

Demystifying Marching Percussion

Band directors and percussionists who do not have a marching background often find that one of the hardest things for them to do is know how to work with their marching percussion sections. It can be intimidating to try and think of what to say to a section that one does not fully feel like they understand. For many percussionists, even if they don't have a significant background in marching percussion, teaching a drumline is often something they will be asked to do. It can be a very rewarding educational experience as well as providing some extra income along the way. Working with a high schools drumline can also lead to increased private students or the potential to develop a concert percussion ensemble. With this in mind, here are some ideas of what to look for when working with the marching percussion.

Starting Exercises

For the battery this will typically either be a count off from a section lead played on the drum or a verbal count off (dut). Many groups use a combination of the 2 with the section leader giving the first four beats and then everyone dutting the second four for each exercise. The idea here is that there will not be a tap off during the show so the section is working on getting everyone to verbalize a consistent beat. A note about duts: no one wants to hear them in the stands! They can distract from the show. While they are necessary at times to be sure everyone enters together it should not become an audible aspect of the performance to the listener!

For the front ensemble it will be a visual count off. This is usually four "aired" counts from the section leader followed by four from the full section. This motion is just a version of the full stroke that will be used when playing but without striking the bars. This is done because often the front has to watch each other for timing with one player specifically designated to listen for the timing from front to back. This can prevent too many interpretations of the beat from the front ensemble.

Sample exercises can be found at

http://media.wix.com/ugd/2c8168_33102a6b2e0b5ca8850ee19f1387f68a.pdf

Have a Solid Technical Foundation (*"If You Don't Have Time to Warm Up You Don't Have Time to be Good"* - one of my favorite Marching Roundtable quotes!)

We all know that technique is the foundation of a successful program. For a marching percussion ensemble this program is going to include both hand and feet warm ups. In a perfect world the group will have their own instructor or a strong section leader who can take charge of working the percussion section through the warm up sequence. If this is the case I would recommend 20-30 minutes (at least!) at the start of a rehearsal to be allotted for the percussion to have a playing warm up. Most directors probably want at least this much time to warm up the winds anyway. Be sure that the batteries drums are tuned at the start of each rehearsal to get a consistent sound from player to player. If any heads need to be changed this should be done prior to rehearsal as well. Low quality heads and tuning can adversely affect any progress trying to be achieved in rehearsal.

As there are many different approaches to performing on marching percussion instruments this will not go into the specific hand techniques to be used as that can be unique to each group. There are many resources available in books and online to help define this style for your students.

Movement

I recommend having the students mark time as much as possible while playing during the warmups. Another option is “tracking” or actually marching through a basics sequence while playing the exercises. After all, it is “marching” band. Watch the feet while listening to the line as MANY errors in playing are actually caused by timing issue in the feet as much as any issues in the hands. It is also becoming more common for body movement to be involved in marching shows and many groups are starting to include movements from the show as a part of their playing warm up as well.

If the line is standing in a warmup arc I highly recommend the use of stands to help prevent back injury in the members. While speaking of health I also have to emphasize having the members wear hearing protection while playing! Hearing cannot be fixed and the amount of time for safe exposure to marching percussion is mere seconds!

Stretch

It is important to stretch the muscles and get the blood flowing in the body before starting to play or march. Be sure to stretch the legs, back, arms, wrists, and shoulders.

Stick Heights

Marching percussionists often have an overly analytical side to how to define the things. Don't let definitions such as stick heights or stick angles drive everything in the music. They are merely reference points and need to be flexible to adapt to the needs of the music and/or ensemble. Below is a basic reference for stick heights as dictated by musical expression. Remember that the basic stroke will not change with these different heights.

pp – 1 inch
p – 3 inches
mp – 6 inches
mf – 9 inches
f – 12 inches
ff – 15 inches

Battery Exercises

Legatos

Often this will be some form of an “8 on a hand” type exercise. At this point you want to be looking for a continuous motion of the sticks and the sticks moving straight up and down in an even and consistent motion. Look at the grip and be sure that the hand position is even

and consistent between the hands. Experiment with different dynamic levels to work on making sure the stroke is consistent at multiple dynamic levels. Listen for: a consistent sound from all players. Alternate having individuals and the full line play so that you can hear the sound being produced by each player (this should be done with all of the exercises). Maintain even spacing between all notes in the sequence. Look for: the stick continuing in an up and down motion and not stopping over the drum (other than after the last stroke on each hand). Always watch the hand that is not playing to be sure it stays low and over the head.

Accent/Tap Exercise

This exercise can take the form of single hand (8th notes) accent and tap (non accent) patterns or can also be a “grid” pattern. The key thing to this is that there must be 2 different stick heights present in the approach to the drum. The accented note should not be played with any more force than the tap. It just features a point of rise from the stick. Listen for: evenness of sound between the hands and the notes at the different stick heights. Make sure that the accent note is not played with a tighter or more forced stroke as that will serve to distort both the sound of the drum and the rhythm. Look for: added tension in the hands on the accents. Make sure there is a clear visual distinction between the accent and non accent note. Watch to be sure the feet are staying on the beat and not trying to adjust to fit with the accent patterns.

Double/Triple Beat

This exercise is used to start developing the open or double stroke roll technique. The goal in the exercise is to work towards both notes of a double stroke are the same stick height and sound. Often you will see a decrescendo from the first note to the second note. You want the students to work for both notes being even. The key to this is having adequate stick speed (velocity) to create the rebound. One way to demonstrate this is to have the pull the stick back with one hand while pressing towards the head with the hand gripping the stick. When they release the second hand the stick should move with enough speed to create two notes from the stroke. Listen for: evenness of the sound between the first and second note. Also be sure that the spacing between the notes is rhythmically even and that the second note is not coming in too close to the first. Also listen to be sure that the hands are balanced from a volume perspective. Look for: The height of each not being even. Be sure fingers are not releasing from the stick too much creating a lack of control.

Stick Control

This is typically a 16th based exercise taken from the first few exercises in George Lawrence Stone’s book “Stick Control.” This exercise is designed to start developing evenness of stroke and sound while doing different sticking combinations. The goal is for every note to create the same sound from the drum. Listen for: even sounding 16th notes all the way through the exercise (no agogic accents). Also be sure that the tempo stays consistent as the students switch from one sticking pattern to the next. Look for: a constant flow of the sticks and even heights for every note.

Paradiddles

This again will be two stick heights with accents and taps. The goal here is to develop the coordination necessary to play these different sticking patterns that are some of the most common in contemporary marching music. Most exercises will be some form of combination of paradiddles and paradiddlediddles which are the 2 most commonly used patterns. Double paradiddles can also be used in the exercise. Listen for: evenness of sound between the hands and the notes at the different stick heights. Make sure that the accent note is not played with a tighter or more forced stroke as that will serve to distort both the sound of the drum and the rhythm. This is a great exercise to isolate one hand on the drum and one on the rim to listen for rhythmic consistency. Look for: added tension in the hands on the accents. Make sure there is a clear visual distinction between the accent and non accent note. Watch to be sure the feet are staying on the beat and not trying to adjust to fit with the accent patterns.

Rolls

Rolls in marching percussion are most commonly open (double strokes) although there are many instances where an orchestral (buzz) roll will be used as well. Both should be worked on in the roll warmup sequence. Listen for: clearly articulated double strokes. These should sound like 16th's, 32nd's or sextuplets most commonly. Think of the sound of a clearly articulated double tonguing passage from the brass. That is what a good roll should sound like. Watch for: Stick heights lowering towards the drum as the rolls get faster. Slightly more arm will often come into the stroke as the roll speed increases as well. Make sure that the hands do not get more tense as the speed increases as well. Orchestral buzz rolls can also be substituted for open rolls in order to work on getting a full and even sound along with a consistent rhythmic base to the roll. This base is necessary to insure that the students will attack and release the buzz at the same time in a passage of music. When playing the show music the rhythmic base of a buzz needs to be defined for all players to ensure uniformity of timing.

Flams

In the immortal words of Dennis Delucia "Keep your grace notes down!!!!" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHxAqL5w8yE>) Just like the aforementioned accents/taps, flams must have two different stick heights to be executed correctly. Where most students get into trouble is lifting the grace note while also lifting the main note. Keep the grace note much lower to the head for accurate spacing. The most common patterns used in marching percussion will be flam accents and flam taps. Listen for: the grace note being slightly before the accent note and much softer than the accent note. Be sure that the grace note does not come too rhythmically early, creating a dotted rhythm sound. In marching percussion the grace note is often played much closer to the main note than in concert percussion. Also be sure that both notes do not hit at the same time as a double stop. Look for: two different heights from the sticks. Watch to be sure that the grace note does not lift to a height to close to the main note.

Full Band Warmup

A sequence similar to this can also be constructed if the director needs to have the full band together for the daily warm up sequence. In this case, adapt the above exercises to serve as a rhythm foundation for the various wind exercises to be performed. But one thing to keep in mind: make sure they are written in a tempo and meter that will allow the percussionists to properly warm up. Many times wind exercises will be at a tempo that is much slower than what is needed to get the percussionists hands moving in the correct speed. If that is the case alter the base rhythmic structure of the percussion exercises to work. For example if 8 on hand seems to slow use a triplet or 16th based variation on the exercise.

Specific Technical Things To Look For

Snares

Playing in the center of the head. If in the music it is defined to be played at the edge, over the guts etc. be sure all players have the same playing position for the most consistent sound possible.

Tenors

Minimize arm motion as much as possible. Do not play in the center of the heads but closer to the edge of each drummer nearest the performer. The basic motion from left to right on the drums should be fairly close to a straight line. Make sure that accents and taps are clearly delineated and not just a product of the changing pitches of the drums. Alternate between playing on drum 2 to work rhythmic and dynamic accuracy and then moving around the drums in their written patterns. Utilize patterns that commonly appear in the show music for their split parts on exercises.

Basses

Be sure everyone has a good sense of where the center of the head is. Get a good rotation out away from the drum to get a full sound. If playing halfway or at the edge for music reasons be sure this location is clearly recognized by the performers. The mallets should have an upward angle (around 45 degrees) to them when looked at from the instructors view with the head of the mallet in the center of the head. This will mean that the hands are closer to the bottom portion of the drum. Be sure bass drum exercises include moments of going back and forth between unison and split parts as they do in the show. It is often good to put actual split parts from the show music into the bass warmups so they are doing them daily.

The Front Ensemble

When it comes to the front ensemble they can either warm up by themselves or as a full ensemble with the battery. In many cases the basic front ensemble exercises can be adapted to fit with the battery exercises. One advantage to having the front warm up with the battery is it can be used to consistently work on their listening back to the battery for timing. In very few instances should the front be watching and playing with the drum majors hands so every opportunity to get them used to listening to the battery can be beneficial. I

highly recommend the book “Up Front” by Jim Ancona and Jim Casella (published by TapSPACE) for anyone whose ensemble uses a front ensemble. This book contains a myriad of exercises, technical breakdowns, writing examples and even care and maintenance tips for the front ensemble.

Front Ensemble Exercises

The front will need a warm up sequences that gets the hands moving while also dealing with the issues of moving around the keyboard in common patterns seen in the show music. You also want the front to work on playing in multiple key signatures. Make sure that for all exercises a timpani part is included as well if you use timpani in the front. The timpani exercises should including tuning (playing root notes and scalar patterns) and working to create a quality tone from the drums. Make sure that for both keyboards and timpani the stroke starts and stops from the same height (piston stroke).

Octaves

Most fronts will start with some form of exercise that works on moving up and down the keyboard in octaves using double stops. Often these are just basic scale patterns and can fit nicely over the first couple of warm ups in the battery sequence. Listen for: note accuracy (not compressing or expanding the interval). Make sure that the sound of each hand occurs at the same time and does not start to become a flam sound. Look for: the mallets always returning to where they start from. Be sure that students are not playing on the nodal points of the bar.

Green Scales

These are patterns taken from George Hamilton Green's “Instruction Course for Xylophone” and are very similar to “Kraus” scales used by many other instruments. Here the student is working on moving up and down the keyboard in alternating hand scale patterns. Listen for: note accuracy. Be sure that the sound of each hand is even and balanced and that there are no accents as the students move up and down the keyboard. Look for: an even height between hands. Also be sure the students are again avoiding the nodal points of the bars.

Spatial Exercise

This exercise is to work on the hands being able to expand outward in different directions on the keyboard. For example a pattern such as c-d-b-e-a etc. This can also be done chromatically. Many great exercises can be found in Gordon Stout's “Ideo-Kinetics Workbook.” Another way of doing this is expanding from a main note such as c-d-c-e-c etc and then going down as well. Listen for: Listen for: note accuracy. Be sure that the sound of each hand is even and balanced and that there are no accents as the students move up and down the keyboard. Look for: an even height between hands. Also be sure the students are again avoiding the nodal points of the bars.

Arpeggios

This exercise will work moving up and down the keyboard in patterns such as 3rds. Listen for: note accuracy. Be sure that the sound of each hand is even and balanced and that there are no accents as the students move up and down the keyboard. Look for: an even height between hands. Also be sure the students are again avoiding the nodal points of the bars.

Four Mallet Exercises

Block Chords

This exercise starts to set the foundation of 4 mallet technique. This can be done using actual chord progressions as well as using intervals of 4ths and 5ths in each hand. Be sure that the students are using a good piston stroke. Listen for evenness of all four notes. Be sure all notes are hitting at the same time and there is no flam sound. Look for: control over the mallets. Make sure all mallets are an equal height. Avoid hitting the nodal points.

Permutations

Typical permutations for marching percussion are 1-2-3-4, 4-3-2-1, 1-2-4-3, 4-3-1-2. The most common form of exercise for this alternates 8th notes and 16th notes on each pattern. Listen for evenness of all four notes. Be sure the students are not compressing the rhythmic spacing between the notes of each hand. Look for: control over the mallets. Make sure all mallets are an equal height. Avoid hitting the nodal points. Be sure that there is a good rotation of the forearm with each set of strokes.

Structure of a Typical Marching Percussion Rehearsal

Stretch and Warmup

1. Legatos
2. Accent Tap
3. Double/Triple Beat
4. Stick Control
5. Paradiddles
6. Rolls
7. Flams
8. Cadences or full ensemble exercises (often referred to as Lot Tunes)

Rehearsal of Specific Musical Sections

1. Have a written plan of what to rehearse before this segment starts. Many groups will focus their warmup around specific goals of this rehearsal segment as well.
2. Use a metronome.
3. Have the battery move their feet in the same count structure as the drill to make the music and marching line up together in their minds.
4. Break sections down to how specific battery and front ensemble parts might line up (such as the marimbas are in alignment with the tenors in a specific spot). This helps to clarify for the front ensemble what specific battery sections they are listening for in the music for timing.

5. Listen to individuals to be sure that the rhythmic interpretation as well as the sound produced by the instruments is consistent. 2 players can have the same stick heights but sound completely different.
6. If possible have the battery on the field working the drill at the same time as the music in this segment of the rehearsal block. This benefits the front ensemble greatly as they get a better idea of where the battery sound will be coming from on the field as they work to align with the battery. During this time have the metronome on the field behind the battery so that the tempo is coming forward at all times. Do not have the metronome on the front sideline!
7. Don't be afraid to make changes. If something is not working due to drill staging, alignment with the winds, inability of the players to perform it etc. it is better to change the part than spend all season trying to fix it. In addition, many times what works fine musically standing in a warmup arc does not really work at all when put into the drill! Be ready to adjust.
8. It is great if at least one drum major is at these rehearsals. This way the drumline gets a visual perspective of where they play in relationship to the beat but the drum major also gets a better understanding of what the drumline is playing. This will greatly help them to keep a full ensemble together more effectively!

It is important to note that really none of these ideas are original! They are the result of working with people like Ralph Hardimon, Glenn Crosby, Shawn Glyde, Wayne Bovenschen, Jon Weber, Bret Kuhn and more! I hope that this gives the novice marching instructor a starting point for reference as they begin to branch out into the ever increasing world of pageantry arts.

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