As we complete the first decade of a new century (and millennium!), it might be an opportune time to look back on the developments of the past ten years in the marching music activity. The past summer and fall have culminated the decade with another exciting year of competitive drum corps and marching bands. Having watched this activity evolve over a period of more than thirty years, I am continually amazed at the levels of energy, creativity, and excellence that “outdoor” groups bring to their craft.
The demands placed on designers, composers, instructors, and certainly the performers seems to increase each season as groups seek not only to “succeed” competitively, but also create something artistically significant and memorable for those involved. That is certainly no small task! As a result of these lofty goals and an expanding number of participants, achievement levels appear to be at an all-time high.

In an examination of the current state of the art of the marching music “industry” – as it applies to trends, practices and concerns that affect the evolution of our activity – it becomes clear that one of the more significant current issues in the marching community is the developing use of vocal narrations as a tool for programming. Exploration of this device seems to be a logical extension of the ongoing attempts to further integrate the audio and visual components of a show (commonly known as “coordination” in judge-speak). Using a text narrative has the potential to explain or enhance what is seen and heard in varying degrees from literal to abstract. As a relatively new device in this activity, there have been a great variety of approaches and levels of perceived success.

One of the more significant issues related to employing text devices is the amount and frequency of its use. There is a legitimate concern that amplified text can detract from the musical substance of a performance, particularly if used a great deal. Not only can it upstage the music in significance, the spoken word can literally cover up or mask musical sounds, making them difficult or impossible to hear. This can be problematic in several ways regarding both assessment and enjoyment. Music designers are exploring ways to deal with this complex set of issues. Drawing on experiences from other professional areas of artistic expression would seem to be a logical educational strategy. Toward that end, our research team at Eastern Kentucky University intends to examine current scoring practices for cinema and other audio/visual media (commercial video, infomercials, etc.) both through observation and interviewing successful media professionals for guidance. Our thesis is that these career artists could inform our use of similar devices in our activity. We know that the primary focus in our industry is intended to be music, while different (and less defined) priorities exist in these related media. In the process of film scoring, for example, a wide range of proportions in integrating music, text, and visual stimuli exists, with the primary device traditionally being the spoken word. This EKU research team project will serve as one part of our ongoing program of studying the marching music activity.

Another closely related trend observed in the marching music industry in this decade is the increased use of electric sound reinforcement, micing, and electronic instruments. Integration of a whole battery of electric and electronic devices has opened up a world of opportunities for incorporating all imaginable sounds into the musical palette. The technical aspects of this innovation have challenged even the most experienced professional technologists with the complexities of extensive demands relative to equipment and performance environments. Composers and tech people could surely benefit from a forum of shared experiences in this challenging (and expensive) area of exploration. Perhaps additional information from the professional world of musical theater, opera, and touring musical acts would be applicable to our productions.

Given all the contemporary sound sources and techniques that are being explored, it is little wonder that the musical materials for our ensembles come from an ever-expanding world of sources. After a period of time characterized by the development and extensive use of “original music,” there now seems to be a greater exploration of existing compositions from a wider range of media. Pieces for exotic instruments, multi-cultural sources, diverse styles and idioms, and unique combinations of sources are all now part of the mix. Traditional literature for strings, voices, guitar, piano, and other instruments is being explored – in some cases for use with the originally intended instruments.

Another observation from the period: there is a continuing conversation in the industry concerning the use of theatrical props to enhance programming concepts. Groups have been very successful utilizing epic-sized spectacular devices, while other units have been equally successful using minimal or no stage decoration. One world-class-championship-level ensemble famously explored the use and manipulation of folding chairs this summer! It is not completely clear what characteristics makes some of these “extras” effective, while some can be distracting or confusing? At least one group used an extensive backdrop structure as a sound-reflecting device to create a unique sonic atmosphere this fall – that’s certainly “pushing the envelope” a bit!

Another state-of-the-art issue impacting marching ensembles is the varying acoustical environments of the performances. This has been a significant consideration for several seasons, but there is now a new development with the potential of ef-

“I am continually amazed at the levels of energy, creativity, and excellence that ‘outdoor’ groups bring to their craft.”
fecting significant change in how music is written and performed. Of course, the traditional venues for our marching ensembles have generally been high school and college football stadiums, large-and-small. Now that more summer and fall “big events” are in “indoor” venues (some domed, some stationary-roofed, some retractable-roofed, and so on), we are hearing new reactions by composers, instructors, and performers to diverse sonic environments.

If one new venue can possibly have an immediate effect on an entire industry, Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis would be that place. The championship events for both Bands of America and Drum Corps International are scheduled to be held the “Oil Can” indefinitely, so potential participants are subject to the unique acoustical characteristics of that mammoth structure. After completing a one-year cycle of culminating events for both BOA and DCI, much study and analysis is taking place to optimize the acoustical characteristics of the stadium for both performers and spectators. From personal experience, the sound properties may well be more problematic for the audience than participants, particularly based on where one actually sits in the stadium. The review process is currently ongoing, and is a very high priority for DCI and BOA. It will be very intriguing to hear and see how musical compositions and concepts adapt to this situation, particularly as the “Home of the Colts” is spectacular in so many ways in comparison to the majority of venues in which bands and drum corps will regularly perform. Future history may prove this to be a critical time in the evolution of our ensembles due to this development.

The adjudication community has been impacted by the decade’s advancement of creativity, substance, and performance excellence in the marching arts. The variety and depth of skills required to absorb and assess highly sophisticated and intricate programs of music and movement makes judging the contemporary ensemble quite a complex and challenging task. It is a daunting process that we ask literally hundreds (if not thousands) of people to undertake each year! It should not be a surprise then that there is so much discussion of how to prepare individuals to serve as adjudicators. Given both the technical and artistic demands on judges and the emphasis placed on marching music competitions within the instrumental community in this country and abroad, it is little wonder this is one of the decade’s “hot topics”!

Discussions of judging have long been a recurring feature in directors association meetings and other gatherings of people involved in this industry. It is easy and logical to be concerned with the “balance of development” of the adjudication/assessment part of the industry, as opposed to the creative/instructional side. The former is most likely a hobby or pastime, while the latter is usually a professional or semi-professional activity. Certainly no one of whom I am aware is making a living from judging marching events, while any number of people depend on “outdoor” composition and instruction for most or all of their income! This fact alone causes significant concerns, as it should.
ally, the process of composing, designing, and teaching usually implies intensive formal training, while the judging process as yet does not. This situation appears to be endemic to our activity as it is now structured. Perhaps it is in the best interests of the wellbeing and continued growth of the industry to consider this predicament more intensively.

There are several concerns I have about the judging process for our marching events, among them:

• A lack of understanding of the perceptual processes involved in judging.
• A lack of consistency/validity of assigned scores, as well as other statistical traits of performance assessments.
• A proven lack of positive correlation between an adjudicator’s musical performance skills and their assessment skill.
• The interdependent (or perhaps dependent!) relationship between what an evaluator hears and sees.
• A lack of understanding as to how a judge’s ongoing verbal diagnostic feedback affects perception, evaluation, and scoring.

Given all this, it is not very difficult to see that an imbalance of preparation and evolution may exist within the ranks of the judging community, as well as compared to the creative/instructional ranks. This is certainly no slur to those individuals who do serve as judges. In fact, one could easily assert that considered as a group, judges do a spectacularly amazing job, given such a proportional lack of training and enrichment activities! Should anything be done? Can anything be done?

We need an “intranet” for each of our constituent groups: creators, instructors, judges, and spectators – we have some (but not nearly enough) of this already. We also need an “internet” where these groups can share ideas and perspectives with other groups to benefit all. Both “nets” require more than what a chat room offers. Surely we have the technology to make this happen. Surely we have the need to make this happen. Let’s see if we have the resourcefulness to make it happen!

Maybe we could be a small part of developing our beloved activity into a comprehensive educational entertaining enrichment vehicle; one that would be fully recognized and appropriately accredited for the amazing curriculum and benefits it has for those who fully commit to excellence and growth.

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