Using a Metronome with the Marching Ensemble

BY CLIF WALKER

Historically, the marching percussion section’s function has been to provide pulse and a sense of time for the entire marching ensemble. For this reason, early visual staging of the battery was centrally located toward the back of the field and movement was limited. However, with today’s visual demands and staging, the battery often finds itself in a variety of locations: in front of the horns, within the horns, maybe even in front of the pit.

The responsibility of “timekeeper” has evolved to include any number of voices in the modern-day marching band, and as a result, the old standard of simply listening to the battery doesn’t always apply. Extreme tempos, demanding polyphonic rhythmic content, and ever-increasing standards of execution and uniformity have further challenged contemporary ensembles to seek new rehearsal techniques. To help meet these new ensemble challenges, many instructors use a metronome amplified through a portable loudspeaker to provide a consistent pulse reference for rehearsals.

**PLACEMENT**

As the ensemble begins playing and moving, be careful of the location of the metronome. If the metronome is positioned incorrectly, the performers will develop the wrong listening focus. It takes longer for sounds played from the backfield to reach the audience than sounds played front-field. As a result, the audience’s perception dictates that listening to backfield voices, being careful to avoid front-field distraction. An easy way to reinforce this concept is to position an instructor mid-field with a high-pitched woodblock or cowbell. Have the instructor play quarter notes with the mid-field voice, listening back to the deepest section. Slowly distance the cowbell from the mid-field by walking toward the front-field, still playing quarter notes. The mid-field section will soon hear a timing delay from their perspective; the cowbell will gradually sound behind their pulse. This will reinforce why they cannot listen forward in the ensemble and must learn to focus backfield. Continue this exercise by having individual performers walk with the instructor mid-field so they can hear the difference from the front-field perspective.

1. The section directly in front of the metronome is most responsible for assuming the timekeeper role for the ensemble. Position the metronome directly behind the deepest musical voice (which may or may not be a battery voice).

   Members of the ensemble listen back and relate their parts to the metronome.

2. Mid-field performers must focus on listening to backfield voices, being careful to avoid front-field distraction. An easy way to reinforce this concept is to position an instructor mid-field with a high-pitched woodblock or cowbell. Have the instructor play quarter notes with the mid-field voice, listening back to the deepest section. Slowly distance the cowbell from the mid-field by walking toward the front-field, still playing quarter notes. The mid-field section will soon hear a timing delay from their perspective; the cowbell will gradually sound behind their pulse. This will reinforce why they cannot listen forward in the ensemble and must learn to focus backfield. Continue this exercise by having individual performers walk with the instructor mid-field so they can hear the difference from the front-field perspective.

3. Front-field sections never have to worry about front-field listening distractions. Generally, the front-line percussion ensemble is located closest to the audience and, as a result, will always focus their listening on the ensemble behind them.

4. The drum major has the most complicated responsibility. This individual should not only have a superior sense of time, but also fully understand the slower speed of sound versus the faster speed of light. The drum major needs to conduct slightly ahead of the ensemble in rehearsals and performances.

   In order for the drum major’s pattern to look correct from a backfield perspective (in regard to the metronome), he needs to feel the beat ahead of the ensemble. Place the metronome speaker on the back hash of the field. Have the drum major push the pattern ahead to the point that he is actually placing his ictus on the sixteenth note before the downbeat. From the backfield, where the listening hierarchy is established, the players’ hands will look perfectly in time! Light versus sound! This compensation falls solely on the drum major and his interpretation of where to place the ictus.

**LISTENING HIERARCHIES**

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**FREQUENCY OF USE**

Metronomes keep perfect time, and when placed properly within the ensemble, they provide a secure and reliable pulse. As a result, it is tempting to over-use them. When the metronome is
first taken away, the players’ sense of security and pulse often undergoes growing pains. The performers must remember what the metronome felt like, how the other voices of the ensemble sounded in reference, and how the drum major’s hands related.

Remember that the metronome is a teaching tool that isn’t part of the actual performance. It can provide a superior sense of pulse and a reference for what a cohesive performance should sound and feel like when played in time. It also provides instructors with a method of troubleshooting ensemble problems, exposing tempo fluctuations, and addressing complex listening challenges.

Stressing individual practice with a metronome will help get everyone on the same page before rehearsals start. Using the metronome with the full ensemble in the early stages of the season can help ingrain a uniform sense of time. When learning fundamentals (musical and visual), stationary music rehearsals (ones that occur in relatively close traditional listening environments) are a great place to get the performers acclimated to the metronome. This will reveal their tempo tendencies (rushing/dragging) as individuals and as an ensemble.

Likewise, marching fundamental sessions in which no playing occurs provide an excellent opportunity to develop consistent time and expose tendencies regarding movement. When these fundamental components are introduced using a metronome, the ensemble is more equipped for success at the next level: playing and moving. Tempo tendencies exposed early on will provide a reference to use on the field.

As the season progresses and ensemble cohesiveness improves, use less and less metronome. Tempo maintenance is crucial, so avoid eliminating the metronome completely from rehearsals, as timing issues can and will reoccur. Tempo maintenance can be checked through a variety of methods:

On and Off Method: Start the metronome and establish a pulse reference for the ensemble. After a few measures, turn the volume down so the click is inaudible. Slowly turn the volume back up so the ensemble can hear the metronome and check to see if they are still in time. In the absence of the metronome, the ensemble experiences the same accountability as in a performance.

Quarter, Half, Whole: Begin with the metronome subdividing quarter notes. When the ensemble is secure, drop the subdivision to half notes (if the quarter note equals 180 beats per minute, change the metronome to 90 bpm). After the ensemble is comfortable and accurate at this level, drop the subdivision to whole notes—one audible click per measure (45 bpm).

Whisper Mode: Place the metronome in the proper area of the field directly behind the time-functioning section (i.e., bass drums). Lower the volume of the click so that only the specified section can hear it. This forces front-field sections to listen to the back-field, as in a performance situation.

Remember that the metronome can become a crutch if over-used. Performers need to be educated on how to listen to the metronome and what performing feels like in relation to it.

When used correctly, a metronome will aid timing by exposing individual and ensemble tendencies. The performers and instructor will be able to understand what challenges are present in their musical and visual repertoire, and why they must listen in a certain direction. Students will also be better equipped to apply these concepts to other musical ensembles and further enjoy the benefits of rehearsing with a metronome.

Clif Walker holds a Master of Music Education degree from the University of Central Florida and a B.S.E. from Missouri Western State College. He is percussion caption head for the Southwind Drum and Bugle Corps and a former member and instructor of the Madison Scouts Drum and Bugle Corps. He is also Associate Director of Bands at Timber Creek High School in Orlando, Florida, where he serves as director of percussion and jazz activities. Walker was the 1993 PAS International Tenor Drum Champion and 1996 Timpani Champion.

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