey the pulse to their specific ensemble. Featured ensembles should watch the DM and listen to their own dutter, not the feature preceding them.
- d. Final Thoughts: This is just a multiple-step word problem. Synthesize the rehearsal techniques from points 3, 4, and 5 (above) and you'll get this taken care of.

8. Oh my goodness; change in tempo!

You need to change tempo in the middle of the opener; now what?

- a. Arrangement: Can the two tempos have a relationship that is not arbitrary? i.e. Half-time/double time (72bpm/144bpm or 1:2 ratio); shared common multiple (old dotted eighth note = new quarter note). Finding a tempo relationship assists the DM and the percussion section in establishing the new tempo and not "stabbing in the dark". If the marchers are holding, can a new tempo be established during the "fermata"? Limiting the responsibility to just the DM and a key dutter in the battery can help. A bass drum line "lead-in" is an effective way to transfer the tempo control from the VFP to the AFP for the entire ensemble.
- b. Drill-Writing: Is the AFP staged well? Can the tempo change be executed from a hold rather than while marching? If in motion, is the step-size manageable?
- c. Rehearsing/Executing: If there is to be a ritardando or accelerando, create a tempo chart that details the same percentage changes for every rehearsal (the ratio stays consistent). If the goal is an accelerando from 144bpm to 168bpm, always rehearse using a 1:1.166 ratio (120bpm to 140bpm, 126bpm to 147bpm, 132bpm to 154bpm, etc...). In a pinch, a careful metronome operator (with the right metronome) can dial in the accelerando in real time. This should probably be the person that regularly rehearses the battery. Ideally, you should use a programmable metronome, the ClickDesigner app, or a rehearsal audio file to accompany this segment in rehearsal. Creating these tracks is time-consuming, but it beats using up your 8-hours of rehearsal for the week and still not being able to execute the tempo change.
- d. Final Thoughts: Consistent rehearsing, indoors and out, will lead to muscle-memory. Follow all general concepts about listening and watching. If performers have too much lateral distance with the AFP, they must rely on a VFP. Ideally, all the performers could listen and watch, but they must be told which one works best for their staging, for that moment. Remember, the closer the performer is to the DM, the more they have to listen back and ignore the DM.

The Production Sheet: avoiding problems through smart design

A detailed production sheet will assist the both you, your staff, and the drill writer. Ideally, the production sheet should be coordinated by the marching band director following a careful study of the wind score. Additionally, the percussion arranger and guard choreographer should be given opportunities to add to the

sheet. A meeting of the design team to go over the finished sheet would be helpful. Get this sheet to the drill-writer as soon as possible.

9. The Basics

Clearly define the following:

- a. Number of members in each sub-section of the ensemble. i.e. flutes, clarinets, trumpets, snare drummers, bass drummers, total guard, weapons, silks, etc...
- b. Number of members in the brass section; number of members in the woodwind section.
- c. Any pertinent strengths and weaknesses.
- d. Any preferences regarding battery spacing, pass-throughs, trombone slide reminders.
- e. Position of props, equipment change locations, non-standard front ensemble placement, etc...

10. The Details

Provide all the details you foresee for each set of the show.

- a. Set by set breakdown of the music (ms 1-4, 16 cts)
- b. General Comments (musical intent, hold, march half-time, etc...)
- c. Wind specifics / percussion specifics / guard specifics
- d. Misc. instructions or notes

Other Factors

There are many factors that contribute to all the various timing considerations involved in marching band productions. Again, nothing supplants good musicianship.

11. Here are some other ideas to consider.

- a. The use of metronome (year-round) in your cluster.
- b. Battery rehearsals with the drum major.
- c. Marching to pop music accompaniment during fundamentals block.
- d. Drum major training to deal with delay.

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