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Spring 2012

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Recommended Citation

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Alison Heleen
Senior Thesis

Rehearsing, Arranging, and Drill Writing for Bands of Any Size

Having a marching band is one of the more expensive and time-consuming aspects of any music program, but can also be one of the most rewarding elements of the music department. Every season, marching bands large and small work with their students to put on the best performance on the field. Factors like musical ability, technique, level of difficulty, and crowd preference all come into play when selecting a show. Whether the band has fifteen members or four hundred members, the band director must do his/her best to ensure the best show possible. To do so, the band director must provide the students with the best musical arrangements, marching drill, and rehearsal technique possible.

As a graduate of a 40-person band, I have always been interested in learning about how other schools perform and rehearse bands of various sizes. I have seen bands of 15 march on a field, and I have seen bands of 400 march on a field. In other areas of the country, the bands of 400 are more common than the smaller bands of 15-20. Most common in the New Hampshire area are the bands in between. Using Sibelius and Pyware 3D Software, I have set out to write drill and arrangements for bands of various sizes. This paper, based on my personal experiences and the experiences of local New Hampshire band directors, addresses the major concerns of beginning band directors and contains my thoughts on the best ways to approach arranging, drill writing, and rehearsing an ensemble regardless of its size.

Arranging

Instrumentation is the single most important factor to consider when arranging music for any ensemble. An arranger needs to carefully consider which musicians or sections are best suited for the melodies and harmonies of the piece. Knowing instrumentation ahead of time is a big advantage for the arranger. It is very easy to assign the melody to the trumpet section all the time, because trumpets tend to be the most audible instruments on the field; however, if the trumpet section is much weaker than other sections, it may be better to assign most of the melody elsewhere. Assuring that all parts are interesting and playable is also important. And, naturally, these challenges are more or less difficult depending on the size and ability of the band.

Arranging for a small band (15-30 members) is possibly the most difficult of all arranging challenges. In a small band, each part is important. On top of this, small bands can have less-than-ideal instrumentation. This means that each player, freshman to senior, plays an integral role in the success of the ensemble. The director must not overestimate young players, but must also help them to become confident playing independent parts (especially in the low brass and bass section, which, unfortunately, tends to have the fewest players).

Still, successfully arranging for a very small band is possible. When doing my arrangement for a band of fifteen, I found that using a four-part vocal score was very effective in the organization of my arrangement. The simple structure of a four-part vocal score suits a small band. The melody can be doubled easily, and the harmonies are often simplified. In short, it is easy to cover each part adequately and, often, make sure that each part has an interesting part at some point during the arrangement.

A four-part vocal score can also work well for a bigger band (80+ members). Here, the arranger has more freedom to include melodic and harmonic lines that may not be included in the original vocal score. Bigger bands can also more equally distribute the melody among the band. With a band of 80+, there will probably be more than one particularly strong section that can be featured. Arrangers should attempt to make each part interesting for each player, and should be able to add in melodic and harmonic lines that are not necessarily in the original score. Here is the place for additional instrumental lines that appear in original recordings, or

some compositional elements introduced by the arranger him/herself.

A medium-sized band (30-80 members) works much like a bigger band, though more attention must be paid to orchestration and instrumentation of the band. Arrangements for a medium-sized band can include additional parts beyond the four-part harmonies present in a vocal score. Still, the additional parts may not be as intricate or important as in a larger band. Melodic distribution is important to a medium-sized band. Stronger players and sections should still be assigned important parts to help the ensemble's performance.

Various options are available for the purchase or creation of arrangements. Many band directors choose to undertake the task of arranging for their band on their own. In many ways, this makes sense, as the band director will know the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and sections better than anyone else. However, arranging for a band of any size often demands extra work and time on the part of the band director. A director may not want to take on this additional stress. Salem High School, a competitive marching band from Salem, NH, uses a professional arranger to ensure that their show music is the best it can be. If there is room in the budget, this is not a bad idea, as the band director can work with the professional to accommodate for the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble.

If the director does not want to do his/her own arrangement, and cannot afford a professional arranger, professionally written stock charts are also an option. These professionally written arrangements are available online, and are usually excellent for bands that play in the stands during football games. The downside to these stock charts is that the arrangement may not necessarily be good for that specific band. These arrangements are typically written for ideal bands, with equal instrumentation in all parts. They can be altered, if necessary. Some publishers also offer pre-written arrangements for smaller bands, if the band chooses to go that route. Stock charts may also be advised against in competitive bands. Marty Claussen, director of the Salem High School Marching Band, says that their major criticism on the competitive circuit was that the arrangements they chose to use were not specifically written for their band. This is why they now use a professional arranger.¹ On the other hand, Dover High School does use stock charts and competes on a local level, with generally good results.² The decision really depends on the band, the quality of the existing stock charts, and what the band can afford.

As an arranger, I have benefitted from the use of both a four-part choral arrangement and a piano-vocal score. The two arrangements of "In My Life" (written for small and large bands) are based off of a four-part choral arrangement, which helped me to select chord tones and distribute the melody throughout parts. In the small band arrangement, it was important to me to assign some part of the melodic line to each instrument. In the larger band, I focused less on assigning a melodic line and more on making sure that each part had something interesting to play. The arrangement of "Anything Goes" for medium-sized band was a challenge for me. This arrangement was based on a piano-vocal score, but included some of my own edits. I struggled with making the arrangement my own and creating transitions between sections of music. Overall, I think I would benefit from more practice with arranging. I had difficulty making sure that each arrangement was interesting, and was not a direct orchestration of the original.

Drill Writing

Drill writing is a complicated aspect of marching band that amateur marching band directors will inevitably struggle with. Writing drill that is interesting, executable, and logical is a challenge for bands of any size. The program most commonly used for drill writing is Pyware

¹ Marten Claussen, interview by author, Salem, New Hampshire, 9 February 2012.

² Michele Boulanger, interview by author, Dover, New Hampshire, 17 September 2011.

3D, a complicated computer program that takes practice to master. Fortunately, writing for any band size will give the director the experience necessary to improve as a drill writer.

Small band drill-writing is a great place for a beginning drill writer to start. Working with 15 to 20 band members can help beginning writers become comfortable with the basic tools of Pyware 3D or other drill-writing software, especially the morph and push tools that are so important in drill writing. It is easy with such a small group to ensure that no marchers collide--a basic challenge for a beginning writer. However, it is difficult to write interesting drill for an ensemble of this size. There are only so many patterns that can be used. Another factor when writing for a small band is the amount of field space that can be used during a field show. In a band of 20, it does not make sense to spread the musicians out from end zone to end zone. Most small bands use a reduced field size—for example, in between the two 30 yard lines and between the hash marks and the sideline. That being said, there is no reason that a small band cannot march drill of some sort. The drill can still be interesting--just not quite as interesting as that of a bigger band.

Large band drill-writing takes practice. Writing for a large band presents challenges at the basic level, such as making sure that marchers are not colliding. The results, however, can be well-worth the practice required of the drill writer. Drill for larger bands can be difficult, but can be very interesting. The band will be able to use more of the field, and sets will become more detailed and defined. If the band gets especially large, drill writing can become even more challenging. Bands like Londonderry High School or the University of Massachusetts contain hundreds of members, and frequently utilize the entire field in drill writing. This means that the band director has more to worry about on a basic level. Each member of the band requires attention from the drill writer. Naturally, as the amount of band members grows, more attention needs to be paid to the details. Writing perfect drill becomes more difficult.

Medium-sized bands offer the most potential for growth for a beginning drill writer. Medium bands allow the drill writer to create interesting sets while managing each individual band member and section. The drill writer is also given more freedom to experiment. New tools can be used within the drill-writing software to make drill more interesting. As bands get larger, it becomes easier to place musicians in appropriate areas based on their parts. Sections with the melody can be placed closer to the front of the field. In general, it is easier with medium-sized and larger bands for the music and drill to come together--an advantage when trying to write the best show possible.

After writing three separate drills for this project, I have experienced the advantages and disadvantages of each size of band. Personally, I am thankful that I began my drill writing with a small band of 16 members. This drill allowed me to become comfortable with Pyware 3D and make basic shapes without any major concerns. After I finished the small band drill, I moved on to the big band drill, writing for a band of approximately 120 members. The larger band drill is based on the smaller drill. My larger drill used many other features of Pyware 3D (such as the rotate tool), and it was obvious at some points that I was experimenting with the program. When it came to the medium-sized drill, I felt more comfortable using different tools of the software and experimenting to make the drill look interesting. I felt free to try new techniques such as "pass-throughs" and rotations.

Not one of these drills is perfect by any means. The most important lesson I have learned about drill writing is that every drill is its own puzzle. I still struggle with making sure that sections stay together and that collisions do not occur. Factors like spacing and step sizes need to be addressed as well. As with any other program, practice is the only way to improve your skills in Pyware 3D. I feel that my drill writing improved as I experimented more with the program, and I think that my writing will improve more in time.

Rehearsal Techniques

Rehearsing each size of band provides a different set of challenges for the band director. A smaller band provides many advantages in the way of rehearsal. It is easy for a small band director to address the needs of each individual student. Technique can be readily fixed, and each student will easily understand the impact of an individual on the group as a whole. Weak marchers need to work harder to become stronger marchers, and stronger marchers need to be willing to help the weaker members of the band so that rehearsal is as productive as possible. Once a show is learned, problems may be easily addressed and remedied. Run-throughs may be all the band needs to be performance-ready.

A larger band can lead to problems for the band director. It is difficult to make sure that all members of the band are focused on learning drill or performing when there are 80 or more members. In this situation, a band director would benefit from the use of student leaders. Drum majors and section leaders can address the technique of a band, and help individuals with memorization and marching ability. Student-run sectionals can be helpful in recognizing and solving problems as well as helping to develop section camaraderie. In well-established bands, professional and local help can be used effectively to create a better band. Salem High School uses former band members to help teach its current members. These community members offer private lessons and run sectionals. This helps the Salem band remain well-established within the town, and keeps alumni involved in the activities of the band.³

Interestingly, the medium-sized bands I interviewed tended to involve more student leaders than Salem. Bands that perform at competition shows, such as Dover and Portsmouth, use section leaders to great effect.⁴ Dover also uses members of the community to help with marching, percussion, and colorguard technique.⁵ Non-competitive Laconia also uses student leaders. Much of band camp is organized by the band council and section leaders.⁶ Medium bands balance the one-on-one attention of a small band and the section/community aspects of a large band. The needs of each student can be addressed while the ensemble as a whole is rehearsed.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of my thesis, I feel that I have learned a lot about how to effectively write for and rehearse a marching band. I have gotten words of advice from current band directors, and, most importantly, I have taken a hands-on approach to learn how to be a better future band director. Drill writing and arranging take practice, and I am confident that my experiences with this thesis will help me in the future.

No two bands will ever be the same. Instrumentation and number are not critical factors if the band is properly written for and rehearsed. Regardless of the size of the band, a director should focus on producing the best arrangement, writing the best drill, and rehearsing the ensemble effectively.

³ Claussen.

⁴ Eric Gagnon, interview by author, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 25 February 2012.

⁵ Boulanger.

⁶ Deborah Gibson, interview by author, Laconia, New Hampshire, 12 April 2012.

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