



Conceptual Show Design Formula: Ability + Concept = Design

Part 2: “A Musical Outline: The Winds Designer”

By: Michael Fogarty

1. Preparations:

Picking up from where we left off, the **Pulse Productions** show-writing process begins with designing the winds score. Before we begin any writing, we request a profile of the group we are working with. This includes full instrumentation, and a number rating given to each section of the band. This number tells us the skill level and ability associated with each section. During this time it is also helpful to know of any soloists or sections that you would like to showcase in the program.

2. Setting the Stage:

As the winds designer, the show music choices and concepts are my main concern. Before any writing begins, I spend a great deal of time with the original recordings. I do plenty of listening. I also push pause on the music and do some brainstorming – elaborating on the show concept, thinking through transitions, etc. I try to piece the whole show together in the “mind’s ear”. I decide which excerpts of the original pieces I want to use, choosing the “best parts” of the pieces and the key themes. I choose sections with high energy and some softer moments as well. Next I edit and compile the various excerpts into one track using audio software such as Audacity (free download). This helps give a definite idea of the timing of the show. All the while, I continue listening to the originals and continue trying to map them out in my ear including the percussion transitions. I decide where to add impact moments, where to extend phrases, where to feature certain sections or where to contrast colors. I also try to expound upon the visual and conceptual ideas of the program. I imagine some big drill moments and other “gimmicks” that will define the show and where they can fit into the musical program.

3. A Blank Score:

Now I am finally ready to sit down and write. If there is a score available of the original, I get my hands on it. I continue to live closely with the recordings. An initial important decision when beginning to write pertains to the key. I stick with comfortable key signatures for band. I also take into consideration brass ranges, and at what point in the piece we will reach the top of that range. Then I set the key around that information. Again, tempos are very important in marching band. There has to be energy generated from the tempo. Moreover it is tough for battery writers to write interesting material in awkward tempos.

I keep a few mental and written mantras by my side through the entire process. 1. What are the main theme(s) of this tune and of the entire show that I can quote in big hits or transitions? It is always enjoyable for the listener to be able to recognize and follow a theme through the show, intertwining an entire package into a cohesive unit. 2. Transitions are important. Sometimes I go through many drafts when writing transitions to be sure I have found the most clear and flowing idea possible. 3. Make the most out of building to the big moments. Tension and release makes for great music. I stretch out the building phrase as long as I can through rhythmic extensions, false cadences, and silence – anything to make that arrival at the hit a glorious moment. 4. Beginnings and endings are most important. These are your first and last impressions. I work to find creative ways to begin the show and look for the best ways to tie it all together in the end. 5. Let the show

concept and overall effect dictate writing decisions, not the original tune itself. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the details of the way a certain piece “goes” that we forget about the overall picture of where it’s “going”. I insert big moments to add excitement. I trim up phrases to minimize length. The musical arrangements must serve the show concept and continuity.

4. Music Design:

In the measure-to-measure process, there are some tools that I use to guide me along the way. Being a band director by trade, I am very familiar with comfortable ranges and the timbres of the different registers of each instrument. So I know just what sound I will get if I write **all** the clarinets on a C above the staff, or the typically sluggish character of the low brass attempting 8th notes in their low registers. I like to utilize woodwind colors in marching band. When written correctly, the woodwinds can add a sparkle to your sound, and can achieve beautiful soli moments by themselves. I keep away from long sustained passages. I understand typical high school marching band stamina, and I don’t keep the low brass holding out whole notes for 32 bars. I add in a couple beats for a big breath here and there. I vary up textures to give sections a rest and others a chance to shine.

Speaking of shining moments, I will throw in a word here about “ballads”. Too many bands fall into the cookie-cutter show style of fast-slow-fast, with a lovely written ballad in the middle. Unfortunately, it is tough for many groups to do those lovely ballads justice. To perform that type of piece as intended, your students must have incredible control, support, maturity, and, in fact, athleticism. I urge band directors to think about using that middle portion of their program for what I call a “production number”, or something light that still does not require the kind of maturity needed for a typical ballad. Feature a soloist with the pit during that time, or just the pit by themselves. Pick a tune that is down-tempo, but not quite a whole-note ballad. In summary, be careful of those sustained chorale-like tunes. They are so much tougher than they seem.

Now back to scoring. As I continue through the piece, I look at ways to simplify tough rhythms to make them easier to read and play by students, while still keeping the integrity of the original line. I explore ways to double, but I also vary those choices as the piece goes on. I don’t simply copy the mellophone line into the alto sax staff and call that doubling... I look for ways to feature star soloists or ensemble sections, all the while very aware of the timing of the program.

5. Finishing Touch – The Pulse Productions Difference:

Being the first step in the **Pulse Productions** creative process, I communicate frequently with the other writers on the team throughout. I bounce ideas off of them and get some basic groundwork laid before I even begin writing. While I am working on the score, I add actual text boxes into the pit or battery staves so the percussion designers know exactly what my intentions are at various sections. I will sketch out keyboard ostinatos or accompaniments, and notate important unison rhythms I want in the battery. I write in important staging ideas for when I need to halt an ensemble feature or when we can create some visual velocity. And then once I send it off, we are again in communication. That is the one of the best parts about **Pulse Productions** - the teamwork. We are the same group of people who have written show after show together. So there is an incredible amount of continuity between the musical and visual package that you cannot get from any independent contractor. And of course, when I compose, I am writing to your specifications and to your band’s ability. You cannot find attention to customization like that anywhere else.

Coming Soon: Part 3: “Color and Character: The Front Ensemble Designer”