Creating a Marching Percussion Ensemble as it Relates to the HOLISTIC MUSIC ENSEMBLE

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GOAL:

TO CREATE A HOMOGENOUS, CLEAR, BLENDED ENSEMBLE COLOR WHERE THE SUM OF THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE PARTS.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH CREATES CLARITY OF INTENT WITHIN THE MUSIC ENSEMBLE.

ENSEMBLE CLARITY IS BASED ON:

1) COMPOSITION AND ORCHESTRATION
2) VERTICAL ALIGNMENT
3) BALANCE

COMPOSITION AND ORCHESTRATION

3-DIMENSIONAL COMPOSITION…BRASS, BATTERY AND FRONT ENSEMBLE CONTRIBUTING EQUALLY

MORE COMPOSERS ARE TREATING THE FRONT ENSEMBLE AS A THIRD CHOIR OR VOICE….AND SHOULD!

CREATING AN ENSEMBLE FRIENDLY FRONT ENSEMBLE
1) Keep it simple 2 or 3 lines at the most during busier ensemble moments. This generates clarity. Too many musical ideas going on at once will contribute less to the overall ensemble. Mallet selection is key. Don't always go for a dark sonority and vice versa. Let the music make the choice for you. Experiment with people playing the same musical line in different octaves with different mallets. Rule of thumb is the lower the partial on the instrument, the denser the mallet.

2) Pick and choose your battles concerning busier compositional ideas. Save them for when the pit is being featured and wind scoring is thin.

3) Try to refrain from doubling wind parts all the time…including timpani. The use of ostinato and even silence can create new colors and textures.

4) Be careful with cymbal sounds. Take heed of colors needed, volume…etc. Don't just reach out and play "any" cymbal. Unison cymbal work can quickly overbalance an ensemble.

CREATING AN ENSEMBLE FRIENDLY BATTERY PERCUSSION
1) Music <u>always</u> dictates the direction

2) Make sure the battery writing is always complimentary to the musical idea being presented by the whole. Realize when percussion are the accompianment and when they are the melody in regards to horizontal and vertical construction.

3) Watch density as it relates to the musical line. Moments of lighter, accompianment playing gives perspective to denser orchestration when the brass have a sustained note(s) or rest(s). This also presents a larger compositional vocabulary and can open up doors to new textures, colors and effects.

4) Don't always write the snares with trumpets. Experiment…Create space by melding different voices, i.e. snares and tubas, or bass drums and trumpets.

<u>VERTICAL ALIGNMENT</u>

THE GROUP MUST OBVIOUSLY PLAY TOGETHER. START BY DEFINING THE VERTICAL ROLE OF EACH SECTION, IN EACH MUSICAL PHRASE. YOU CAN ADD IN CHOIRS FRONT TO BACK, FROM THE 50-YARD LINE OUT, OR A COMBINATION OF BOTH.

1) FEET! FEET! FEET! If the feet are not in time, the group will not play in time.

2) Some players may have to watch, some anticipate, while others listen…there is no exact formula be willing to do all 3 at any time. One way to figure out anticipation is to have the conductor conduct and have the target choir play quarter notes to what they SEE from the conductor. The gap YOU hear front field is the anticipatory gap. That gap is how "on top" the ensemble needs to be regarding the conductor's ictus. Example, If the choir is near the center X, at mm=196, the anticipation in regards to the ictus is about an 8^{th} note. The drumline AND winds should be ready to "dut" at any given time to clarify the ensemble. Example, the baritone player furthest back in the form "duts" for the baritone choir entrance.

3) Have the winds bop to line up wind attacks.

4) Have the percussion play 8th notes with the winds in the drill to hear exactly which sections are rushing/dragging.

5) Ask the front ensemble not to play in order to better hear what is happening on the field. Eventually add them in player by player.

*** The front ensemble should almost always listen back and never watch the drum major. Exceptions would be during a pit feature or if the front ensemble is starting a production. It's usually good for them during long phrases to periodically look up at the DM as a point of reference.**

<u>BALANCE</u>

ONCE EVERYTHING IS VERTICALLY ALIGNED, BALANCE SHOULD BE THE EMPHASIS. THE PERCUSSION SHOULD USUALLY BE CONTAINED WITHIN THE BRASS TEXTURE… NOT NEXT TO WHICH CREATES A TIMBRE ARGUEMENT.COMPLIMENTARY PLAYING DOES NOT NESCESSARILY MEAN EQUAL. THERE SHOULD BE A LEAD LINE AND A SECONDARY LINE. PERCUSSION IN MOMENTS OF ENCOMPASSING THE SECONDARY LINE SHOULD USUALLY BE FELT, NOT HEARD…YOU DON'T KNOW IT'S THERE, BUT IF IT WASN'T, YOU'D MISS IT. TOUCH, TUNING AND SOUND SHOULD GRAVITATE TOWARDS THE TIMBRE OF THE WINDS AT ANY GIVEN MUSICAL MOMENT…FROM DARK TO BRILLIANT.

TUNING
1) Be pitch specific. Daily, defined pitches in the battery and pit membranes (concert toms, concert bass) allow you to continually refine the blend day to day.

2) Tune your instruments to enhance the brass.

SOUND
1) The percussion musical contribution begins with the implement. Example, I prefer snare sticks pitched at F between 88-96 grams and are very adamant about it. This is the beginning of getting a great sound out of the instrument.

2) Don't overplay the instrument or distort. Touch and sensitivity are both key in producing a great sound. A great battery sonority AT ALL TIMES is conducive to a homogenous, clear blend with the winds.

3) Because of staging, be willing to change any heights/volume to maximize ensemble blend.

MAKE SURE YOU ARE GETTING BACK AND AWAY WHEN BALANCING ALL THE ENSEMBLE VOICES. (Think of the judges in the stadium box.) TRY TURNING YOUR BACK TO THE ENSEMBLE DURING A PERFORMANCE OR CLOSING YOUR EYES AND JUST LISTENING. TRY WATCHING JUST THE BARITONE OR TRUMPET SECTION FOR A WHOLE PRODUCTION. CAN YOU HEAR EACH VOICE ALL THE TIME? IS THE MELODY OBVIOUS? ARE THE COMBINED ELEMENTS BALANCED AND BLENDED? NEVER BE SATISFIED WITH THE BLEND. KEEP WORKING ON DISTILLING THE SOUND UNTIL THE MUSICAL INTENT IS PERFECTLY OBVIOUS 100% OF THE TIME.