



Conceptual Show Design Formula: Ability + Concept = Design

Part 4: “Rhythmic Reinforcement: The Battery Designer”

By: Brad Buehring

Musicality First

After the wind and pit parts have been established, as the battery designer, I am next in the process. My approach to writing a battery book starts with musicality. How can I serve this piece of music? How can I adapt this piece to the marching idiom without taking anything away? How do I add drumline parts to some of the greatest compositions ever written? These pieces were complete when Shostakovich, Ellington or whoever wrote them without snares, quads, and basses. Improving upon these is a daunting task, and a process that must be approached with respect for the originals. Sometimes I am given an arrangement that may not be as strong. In some instances a customer has contracted drum parts from us for horn arrangements already written by someone else. Those arrangements may be lacking musicality that I may be able to enhance. Strange as it sounds, a well-crafted battery book can add musicality to a piece that is otherwise lacking. Many times the pacing of an arrangement is off. This can really destroy a show and can wreak havoc with general effect scores. This can be corrected with careful orchestration in the battery parts, changing the flow of the tune and contributing to impacts during key points. The students are first musicians, not just drummers. We must provide them with musical parts to play.

Mapping Ideas

Before writing, I map out ideas for each section of an arrangement. There are many different ways to score a piece and there isn't always a right or wrong answer. So many kinds of support are possible. Do I want to transcribe the rhythms from the other parts, or use ostinato support? The battery parts generally need to be something both the hornline and pit can latch onto and relate to their parts. Sometimes a little counterpoint is called for and I will write the drums against the prevailing rhythms. This must be handled carefully and not overdone. I also like to dovetail the sections of the battery and weave the parts in and out of one another. The effect of this is twofold – on one hand the orchestration comes to the forefront and there are great opportunities to demonstrate some nice musicality; on the other, by not always scoring the entire battery together you end up with less notes for the performers to learn while still having the right amount of measures in your score. This helps because, of course, there never seems to be enough time to teach the book.

Supporting Figures

Another important consideration is support for the horn and pit score. A hornline can be made to sound better with appropriate drum parts. The drums can add crucial articulation to woodwind runs and more impact to brass hits. They can also cover up deficiencies in this area. Though this is all common sense, it must be approached skillfully. The drumline can easily become an overbearing timbre if not scored carefully. Solid drum parts combined with proper field staging will make an ensemble hold together much better, eliminating most ensemble tears. The pre-existing originals are my greatest guide in writing the drum score. I find myself constantly going back to find figures from the horns to use in solo sections or in impact phrases where the horns are holding long notes. Tying together previous material and weaving critical

motives back through the music gives more cohesion to the show. This of course is Composition 101, but is neglected in many battery books.

Orchestration

Reflecting foreground and background material in the drum parts often works out nicely as well. If you can catch the clarinet melody with the snares, the mellophone counter melody with the quads, and the low brass ostinato with the bassline at the same time and not have it sound too thick, you get a very cohesive sound from top to bottom. Earlier approaches to battery writing had the entire battery playing the exact same rhythms from beginning to end. Scoring the battery tutti definitely has its place (impacts, behind big fat horn chords, etc.), and I do use this technique frequently. Still, I want to hear variety in orchestration at times. The arranger has not thought musically if he or she has just written the snare part all the way through, cut and pasted that into the quad and bass lines, and then moved the notes up and down.

Know the Ability Level

One of the most important considerations is the ability level of the players. You can have the best notes in the world, but if your group can't play them, they will sound terrible. Conversely, if your kids are not challenged or do not enjoy the parts that they are given, they won't be excited about playing and will become bored easily in rehearsal... and you don't want a bunch of bored drummers on your hands. The most challenging task for the arranger is to write great sounding, fun parts for a group that is only at a beginner/intermediate ability level. It is often easier to write a difficult, intricate book than to write something interesting for a younger or inexperienced line. With a world-class ensemble you can write anything that you can think of. With the young line, your palette is much more limited. Most of the time, that's what you see: a line that is in way over its head, or a line just playing lame parts that the arranger obviously put little thought into.

The Pulse Productions Difference

I start my writing process by analyzing the horn and pit parts. Mike and Dan usually leave me notes clarifying their intentions with certain parts. Mike has usually structured the piece very tightly and has already envisioned drum transitions, silences and sometimes a certain orchestration beforehand. Having written together for a while, we usually know what the other is thinking anyway. It always adds more difficult writing with someone whose style you are not familiar with. As an arranger, it definitely helps me to work with guys who I am comfortable.

Conclusion

The bottom line is – don't blow off your battery arrangements. The drumline musical score is an integral part of what makes a marching band a marching band. So much can be added or fixed or even covered up if you have the right notes on the page from the beginning. Quality arrangements can teach your kids about things that we also value in the concert hall, such as touch and musicality. The right parts will challenge your students and keep them interested. They can hold your band together and make it easier for the horns to play in time. Take advantage of the benefits of a well written arrangement.

Coming Soon: Part 5: "Setting the Stage: The Drill Designer"

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Brad holds a Bachelor's Degree in Percussion Performance and is currently obtaining his Masters in Music Composition Degree from the University of Louisville. He performs regularly with the New Music Ensemble, University Orchestra, Wind Symphony, and Percussion Ensemble. Brad has had an extensive career performing with many outstanding ensembles within the marching medium. Many of these include such groups as the Music City Mystique Indoor Drumline of Nashville, TN, the Colts Drum and Bugle Corps of Dubuque, IA, and the Phantom Legion Drum and Bugle Corps of Rockford, IL. Brad has acted as an arranger, designer, consultant, and educator for several high schools, drum corps, independent indoor ensembles, and the Yamaha Sounds of Summer Camp. He has acted as the Bass Drum technician, Music Director, and Percussion Co-Caption Head for the Americanos Drum and Bugle Corps of Menasha, WI. As an active member of the Vic Firth education team, Brad works as the Percussion Director for Eastern High School in Louisville, KY as well as the Percussion Caption Head for the West Athens Indoor Drumline of Sellersburg, IN while performing other freelance percussion work and teaching throughout the Louisville area.