The marching percussion ensemble is a unique combination of artistic, physical, and acoustic challenges that demands an equally unique plan of attack in regard to instruction. The fundamentals of playing and marching are commonly addressed sequentially, but the listening component, the “how,” “to whom,” and “when” is often overlooked.

Listening responsibilities within any musical ensemble vary from micro to macro. In the marching percussion ensemble, we can also start with the individual sound (self), subsection (just bass drums), section (battery), percussion ensemble (battery and frontline), and ultimately full ensemble (with winds if outdoors). Challenges occur throughout this progression and become increasingly difficult due to the mobile nature and spatial issues associated with today’s marching activity. For this reason, the introduction, development, and maintenance of listening skills are even more relevant and vital.

### Ensemble Listening: Rehearsal Techniques for Marching Percussion

**BY CLIF WALKER**

### COMMON PROGRESSION OF PLAYING AND VISUAL FUNDAMENTALS

The following table illustrates a sequential approach widely practiced in regard to musical (a) and visual (b) development (Steps 1–5 and 10). The addition of Steps 6–9 offers the opportunity of increased focus specifically on ensemble listening.

*This article assumes the traditional placement of the frontline/grounded percussion frontfield.

It is very common for ensembles to inadvertently skip from Step 5 to Step 10 for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1a. Stationary Music Fundamentals</th>
<th>1b. Visual Fundamentals (battery only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercises only, drums on a stand, 100% student focus on technique, with metronome.</td>
<td>Basic marching exercises, no equipment, 100% student focus on technique, with metronome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>2a. Stationary Music Fundamentals (battery only)</th>
<th>2b. Visual Fundamentals (battery only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercises only, wearing drums, 100% student focus on technique, with metronome.</td>
<td>Basic marching exercises, with equipment, 100% student focus on technique, with metronome.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Music Fundamentals and Visual Fundamentals (battery only)</th>
<th>4a. Stationary Show Music</th>
<th>4b. Drill (battery only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The battery moving with a majority of their focus still on music fundamentals through exercises. Coordination between hands and feet, with metronome.</td>
<td>Phrase by phrase, drums on a stand, 100% student focus on applying fundamentals to actual music, with metronome.</td>
<td>Set to set, with no equipment, 100% student focus on visual responsibilities (sets, dress points, applying fundamentals to actual show), with metronome.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>5a. Stationary Show Music (battery only)</th>
<th>5b. Drill (battery only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phrase by phrase, wearing drums, 100% student focus on applying fundamentals to music, with metronome.</td>
<td>Set to set, with equipment, 100% student focus on visual responsibilities (sets, dress points, applying fundamentals to show), with metronome.</td>
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<tr>
<th>6. Stationary Staging* and Listening Exercises; Music Fundamentals in Warm-Up Sets</th>
<th>7. Stationary Staging* and Listening Exercises; Music Fundamentals in Show Staging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercises (not show music) that build proper listening habits and hierarchies (within a section, front to back) using stationary arcs/friendly forms for the battery. Start with the aid of a metronome.</td>
<td>Exercises (not show music) that build proper listening habits and hierarchies (within a section, front to back) using stationary drill sets from the actual show for the battery, but not show music. Start with the aid of a metronome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8a. Show Music and Visual Fundamentals (battery only)</th>
<th>8b. Drill and Music Fundamentals*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 3, but with show music. Battery learns timing tendencies of music in relationship to feet. Start with the aid of a metronome.</td>
<td>Set to set visually, but using exercises. Frontline hears the battery’s presence and timing tendencies in actual show staging. Start with the aid of a metronome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. Staging* and Listening; Stationary Show Music</th>
<th>10. Show Music and Drill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Show music, enforcing proper listening habits and hierarchies (within a section, front to back) using stationary drill sets from the actual show for the battery. Start with the aid of a metronome.</td>
<td>Phrase by phrase, culminating in full show beginning to end. Start with the aid of a metronome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a variety of reasons, mainly a lack of time or the pressure to get the show on the field. However, the effort must be made to give students the opportunity to gradually experience the challenges of listening in a sequential, confidence building progression.

**STEP 6: STATIONARY STAGING AND LISTENING EXERCISES; MUSIC FUNDAMENTALS IN WARM-UP SETS**

The frontline and battery percussion are separate during the first five steps, focusing exclusively on playing (both), marching techniques (battery only), and listening skills (both) within their respective sub-sections. During Step 6 the frontline adds the responsibility of listening back to the battery for time through basic fundamental exercises, not actual show music. The battery begins the experience of listening to each other outdoors and learning to ignore sound coming from the frontfield instruments.

Start with the familiar. When first venturing outdoors, position the battery percussion directly behind the frontline, similar to an arrangement they may use and understand while rehearsing indoors. Choose a simple exercise that allows the frontline to listen back to the battery. The battery is conveniently staged for easy frontline listening (building listening confidence), so that the frontline can also play along (battery plays unison eighth notes while the frontline plays the first note of each measure only, thus reinforcing the battery as time). This builds trust.

After a successful ensemble experience, have the battery return to their actual show music, then two sections, etc. eventually culminating in everyone performing show music. Return to a simple exercise throughout the season to reinforce and maintain cohesiveness (Step 10).

Also remember that when the winds are present, the frontfield performers have more to listen back to and through, increasing the difficulty in hearing battery percussion whose sound is potentially blocked. Moving from a concrete practice field to a grass field can also radically alter what the performers can and cannot hear due to the acoustic properties of the marching surface (reflective versus absorbent).

**STEP 7: STATIONARY STAGING AND LISTENING EXERCISES; MUSIC FUNDAMENTALS IN SHOW STAGING**

Essentially, the same philosophy and goals of Step 6, but using actual drill sets from the show, which tend to be more varied and difficult. The battery begins the challenge of listening to each other in actual drill sets with true performance staging demands.

**STEP 8B: DRILL AND MUSIC FUNDAMENTALS**

This approach uses actual drill sequences from the field show (move 12, move 16, hold 8, etc.) and show tempos, but not actual show music.

Start by substituting a basic exercise to help focus the ensemble’s listening responsibilities over the existing drill sequence. By using actual drill sets and visual count structure sequences from the field show, you can expose and address timing tendencies while defining listening hierarchies. This rehearsal technique can also help to identify what the frontline can and cannot hear from the battery in its purest form in problematic drill sets/areas of the field (exercises versus show music).

After initial success is experienced, have one section at a time return to their actual show music, then two sections, etc. eventually culminating in everyone performing show music. Return to a simple exercise throughout the season to reinforce and maintain cohesiveness (Step 10).

Also remember that when the winds are present, the frontfield performers have more to listen back to and through, increasing the difficulty in hearing battery percussion whose sound is potentially blocked. Moving from a concrete practice field to a grass field can also radically alter what the performers can and cannot hear due to the acoustic properties of the marching surface (reflective versus absorbent).

**STEP 9: STAGING AND LISTENING; STATIONARY SHOW MUSIC**

Similar to Steps 7 and 8, but finally with phrases of actual show music. Avoid unknowingly reinforcing incorrect listening habits, e.g., the battery listening forward to the frontline percussion. While it is always exciting, gratifying, and educational for the instructors and students to hear how the parts fit together early in the season, be careful not to unknowingly condition bad performance listening habits.

**REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES**

Selective and directed listening can be
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- Interactive DVD complete with activities, games, instrument guide, and inspiration interviews  
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- Explores accessory instruments  
- Examines multiple percussion techniques
an abstract concept for many players. The following approaches are rehearsal options that can provide a tangible starting point and hands-on illustration:

1. Distraction: Once good listening habits are established and solidified, purposefully attempt to distract the performers, testing their true ability to listen correctly by tempting them to sway. Have an instructor play an unrelated pattern on a cowbell, intentionally out of time, training the students to ignore any and all distractions. Preface the students on how this exaggerates their listening challenges and tests their ability to focus (steps 6–10).

2. Black Out: By turning out the lights during an indoor rehearsal or blindfolding the ensemble while rehearsing outdoors, you can attempt to heighten their listening skills by eliminating a sense: sight. You can preface the students, or surprise them and then take a poll to see if they experienced the intended effect (steps 1, 2, 4–7, 9—careful not to try this on the move).

3. Metronome Accountability: Start with the traditional use of the metronome providing all downbeats, then only the first beat of every bar, then only one click every eight counts, etc. This reinforces/checks tempo without danger of engraining metronome dependence and helps expose timing tendencies (all steps).

4. Snares Off: To reinforce proper listening hierarchies, have all players turn off their snares or change to soft mallets. Repeat a given exercise and have each player gradually switch to snares on/regular mallets in a systematic order (from the center out). This reinforces where and to whom each given player should be focusing their listening. This approach works best when reinforcing micro-sectional listening responsibilities but may not work in the macro front-to-back issues concerning frontline and battery over large distances (steps 1, 2, 4, 5).

5. Ear Plugs: As an experiment to raise student listening awareness, have them use various combinations of ear plugs while playing (both ears, left only, right only). This may not turn out to be a permanent performance practice but it can prove to students that their listening can be selective (all steps).

6. Gymnasium/Cafeteria Acoustics: Purposefully find the most unfriendly acoustical environment convenient. The idea being if ensemble timing/balance can be achieved under these conditions it should make performance conditions seem easier (steps 1, 2, 4–7, 9).

7. Drill Set Warm-Up: After the basic fundamentals of playing are being achieved consistently, force the battery to only warm-up in actual show staging (not always in the security of the friendly arc). Adopt especially problematic and unique drill sets from the show for use as a warm-up set. This can vary rehearsal to rehearsal to relate to the focus of the day (steps 1, 2, 4, 5, 7).

Leave space in the students’ music for them to write in whom they should be listening to. Remind them that this is not a blanket statement for the entire show, arrangement, or even phrase as listening responsibilities can and will change. This can only be determined once the drill is written and staging is known. It is equally important to identify what students should ignore and not be distracted by. Ask the backfield bass drums the trick question of whether or not they like the frontfield timpani solo. Their collective answer should automatically be, “What timpani solo?”

Combinations and adaptations of these and other listening techniques can help increase student awareness of what they can and cannot hear and make a seemingly abstract skill more tangible. As the ensemble develops and their needs refine, be creative so the experience stays fresh and reaches its maximum potential for the students, instructors, and audience. Good listening skills will then have a greater chance of carrying over into all musical experiences.

Clif Walker is Associate Director of Bands at Timber Creek High School in Orlando, Florida. He holds degrees from Missouri Western State College and the University of Central Florida, and was on staff with the Madison Drum and Bugle Corps Association for five seasons. Clif was the 1993 PAS Collegiate Multi-Tom and 1996 Timpani Solo Champion.