



Conceptual Show Design Formula: Ability + Concept = Design

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

By: Dan Duffield

Section Evolution

The front ensemble (pit) is rapidly growing in aptitude, size, and importance to the overall show design. Electronics and amplification can enhance even more musical possibilities than thought possible a short time ago. The pit helps create moods in music as well as highlight visual ideas with unique sound colors and timbres. However, the pit is also likely the most diverse group of students in your band with the widest range of individual ability levels. There are extremely talented percussion students in this section who seek to study percussion in college. Some are non-percussion students who play an instrument uncommon to marching band such as bassoon, oboe, or piano. Then there are students in this section who struggle with simple rudiments, have little to no keyboard skills, and/or cannot march. Depending on how wide this range is in your ensemble will dictate a set-up. One, to allow easy access in moving around freely for an extremely wide range of ability, or another that is tight and intimate where each individual student is located on one instrument for a more comprehensive ensemble. Ability and set-up are two main areas of constant concern when I write.

Further enhancing the BIG Picture

The next step in the **Pulse Productions** writing process comes to me, the front ensemble designer. It is my job to further enhance the big picture. I utilize a collection of percussion sound combinations to the already established wind voicing in creating the overall mood of each section. Before I can start I need to know first for whom am I writing. **Pulse Productions** utilizes a profile sheet as a rubric to understand the group’s instrumentation as well as the ability level of each section in the ensemble. This is somewhat different when it comes to the front ensemble as I look for the ability level of each individual student in the group. Perhaps some keyboard parts can be extremely melodic with a number of licks and four-mallet skills, and other times they may only be able to shadow minimalist principles. Perhaps the auxiliary parts can be full of intricate multi-percussion coordination acrobatics, and other times it may be more conducive to have simple repetitive rhythms on one instrument at a time followed by long periods of transition to the next instrument.

Impact Points

Once I have synthesized this information, the first thing I do is find and outline the impact points within the music. The winds designer submits to me a fairly accurate layout of the production concept complete with notes and suggestions. I listen for sections in the music that serve both the expository and terminative functions. From this, I identify the major impact points created by full ensemble forte entrances, the ends of large phrases, or at the conclusion of builds and developmental sections. I outline these with cymbal impacts or gong/bass impacts with low brass sforzando entrances. This helps the band sound much larger and fuller at those big sections. It may also help mask possible tone distortion dependent upon where in the show an impact point may be located (especially early season, or late in the show). Many individual phrases are then concluded with suspended cymbal rolls to color, create tension and release, as well as aide transitions from one instrument to another. There may be additional impacts that I later add with either crashes or chokes for various reasons. Perhaps these will be

used to aid and highlight melodic passages I write in the keyboards. Sometimes they are also added to further support and enhance nuances written later by the battery designer.

Harmonic and Melodic Timbre

All keyboard percussion writing in the marching medium does not necessarily have to double wind parts. This had been a popular concept during the genesis of the pit, and became adopted by most arrangers. However, that keyboard sound usually will be lost in the band when doubled. I use the instruments instead as a color wheel, accompaniment, and even solo voice. If it is a section that calls for a metal timbre I may use crotales, glockenspiel, vibes, and chimes either in like or contrasting registers. It may double the theme at times or just create a twinkle effect with varying, contrasting rhythms or densities. A section may call for a wooden timbre where I use marimbas, xylophones, and temple blocks. I may again double the theme or create an Earthy feel developing an ostinato groove that accentuates the phrase or section in a transitory or developmental function. Working and communicating with the winds designer can allow exposed themes to come through in the keyboards giving a different texture. This will create opportunities for the winds to rest allowing them to be even more effective during their high points without losing melodic momentum and assists show pacing. The audience hears a pallet of new sounds that creates cohesion and effect.

Stylistic Character

When doing a stylistic or period piece then additional instrumental considerations need to be made. Ethnic instruments can be used in the pit to create different feels such as castanets to emulate a Spanish style; claves, cowbells, and congas for an Afro-Cuban style, or even a drum set for rock or swing styles. Effect instruments can be used in the pit to create different moods such as triangle to envelop tranquility, timpani and concert snare drum to outline a majestic fanfare, or tambourine to create bright energy.

Electronics and Amplification

Electronics in your pit allows for more possibilities in the design process. Synthesizers can add instrumental sounds not typical of a marching band such as strings, oboes, or bassoons to the orchestration. Electronic and industrial sounds could be used to make an effect come across cleaner. Even amplified sounds can allow an electric bass to bring more chords across if you have a smaller low brass section. Amplification can allow for ethnic possibilities like udu drums and tabla to be heard allowing more stylistic possibilities. Other effects such as using the vibraphone motors, water gongs, brushes, cymbals on timpani, or bowing instruments like vibes, cymbals, and gongs become much more effective when amplified. New choices in mallet selection allows for warmer keyboard sounds rather than the hard brittle sounds generally heard on un-amplified instruments outside. Amplification allows for more orchestration principles, and concepts to be used. Less doubling of parts and octaves are needed. More individual lines and busier passages can be created.

Overall

The **Pulse Productions** process comes with the big picture first. I consider whom am I writing for, and how to get across impact points for a show's effect. I develop underlying movements to create energy when longer notes are played in the winds. By finding ways to reinforce period and style can aide the overall idea of your show. Sound masses and possibilities rounds out the usefulness of the front ensemble to the overall musical effect of your show.

Coming Soon: Part 4: "Rhythmic Reinforcement: The Battery Designer"

Author

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Dan has been an active performer and educator throughout Iowa and much of the Midwest. He obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Percussion Performance and Education from the University of Iowa where during his schooling he acted as the Percussion Director for City High School in Iowa City, IA, and assisted the Davenport Central High School Marching Blue Devils from Davenport, IA. Dan worked with several schools in the Los Angeles area while completing an internship with Yamaha Corporation of America's Band and Orchestral Division. He has been a student of many fine percussion educators such as Dan Moore, Darin Wadley, Michael Spiro, Dave Samuels, Dick Sisto, Jim Dreier, Liam Teague, Los Muñequitos de Motanzas, and several others. As an active member of the Vic Firth Education Team, Dan has taught numerous clinics, classes, and private lessons for students of all levels. He has acted as a designer, arranger, and educator for the Americanos Drum and Bugle Corps of Menasha, WI, and for the Kilties Senior Drum and Bugle Corps of Racine, WI. Dan was a member of both the Nite Express and Colts Drum and Bugle Corps. He is an adjunct professor of music for Northwestern College as well as Buena Vista University, and works with the percussion programs for both MOC-Floyd-Valley in Orange City, IA, and North High School in Sioux City, IA. Currently, Dan is obtaining a Masters of Music Performance degree from the University of South Dakota.