



Conceptual Show Design Formula: Ability + Concept = Design

Part 5: “Setting the Stage: The Drill Designer”

By: Ted Reicher

Relating Past History with Current Goals

The show has been chosen, music arranged, recordings made and now it’s time to start the visual design. Mike, Dan, and Brad have sent me scores and recordings, as well as visual and staging ideas. Where do I start? First and foremost, I like to speak with the new client personally in order to gain a better understanding of the specific needs and requirements regarding their program. As a former band director of 21 years, I have seen many bands attempt visual designs that their fundamental abilities did not allow for successful performance and execution. I need to understand the program’s past history with drill design. What are the color schemes I can draw from, or are we able to explore new color pallets for a better effect regarding this particular show? What are the current goals for the year? What are the marching strengths within the program?

Mapping Ideas

Before any design begins, it is my responsibility to:

1. Determine the current level of visual expertise of the performers and staff through dialogue and past visual recordings.
2. Assess the direction of the program in relation to competitiveness, staff expectations and community support.
3. Gather information in relation to the use of props, auxiliary abilities, past amount of drill sets used and age of the band – be it freshman heavy, senior heavy, etc.

I collect this information along with a fairly accurate estimate of instrumentation numbers. This is important for staging. My drill is not just a collection of dots. I want to allow all the musical lines to be heard. Once I have a good understanding what the performers can handle and what the direction of the program is, then I am finally able to begin the visual design process.

Revisiting the Scores and Recordings

The first step is to sit down with scores and recordings and just listen, letting shapes and ideas form in my head. After 2-3 three listening sessions I begin to make notes in the scores – where the phrase breaks are, who the primary voices are, the secondary voices, what is coming up. I need to know what section to feature visually and musically as well as how to go about this effectively. I also need to consider what I will be setting up, etc. For instance, if there is a low brass voice that is predominant, then the line moves to upper winds, and finishes with percussion then I may need to move the elements on the field to stage their sound combined with the pictures or settings in my sketch. However, I also need to understand if the section even needs much movement or if it is a section that deems more appropriate to be visually relaxing. Once this process is finished, I establish where I hear and see the visual “effects” that bring the visual design its “wow” moments. This is an important step in that a visual design

needs its moments to breath. By creating moments of visual relaxation, I am able to provide greater importance to the big visual effect moments that now have the chance to shine.

Bringing the Ideas to Life

Finally it's time to plot the ideas. Designing for a marching band today is different than when I designed for marching bands 20 years ago. I input the drill into the computer for a cleaner and more comprehensive output. This also allows me new abilities to see things first hand rather than imagining what something may look like from various levels. This gives me a better understanding of potential problem areas before the project is complete. I use Pyware 3D to bring my visual designs to life, syncing the music to the drill, spending time in the perspective window to make sure the individual design elements are readable throughout the drill as well as making sure the drill "flows". I consider my drills to be fairly "organic". In other words, the flow of each move begins in the previous move and moves to the next while individual elements motivate other elements in a logical and progressive manner to culminate at the "effect" moment.

The Pulse Productions Difference

Open communication is vital to the success of each project. Really understanding the level of the program from the past to the present as well as understanding future goals dictate my focus of each design. Keeping the drill concise and complete is important. I provide quite a bit of information in text boxes on each page regarding halts, visual opportunities, mark times, etc. rather than have multiple pages that contain the same picture but one new direction per page. Understanding the musical intent from Mike, Dan, and Brad creates a more cohesive package when I begin to plot the visual ideas. Obviously there is far more to consider in a successful visual design than what I've talked about here in this article. This is an over simplification of the process. Though, hopefully this will give you a good starting point and with the help of experienced designers your program can benefit greatly!

Coming Soon: Part 6: "Character and Plot: The Guard Designer"

Author

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Ted Reicher has been writing and teaching drill for competitive bands, drum corps, and winter guards for over 20 years. For several years he acted as the Director of Bands and Chairman of the Music Department at Davenport Central High School in Davenport, IA. Under Mr. Reicher's direction, the marching band, three concert bands and jazz bands at Central received straight Division I ratings at the Iowa High School Music Association Festivals. Central's Marching Blue Devils is the only band from Iowa to compete in the Bands of America Grand National and Regional Championships. Mr. Reicher is an active composer and arranger, and maintains a private brass studio for students in the Quad Cities area. He is active in the Iowa Bandmasters Association, Southeast Iowa Bandmasters Association, the International Trumpet Guild, and is sought after as a clinician for marching bands throughout the Midwest. On the side, Mr. Reicher is an avid golfer, carrying a scratch handicap for anyone looking for a game!