

A Few Helpful Hints for Improving Your Marching Percussion Program

By Tracy Wiggins

Director of Percussion

The University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Top 15 Judges Comments on the Percussion Tape

- 1) Bass drums are overbalancing the winds. This is very commonly a result of too much unison writing in the parts. This can also be technique related. Could also be caused by the drums being tuned too low, all to nearly the same pitch, or not muffled enough.
- 2) Lack of clarity within accent and tap passages. This is most commonly the result of the accent and tap notes being performed at the same stick height. Go for either 6" and 3" or 8" and 3" for better clarity.
- 3) Pit is playing ahead of the band. Most commonly this is a result of the pit watching the drum major (A BIG NO NO!) rather than listening to the winds and drums behind them.
- 4) Inconsistent approach to the double stroke. Most drumming boils down to single and double strokes and combinations in between (with occasional triple strokes). A regular part of every lines warm-up must be a double stroke exercise, including a roll exercise. Listen for EVERY stroke lining up exactly between players.
- 5) Problems with attacks. The drum line needs to have some sort of verbal timing element (e.g. the syllable dut) to make sure they attack together).
- 6) Small percussion section not really being effectively used. This one can be controversial, but if you only have a few students I would rather see them in the front ensemble playing keyboards, timpani, drumset, adding impacts etc. than as a battery (I would NOT score you down for this!). I feel it is sounder educationally this way, and they can make a better contribution to the overall product. Don't just ground them in the pit area while still playing battery parts either.
- 7) Book having problems fitting with the music. This can be a result of the percussion playing an incorrect style (i.e. not swinging swing, too rock-like in Latin etc.), the percussion parts being too busy (rests are a GOOD thing, but also be sure there are not too many notes for the tempo being performed), lack of dynamic contrast, and occasionally too easy (percussion should NOT play the exact same thing the entire show).
- 8) Too much emphasis on visuals. Visuals can be used to enhance the overall show, as well as for timing purposes but they should not be there just for their own sake. The music MUST come first.
- 9) Problems with balance within the percussion section. Most often the instruments that are lost are the tenors (too much bass and snare) and the front ensemble (especially mallets and timpani). This needs to be corrected from a distance. Most rehearsal or drum major podiums are too close to get a clear sense of balance. Another cause is often a player over (or under)playing their sound in relation to the rest of their segment.

- 10) Lack of impact from the percussion in the musical book. No, we don't want the percussion to overpower the winds at impact points. But, good and effective use of cymbals and concert bass drum can add more punch and actually make the winds sound louder.
- 11) Drill causing hearing/timing issues. Avoid forms with no back to them (i.e. V is bad, ^ is good). Often this is also a result of the players' feet being out of tempo with their hands. Have them mark time when performing their book and exercises to get used to feet and hands moving together.
- 12) Inconsistent sticking in battery. The battery players MUST use the same sticking within each segment. These should be written into their music and the accurate learning of these must be a prime issue.
- 13) Lack of definition between flams and double stops. Flams must have two defined heights between the grace note and accent note. Double stops will be even heights.
- 14) Pit needs to make more contribution to the musical ensemble. Often the front ensemble is just doubling the wind parts. This can help strengthen the ensemble sound at times, but more often they need to play more of a counter role to add interest and to avoid tuning issues.
- 15) Battery not listening back when up front. If it is not a drum solo and the battery is in the front of the field they should be listening back to the winds for tempo.

Additional Resources

Books

UP Front by Jim Casella and James Ancona – The ONLY book designed specifically to deal with the front ensemble. Includes exercises, technical descriptions, tips for arranging and more. TapSPACE Publications

Green Beats by Jim Casella – This is the Cavaliers instructional book. Covers all aspects of their technique from battery through pit. Tap Space Publications

Fresh Perspectives for the Modern Drumline by Jim Casella and Murray Gussek – Predecessor to Green Beats, focusing on the battery percussion technique of the Santa Clara Vanguard. TapSPACE Publications

Field Level by Mike Lynch and Scott Brown - From the 2x winners of the BOA National Grand Championships, Mike Lynch & Scott Brown (from Lassiter High School) have compiled this complete Band Director's Guide for the marching percussion section. This 216 page manual will guide you through every topic there is to help you & your percussionists build a well-balanced and competitive drum-line.

Included is a CD-Rom containing the music audio as well as printable PDF parts for the entire ensemble. Rowl-off Productions

The Cadets Approach to Marching Percussion, Ensemble Exercises and Musical Excerpts by Tom Aungst - Nestled within the publication are exercises crafted by Tom Aungst, including "Accent Tap," "Flam Builder," "Diddle Trip," "Alan," and "Noah's Diddits." Taking the play-along guide a step farther, musical excerpts include the "Latin Drum Fill" from Cadets 2003, "Machine" from Cadets 2005 and the "Bass Drum Solo" from Cadets 2006. Yea.org

Videos

The Cadets - Rehearsing the Contemporary Percussion Ensemble - Go inside the Cadets percussion ensemble and learn techniques not only helpful on the field or in the gym, but also instruction helpful inside and outside of rehearsals. Features the techniques used by Cadets percussion caption head Tom Aungst. Yea.org

Santa Clara Vanguard has produced several years of **Keepin Up with the Jonez!** videos. I highly recommend 2004. If your line plays matched grip 2005 is very good.

The Equipment We Use at UNCP

Yamaha Drums

Note: pitches specified will be somewhat relative depending on the sound and pitch range of the show. The most important thing is to have a consistent tuning scheme and a place to start.

14" Marching Snare Drum: top head tuned tight enough for the stick to rebound comfortably, without being so tight it becomes table like. Bottom head tuned a ½ or whole step higher or than the top head depending on the sound you like. Also be sure that the guts are all tuned to the same pitch. Top snare head tuned to A. 1 piece of tape across the guts will dry them out sufficiently. The snare drums are tilted as it is more ergonomically correct when playing traditional grip. Traditional grip on a flat drum creates extra muscular tension. The drum height should be even with the performers' waist. Evans Hybrid Heads

6, 10, 12, 13, 14" Marching Tenor Drums: intervals from top (10") down – minor 3rd, minor 3rd, major 2nd. 6" drum tuned as high as it can go. 10" Tuned to A. Drums should be set at a height just below the waist of the performer. Evans Corps Clear Heads

20, 22, 24, 26, 30" Marching Bass Drums: intervals tuned from top down –minor 3rd, major 3rd, major 3rd, perfect 5th. 18" tuned to A. Drums should be adjusted to a height that is at eye level. Evans MX 1 Heads

Yamaha Stadium stands for snares, tenors and basses.
All drums should have covers

From Bret Kuhn on Cavies Tuning:

Thanks for asking about the tuning scheme for the concert bass drums and the battery. We do have specific pitches for tuning all of the membrane instruments. The concert bass drums are 40" and are tuned to a C#, the batter head is a Fiberskyn III and the resonant side is white plastic. Often times people tune the concert basses too low and they don't resonate properly. As far as the battery goes, here is the tuning scheme for this past year. The snare tops are white max and tuned to an A and the bottoms are the 1/8" mil thin plastic/clear (SA-0314-TD) and they were tuned to a D#. With the tenors we used Suede Emperor Crimplock on everything except the shots and there we used the clear Emperors. The pitches are as follows- 14"-B, 13"-D#, 12"-F#, 10"-A, and for the two 6" shots the low was a B and the high was a D#. The bass drums used Ambassadors (BR-12XX-MP) for heads and were tune in perfect 4th's. 32"-D#, 28"-G#, 24"-C#, 20"-F#, 16#-B. We really strive to create a sonority with all of the battery voices and tuning changes from year to year depending on the musical needs of the group. I hope this helps and gets you thinking about what you want to hear from your drums.

Sabian Cymbals

19" HHX Synergy Cymbals with Leather Gambal Cymbal Straps (no pads)
1 bag per cymbal player

Innovative Percussion Sticks and Mallets

FSJC - Marching Snare Drum Stick
AS-MM Arena Series Marching Snare Stick
BR-6 Brushes with Metal Cap (similar to "Dreadlocks")
FT-1A Marching Tenor Mallet
TS-2 Marching Tenor Drumstick
FT-3 Soft Marching Tenor Mallet
FBX 1-5 Marching Bass Drum Mallet
FB 1-5S Soft Marching Bass Drum Mallet

For front ensemble I recommend the IP Jim Casella and James Ancona series, as well as their outdoor timpani mallets. Outdoor mallets will need to have more weight in order to project the sound.

Evans Heads

Note – Heads should be changed at the VERY least every season. The typical line should go through 2-3 sets of heads each year. The tenor line will be the section that goes through the most heads. The bass line should go through the least. Do not muffle any drums other than the bass drums.

14" Grey Hybrid Top Snare Drum Head
14" Hybrid bottom Snare Head
System Blue Tenor Heads
MX 1 Series Bass Drum Heads (these are pre-muffled heads)

We typically carry a cymbal bag containing one complete set of heads when we travel and rehearse.

Ear-Plugs

Everyone in the UNCP Drumline is required to use ear-plugs when performing and rehearsing. We utilized the Etymotic ER 20 plugs. These are an inexpensive version of the musicians' ear-plugs which reduce the sound at an equal level across the spectrum, as opposed to foam plugs that tend to eliminate the upper sound.

Arranging or (Re-Arranging) for the Modern Marching Percussion Ensemble

One thing that can make a huge difference in the quality of your marching percussion program is the quality of your arrangements. Your best option will always be to have the arrangements done specifically for your group. They can be done by an outside arranger that you hire, or by your percussion instructor. Whoever does the arranging though, it is key for them to know a few things first:

- 1) What is the show? Is it a custom arrangement or a rearrangement of a stock chart? What styles do all of the charts fall in to?

- 2) What is the size of the group? How many of each battery instrument? Is there a cymbal line? What front ensemble instruments are available? What sort of ethnic instruments does the school have available? Will the front ensemble be amplified (important as this could open up some more unusual instruments as possibilities)? How many players are there in the front ensemble? Is there a video or audio recording of the group from the previous year available to gauge talent? Will there be percussion instructors (and if so how many) with them regularly?

- 3) What is the ability level of the group? How is their ability to play the following: rolls; flams; flam accents; paradiddles and paradiddle-diddles; grid patterns? Are they rhythmically solid enough to handle some odd rhythmic figures or does it need to be rhythmically straight forward? What sort of crash techniques does the cymbal line know? How many front ensemble members can comfortably play four mallets? Does the timpanist have good tuning abilities, or at the least tuning gauges?

- 4) Specific points in the drill that the percussion might be in odd spacing or forms. Are there parts of the show where you do not want the battery to play? What are envisioned as the major musical impact points throughout the show? Is there a flow chart of the show available (highly recommended)?

Often schools will not have the luxury of a custom arrangement and will need to use a stock chart. These however can also be adjusted for each specific group. A few tips:

- 1) Look for places where the full battery seems to be playing for a long period of time in unison. See if one section could be removed to create a slightly different texture. Space in the arrangement is a good thing musically. Change the mallets or sticks the section is using to create new textures also. Try using a concert snare stick or some type of brush on the snares. Snares sticks can be a very effective sound change on tenors.
- 2) Look for repeated patterns where a new sticking could be devised to heighten the students' ability levels.
- 3) Many of these charts will be based more around orchestral rolls than open rolls. Change some of the rolls to open if it makes sense musically.
- 4) Many of these charts will have limited front ensemble parts. Use a flute part on the vibes, a trombone part on the marimba, and an edited tuba part on the timpani

to fill out the sound more. If you have a section in the winds that is slightly weaker adding that part to the front ensemble can also add a lot to the ensemble sound. Add more auxiliary instruments where appropriate, especially cymbals and concert bass drum for impacts, and ethnic instruments throughout.

- 5) Remove some of the unison bass drum parts (stock charts often have many). Save these for major impact points in the show. Also, adjust the parts for the number of bass drums you have. If the part is written for 4 and you have 5 split the #4 part between your 4th and 5th drum, or save drum 5 mostly to double unisons and impacts. If a rock or jazz show use drum 5 to simulate a drum set bass drum while the other 4 drums play the written part. This can be a very cool effect. If you have fewer drums than it is written for assign one player to cover 2 consecutive parts (i.e. player 1 plays 1 and 2, not 1 and 3. This would alter the pitch sequencing too much I believe).

Special effects in the front ensemble can be effectively utilized to help increase the overall General Effect (GE) of the show. A few common examples:

- 1) Suspended cymbal upside down on the timpani. Rolling on the cymbal can create an eerie, shimmering effect. Moving the pedal up and down can also glissando the pitch of the cymbal.
- 2) Bowing any instrument can be effective but metallic instruments (especially crotales and vibes) would be most effective outdoors. Amplification can also make this a more effective outdoor technique.
- 3) The marching machine is a set of small wooden blocks suspended from a frame. When this is played against a piece of wood (a desk, table or even concert bass drum shell) can effectively represent the sound of marching troops.
- 4) Metallic objects that can be effectively used outdoors include brake drums, propane tanks, oxygen tanks and more (be VERY careful to be sure the entire product is out of these tanks). Large, thin, metallic sheets can also be utilized to simulate the sound of thunder.
- 5) Try to have as wide a variety of cymbals in the front ensemble as possible. Utilize not just suspended cymbals but splash cymbals, ice bells, sizzle cymbals (can be simulated with a chain laid across a larger cymbal), Chinese cymbals and more. All of the major cymbal companies make a wide variety of sounds that can be used now. Also a collection of gongs and tam-tams in various sizes can add a lot of variety to the ensemble sound.
- 6) Use different varieties of drums if it fits in the show. Rope tuned snare drums can be very effective as can ethnic drums (ranging from African to Brazilian to Japanese Taiko drums). These can add a great authentic sound to the arrangements.

Finally, I think the most important key to any marching percussion arrangement is the voicing. Think of the battery percussion as an STB choir. The snares are the soprano voice, the tenors are the tenor voice and the basses are the bass voice. When writing, use this voicing as a guide to follow the wind parts. A very basic set of doublings is snares with trumpets, tenors with mellophones and bass drums with the tubas. This voicing can

help you to avoid having too thick of a texture throughout the show. In addition, think of the front ensemble in the same way with the xylophone and bells as the soprano, vibraphone as the alto, marimba as the tenor and timpani as the bass. The front ensemble should also be approached as a concert percussion ensemble in its' scoring. Thinking along these lines can help to guide the custom arrangement, or help to guide the adjustment of the stock arrangement.

Sample Marching Band Arrangement Flow Chart

Instrument	Intro (1-16)	Hit (17-18)	A(19-40)
<i>Winds</i>	Low, sustain, build	long tones, FF	rhythmic accomp
<i>Brass</i>	Echo, build	long tones, FF	trpt and mello Low rhythmic
<i>Battery</i>	soft groove, building	rhythmic fill, triplet	bass rhythm Tenor melody
<i>Pit</i>	sustained sound	impacts	counter
<i>Guard</i>	body movement	large flags	rifle feature

The Marching Percussion Ensemble Technique Program

It is very important that the line have time to warm-up and rehearse by itself on a daily basis. This is the only way to ensure that the students focus on technique regularly. I recommend having the front ensemble and battery warm-up and rehearse together as much as possible to create a cohesive ensemble sound. Have the battery moving their feet as much as possible to get used to their feet and hands moving in tempo together. I also recommend using a metronome regularly with the drumline to establish the correct tempo as they perform. The more in time they can play the easier it will be for the full band.

Stretch - It is important for the members of the line to properly stretch out the wrists, hands and fingers before starting to drum. This will help to loosen the muscles and get the blood flowing which can prevent injury from the repetitive stress of drumming.

553 – This exercise is used just to loosen the students’ hands and get the blood flowing to the muscles. Can also be used as an accent tap exercise by adding accents to the beginning of each grouping. Vary the number sequence from section to section to create more interest.

Flowbeat – This exercise begins to work the accent and tap height relationship, while continuing to loosen the players’ hands. Be sure accents are at 8” and taps at 3”. Also be sure that it “grooves”. Also look for the students squeezing the stick or overplaying the accents. All notes should be performed with the same approach to the drum. Front ensemble is practicing a basic double stop exercise to loosen muscles. Timpanist is working the basic legato stroke and tuning.

1-2-3 – This is a double stroke exercise. All notes should rebound off of the head and are performed with an equal touch and height to the stroke. Front ensemble can be performed as a 2 or 4 mallet exercise. Both ways it works double and single strokes. Timpani works staccato strokes and tuning.

Grid – This exercise is to work the accent tap relationship while alternating sticking. Again, look for an 8” accent and a 3” tap. The accents should not be struck any harder than the taps. Front ensemble works vertical movement around the keyboard. Timpani works tuning and legato stroke.

Tap Timing – This exercise is designed to teach accurate rhythmic interpretation throughout the ensemble. Front ensemble works rhythmic timing as well as vertical sixteenth motion around the keyboard. Timpani works combination of legato, staccato and roll strokes, in addition to tuning.

7/8 Paras – This exercise is designed to teach the students to perform paradiddles and paradiddle-diddles, the two most common diddle rudiments in marching percussion. Be sure that the accents are at 8” and the taps are ALL at 3”. Front ensemble works arpeggiated chords, either with 2 or 4 mallets. Timpani works tuning in larger intervals and staccato stroke.

Fred – This exercise begins to develop roll technique. It both isolates the doubles on both hands as well as covers 5 stroke and longer rolls. The sound should be even and consistent throughout the exercise. The triplet motion of the hands should never change (speed up or slow down) during the diddle figures. Front ensemble works arpeggiated 2 mallet motion through various keys. Timpanist works legato motions and tuning. For a little extra work try making the diddles buzzes to work buzz roll quality (and the fact that even when playing a buzz roll their hands must be moving in time together).

Flam Thang – Works flam control as well as any other rudiments we need to cover based on the book. Be sure that grace note is at 1” and the accents note at 8”.

For all battery sections the fulcrum of the stick is between the thumb and index finger. For the front ensemble the fulcrum is the back three fingers of the hand (this gives the mallets more weight into the instruments to help aid projection). The stroke should be a relaxed one, in which the performer is not over-squeezing the stick. All notes should be played with the same stroke. To get a fuller sound imagine the playing surface being one inch below where the head actually is located. This will teach the students to play “through” the head without over-playing the drum. Snare drum and bass drums should be played in the center of the heads (except in cases where a timbre or dynamic change is called for) while the tenors are played on the edge of the drum nearest the player.

“What is clean?” is another question that I am often asked. The textbook definition is everything played with the sticks striking the drum at the exact same time, at the exact same volume, with the exact same sticking (notice I didn’t say stick height but volume. Every player will produce a slightly different sound at the exact same height so we need to match volumes with our ears, not our eyes and especially not with a ruler!). From a player perspective I always knew I was playing clean when I could not hear myself in the line, but only heard the players around me. Listen for line to be exactly replicating what is on the page, with every section playing as though there is only one sound: the lines sound. No individuals should be sticking out of the sound. If they are, it’s dirty.