

# *Small Band Show Design Considerations*

## *By Kevin Ford*

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed performers can accomplish great things.”

### **Attitude**

You must first believe that you can be successful regardless of how small your band may be.

- a. You must focus on quality over quantity.
- b. Don't try and be like someone else.
- c. Think out of the box.
- d. Your production must be interesting from start to finish.
- e. The field is your stage...what are you going to do with it?

### **Searching for a Program**

- a. Competition vs. Entertainment
- b. Will our students feel educationally challenged with this program?
- c. Use it as a teaching tool for music education, discipline, working together,
- d. Each piece of music must have some kind of “audience response” built in
- e. The show must have a variety of tempos, textures, dynamic levels and style to make it interesting (tension and release)

### **Story Board**

A. On a large poster board write down as many visual and musical ideas that support one another as you possibly can think of. Stretch your imagination and don't worry about logistics. Go into this thinking anything is possible!

B. Now go back and see what ideas or music needs the most attention and then repeat step A.

C. The key is to fill up each moment in your program with as many ideas and options you can give yourself. This will be very important to you when you get further along in the process and when you begin creating levels to your presentation.

## **10 Music Considerations for the Small Band**

### **1. Woodwind Instrumentation**

- a. Work towards the Pyramid of sound.
- b. The importance of the Baritone Saxes
- c. Bass Clarinets...are they really needed on the field?

### **2. Woodwind Melodic Instrumentation**

- a. When to use Unison Line?
- b. When to use Harmonized Line?

### **3. "Write in the Pocket?"**

- a. Where should the clarinets be scored?
- b. Avoid the throat register for the clarinets.
- c. Where is the best range the saxes?

### **4. Woodwind Scoring**

- a.** What are the best key signatures that allow you to stretch the orchestration?
- b. How do these key signatures affect the Baritone Saxes?
- c. Where do you voice the Tenor Saxes in relation to the Baritone Saxes?

### **5. Brass Scoring Considerations**

- a. One Mellophone part
- b. Two trumpet parts
- c. Three Low Brass Parts and not separated by trombone and baritone.
- d. Consider using all Trombones or all baritones for better blend of sound.

### **6. Mellophone Consideration**

- a. What mouthpiece to use?
- b. Benefits of French Horn Mouthpiece
- c. Benefits of using M6 mellophone mouthpiece
- d. Your choice...

### **7. Musical Sustains**

- a. How long should ff sustains last?
- b. Stagger Breathing is a must.

### **8. When is the best time to use a musical sustain as an effect?**

- a. When should you be sustaining...on the move or off the move?
- b. Consider some an ostinato rhythmic pattern underneath sustains on the move.

### **9. Layered Development Considerations:**

- a. How to orchestrate an effective ensemble development from the woodwinds through the Brass.

### **10. Dynamic Considerations**

- a. "Not all musical effects require you to be loud."
- b. Stay within your ensemble's capabilities (Don't try and be something you're not, in other words.....don't try and sound like 150 horns when you only have 80)
- c. Pianissimo can also a musical effect.
- d. Shaping and Contour of the line. "All sound should have motion."

### **Top 4 Percussion Small Band for Considerations:**

#### **1. Why 4 mallet technique?**

- a. More sound depth to sound

#### **2. What are the benefits of Amplification?**

- a. Allows performers to play with proper technique.
- b. Less performers required to produce a depth of sound.
- c. Purchase a quality P.A. System (amplifier, mixer and mics)
- d. Mic as many instruments as you want (or have a budget for)  
the most common are: Vibes, marimbas, xylophone, bells, aux. instruments

#### **3. Battery vs. No Battery Percussion**

- a. Consider the Winds instrumentation to make this decision.
- b. Where will you get your time from on the field?

#### **4. Backfield Electronic Station....What...Why...How...Cost...**

- a. Rhythm Section
- b. Electronic keyboards (can provide a whole color palette that a marching band can't reproduce)
- c. Spend quality time with the "pit" well with the entire ensemble (especially synthesizers)
- d. Where do I start with electronics? Local music dealer (make a friend, they will help set it up and teach you) Ask a parent who may run sound for a church or has rock band experience, etc. Learn yourself (learn about all the possible problems and solutions too)
- e. Digital kids love this stuff.

### **Goal for Staging a Marching Band Production**

Contemporary Drill Design has now become its own art form in combining the elements of staging, focus, motion, and form into an unpredictable presentation that captures the imagination of the audience. Through the combination of these elements the drill design serves as the canvas for the performers to become a moving illustration which should bring forth the music to life. It is through the choice of staging and motion where the drill design creates a visual intrigue that will captivate an audience's attention from the beginning to the end of a performance. A well thought out design will seamlessly draw the audience's attention to various places on the performance field while drawing the spectator's eyes to exactly what you choose as a focal point.

## Writing Drill and the Musical Score

All great drill design BEGINS with the musical score. The musical phrases of the score provides the infrastructure of the count block for the drill, the method of articulation often indicates when to use linear line versus curvilinear line, and when/what performers should be the focal point. The actual drill design should be a visual representation of the musical score. In others words “you want the spectators to see exactly what they hear.” It is the responsibility of the drill designer, to visually bring forth the music to a visual reality while manipulating space, time, and focus. A quality drill design, combines all the visual elements brass, woodwinds, percussion, and color guard in a coordinated effort that interprets the emotion, contour, and pacing of the musical score.

### Where to start?

**Count Block** Drill phrases and staging should be consistent and complimentary to the actual pacing and style of the musical phrases. Simply, a count block for the drill can be developed through rehearsal markings in the musical score. Based upon the intensity of the music these phrases can then be broken down into subsets of a rehearsal marking. For example: if a phrase is 16 counts from A to B and the music is building to a climatic moment, you may choose to break that phrase into two sets of 8 to match the intensity of the build to the musical phrase.

**Staging Map** before beginning to write the actual drill, a staging map should be developed. This is where you plot out your count block, import the information of who is playing the melody during those counts, where on the field you hope to present those performers, and what role the color guard be playing in regards to that section. This will also allow you to visually see and develop a variety from where you will be presenting each musical focal point.

*Caution:* Not every musical phrase should be presented from the center of the field. You want to avoid the drill design looking like it is in a “television box” for the duration of the show. The color guard should be integrated and an important participant whenever you are presenting a group of performers.

### 5 Points of Staging:

**1. Staging** is the art of placing performers where we can hear them and can see them at the appropriate times. This takes planning can be difficult to achieve. Analyzing a score from start to finish before you begin to write can serve as a great benefit for the designer. The development of a staging map for when and where performers need to be in focus can be a great benefit during the actual design process.

**2. “Hear what I See and See what I Hear.”** Consider this statement at all times when you are staging your performers. You will always want to see a particular part of the guard while presenting the performers playing the musical line. If the

lead voice is on the left side of the field and the guard is on the right side, in most cases this could be considered a poor split focus decision in regards to staging. You will want to make sure that these performance elements are always coordinated together.

**3. Staging Considerations:** Who is playing the most important line and will I be able to hear them where I placed them? The melodic voice staged behind a large number of accompaniment voices will be difficult to hear?

**4. Split-focus** is two ideas of equal value occurring at the same time on split parts of the field and is usually considered poor staging. There are some occasions where you want two opposing ideas, but this is the exception and not the rule.

**5. The percussion section** is important to the timing of the band. Placing them at extremes side-to-side if the band is centered can be a problem. Keeping them marching up and down the 50 yard line is not appropriate either. You want to place them within the proximity of the band to allow for rhythmic clarity. There is not an absolute rule, but this section is an important part of your staging that you must consider at all times.

## 10 General Guidelines for Staging Considerations:

**1. Curves generally represent lyrical musical phrases or a softer musical dynamic.** Essentially, curves clearly need depth to read correctly. Shallow curves often look like crooked lines. As a general rule, end point to apex should be at least 3-4 steps of depth as a minimum.

**2. Diagonal Lines are generally used to interpret strength or stronger dynamic levels.** Diagonal lines with more than 10 people in it are difficult to clean. Be careful when writing long diagonals. Creating diagonal lines that place the performers on, two, or splitting off a yard line can help towards successful achievement of maintaining that diagonal line by the performers.

**3. Circles are a great way to create a specific focal point or area.** A computer drill writing program makes **circles** look easy, but circles can be difficult to clean. Small circles with 8-10 people are manageable, but larger circles should be limited and be used only for a specific focus or effect. You should also consider placing a color guard performer or something in the center of the circle to maintain a high level of focus and visual intrigue.

**4. Stationary Vertical Lines can be a great way to hide performers when trying to create negative space.** If you choose to do some type of long vertical line (20 or more performers), be sure to use a yard line or the middle of the yard line. I would recommend that this is a set you would not have your performers

playing in. It could be a starting point or some type of arrival at the end of a phrase when the number of players is minimal.

**5. Avoid placing your guard in vertical lines** when they are doing choreography. This can make them look smaller as a unit and it is easy to see the slightest variation in their work. At times it can be used this as a starting point or an ending point if you want them blended with the band. Remember, we place them in blocks to clean and do basics for a reason. Block forms and its variations can be an effective impact sets for the guard, but be sure they have enough vertical and horizontal space to do the work and this will need to be work that is spotless. Also, you may want to consider beginning a phrase in a vertical line and then move every other person out of it to create a visual impact.

**6. The company front** can be difficult to create a musical impact. Wide horizontal spreads are hazardous to clean visually, and balance musically. Blocks, wedges, or forms that are tighter in shape are much more effective for this purpose.

**7. Drill moves should reflect the mood and match the energy level of the music.** Drill phrases that last longer than 16 counts are sometimes difficult to sustain a visual interest unless the tempo is extremely quick. When writing to slower tempos, a stage to restage approach where some performers move and others stand still can provide variety, focus, and visual intrigue.

**8. Set Points:** When writing a form with important end points or set points, strongly consider placing the performers a set point that will be easily identifiable on the performance field, i.e., yard lines, hash marks, etc...

**9. When or When Not to Move:** Not every element of the band has to move or stand still on every count. ***Judicious use of motion/non-motion*** can be very effective. At times, the absence motion can create a more interesting focal point than actual ensemble tutti motion. Some of the most interesting musical compositions are not based on consistent tutti playing. They entail a variety of colors of sound and a sequential presentation and treatment to the melody and accompanist. This should also be reflected in your drill design.

**10. Resolution Set** is considered to be the point of arrival. These sets should be visually pleasing to look at, remember the elements of form, weight, balance, line, unity, and proportion (Golden mean). Also, these are the sets if there are literal forms that are associated with the theme of the show that could be drawn upon to help bring greater communication to the visual identity and iconic communication of the show.

#### **Intervals:** (Side to side relationship)

Teach your students the difference between interval and distance.

**Interval** is defined by the side to side relationship between performers. **Distance** is defined by the space between performers.

- The **most common wind player intervals** are 2 steps, 3 steps, and 4 steps, with 2s and 3s being the most common. With the drill writing program, be sure to check your intervals and make sure that the **interval is a whole number**, and not some interval with decimals, i.e., 3.28.
- You can write **wind intervals that are bigger than 4 steps**, but that can make for a difficult listening and playing environment for the performers. If you place a form in windows, the effect of larger intervals is minimized. For example, below these performers are 6 steps apart side to side but by placing the next line of performers in the **window (middle of the line)** the listening and playing environment feels like 3 steps.

#### An example of performers in windows

X		X		X		X
	X		X		X	
X		X		X		X
	X		X		X	
X		X		X		X

- With **smaller bands**, a 2-step can make the group look really small but can also be easier to play in, so you have to balance these two issues. Use this interval wisely and judicially.
- If you are **marching trombones**, and they will do any type of turns, the minimum interval the performers will need is 3 steps, or you can also stagger the lines briefly to make the turn work. Even so, the music might be limited at the point of the turn because they will not be able to move their slides.
- **Designed Interval Consistency:** the **more you change the interval** from set to set the performers expect more effort on cleaning and refining the space between the performers throughout your program. You may want to consider keeping the performers at much of the same intervals for the show as possible. Utilizing 2's and 3's throughout most of your program. This will benefit your performer's ability to maintain consistent intervals while performing. This is less of a concern for more experienced performers.

#### However, you may want to consider 2 points of interval musicality

1. Contract intervals on an ensemble musical decrescendo.
2. Expand intervals on an ensemble musical crescendo.

#### Percussion Intervals: The **most common intervals for percussionists** are:

- 1.5 to 2 steps intervals for snares
- 3 step intervals for tenors

- 3-4 step intervals for bass drums
- 3-4 step intervals for cymbals

There can, of course, be exceptions, but realize that intervals bigger than these are difficult for the percussion to play well in. I recommend that you consult with your percussion arranger and indicate clearly to him when you are placing the snare drummers in an interval larger than a three. Anything smaller than a 1.5 for snare drummers and a 3 step interval for the tenor and Bass drummers will make it difficult to effectively perform as such as close interval.

- **Guard intervals** are difficult to generalize because there are many exceptions; it is imperative the drill designer and the color guard choreographer consult with one another about every visual moment in the show. Communication is essential to the success to the visual presentation that includes variety and visual intrigue. In general, most pieces of equipment need more than 4 steps of space to be used effectively. There can be exceptions in your drill but the guard work would be limited. 6, 8, and 12 steps are the most common intervals for flags. Rifles and sabers will often march at 4, 6, and 8 step intervals.
- If the **guard is doing movement only**, large intervals usually do not work as well. As you bring them closer together they will become more of a focus, and the choreography will be more easily read. It will also be more achievable to critique the quality and effectiveness. In addition, it is beneficial to limit the step size so that the choreographer has the flexibility when creating the expressive movement. The interest should be created through the actual choreography and not the amount of distance the performers are traveling.

### **Step-size Considerations:**

- For slower tempos, larger step sizes (8 to 5, 7 to 5, 6 to 5) are more comfortable and easier to march. 5 to 5 looks very awkward and should be avoided as much as possible.
- For moderate tempos, all step-sizes are possible.
- For fast tempos, smaller step sizes (8 to 5, 12 to 5, 16 to 5) are more comfortable with 6 to 5 being close to the maximum.
- Caution: The step size tool on the Pyware Computer software program is based on a straight path. If the pathway for your largest step-size is a curved path, the Pyware program does not calculate this and your step-size will increase.

### **Color Guard Considerations**

**Color Guard Integration:** Quality drill design has the color guard integrated and a strong part of the visual focus at all times. The guard no longer is relegated to framing the band in big arcs across the back. They must receive the same attention as one puts forth towards the other elements of the band.

## As a general rule;

Wherever you see the melody being played, there should be some element of the color guard in that area integrated visually interpreting the musical line.

### Guard Costuming and Designs

#### 1. Find the one concept that you want the guard to symbolize and then “create a Costume” that demonstrates that idea

- a. Portraying a character, an idea, a concept?
- b. Color of the costume should reflect the program theme and contrasting colors to the band uniform.
- c. Be creative, but practical (can they move and do the work “in uniform”)
- d. Body size of the guard members is a major factor (have to work “with” their sizes)
- e. General Rule: Would you put your own daughter in the costume?

#### 2. Where does one find costume ideas and implement them?

- a. Do your research...books, movies, etc...
- b. Color Guard Uniform and Equipment Companies. Create an outfit with the company (they are very approachable, but start early)  
Fred J. Miller  
The Band Hall
- c. Create and sew your own outfits (if you have a great seamstress)
- d. Already designed outfits from catalogs (sometimes they actually fit the program)
- e. Theatrical Costume companies

#### 3. Visual Choreography

- a. Does the choreography and movement reflect the musical intent and storyline of the program?
- b. Does the color guard always have to spin traditional equipment?
- c. Is there a common theme throughout the show?
- d. Keep the choreography creative, but “learnable” and “cleanable”
- e. Make sure the work enhances the music and coincides with the musical phrases
- f. Keep tosses to a minimum not all effect moments needs to be toss.
- g. Flag, Silks, Design and Color Selection
- h. Colors appropriate to the show? (contrasting colors to band uniform)
- i. Colors should reflect the musical mood or the storyline of the piece
- j. Based on the quantity of the color guard members, you can determine what size equipment is most effective for you.

## **It's Now Time for You to Pull Out Your Needle and Thread!**

### **Ask Yourself the Following Questions:**

- A. What is the Main objective of my program?
- B When the show ends, how do I want the audience to feel?
- C. Is there a musical selection from my ideas that could serve as the center piece to which I build my presentation around? If not, what visual motif or idea could I use to connect the presentation?
- D. Out of my ideas what will work the best as an opening that will draw the audience into the presentation and best state what the program is going to be about?
- E. Now go to the end and select what will best conclude the presentation and give you the complete visual and musical picture of the program.
- F. Now begin putting together the infrastructure of your program. Keep the order of your emotional content varied. Try to not put like emotions together. However, unless you are presenting these for a specific effect try to gradually and smoothly go from one emotion to the other. Return to your story board and look for transitional material.
- G. Now you have your program organized, before you begin charting this out, field test your program. Call and discuss your presentation from beginning to end with people from a variety of age groups and backgrounds. This is where you will find out whether or not your program has emotional appeal. You will learn a lot from this Seek a master designer! You will be amazed how willing most people are help!

### **Begin to write your program!**

Make Sure Your Music Arranger, Percussion Arranger, and your Color Guard Designer are all working together .

Most importantly, enjoy the process!

Design, in the end, is about creating better things for people.

Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a particular purpose.

The designer... has a passion for doing something that fits somebody's needs, but that is not just a simple fix. The designer has a dream that goes beyond what exists, rather than fixing what exists...

Design *is* a choice.

To design is to communicate clearly by whatever means you can control or master.

Designing is not a profession but an attitude. Design has many connotations. It is the organization of materials and processes in the most productive way, in a harmonious balance of all elements necessary for a certain function. It is the integration of technological, social, and economical requirements, biological necessities, and the psychological effects of materials, shape, color, volume and space. Thinking in relationships.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Photographer, Graphic Designer, Co-Founder, Bauhaus