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# Improving Rhythmic Clarity in the Contemporary Marching Percussion Ensemble

The contemporary marching percussion ensemble consists of field percussion (snare drums, tenor drums, bass drums and cymbals) and front line percussion (from mallet instruments to various suspended cymbals and timpani). With such a diverse and dense orchestration, it is understandable that difficulties will be encountered when the full ensemble performs together. Let us look at ways to assist the percussion ensemble in creating a cohesive unit.

## I. Defining the Listening Focus

After music is learned, it is important that each performer understands how his/her part fits in each respective section of the ensemble. In the snare drum and tenor drum sections, it is imperative to place the strongest player in the middle of the section. By the term “strongest,” I am referring to the performer that has the strongest sense of pulse and consistency. A performer that has difficulties with syncopations and memorizing music does not fit well into this category. After the strongest performer has been established in the snare and tenor drum sections, inform the performers that they are supposed to listen in to the “center” (the strongest performer in the middle of the section) to align their parts. Therefore, the center becomes the “listening focus.” Concerning the bass drum, cymbal and front line percussion sections, this idea of establishing a center is not applicable, as the parts are interdependent on one another to complete the rhythmic phrase. It is necessary for these sections to work as one, rather than to create one listening focus.

## II. Developing the Listening Focus

There are many options for strengthening our ears, but the simplest option is to have all players match one performer. By doing so, we have one interpretation of the pulse and a uniform approach to a specific musical phrase. In the snare and tenor sections, start with the center performer playing the selected musical passage while the remaining performers play on the rim, “air” or “ghost” the passage. After two to three repetitions, add two players. After two or more repetitions, add two more players. You will repeat this process until all of the players are involved. After this progression, you find that the selected musical passage should have a stronger sense of rhythmic clarity.

In the front line percussion, this concept can work if the selected passage lends itself to the same treatment. This can be exemplified by looking at the following example (Ex. 1).

The musical score for Ex. 1 is written for four percussion parts: Vibes, Xylo., Mar., and Timp. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of five measures. The Vibes part starts with a forte (f) dynamic and features a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The Xylo. part also starts with a forte (f) dynamic and plays a similar rhythmic pattern. The Mar. part starts with a forte (f) dynamic and plays a simpler rhythmic pattern. The Timp. part starts with a forte (f) dynamic and plays a simple rhythmic pattern. The score includes various dynamic markings such as f, mf, and mp, and includes articulation marks like accents and slurs.

After reviewing the excerpt, it is only logical to conclude that the xylophone player would become the listening focus of the front line. This conclusion is established on two points. First, the xylophone part is the most rhythmically active. Second, the characteristic timbre of the xylophone will be brighter than the texture of the vibes and marimba, allowing it to easily become a listening focus. Therefore, the logical addition of voices would be: Xylophone, Vibraphone, Marimba, Timpani.

My listening focus suggestion for the bass drum and cymbal sections does not follow the same procedure. As the parts are interdependent, the performers should be situated physically so that they can audibly hear the other performers of their section with ease. Bass drummers typically have their heads facing approximately 45 degrees from their bass drum. This will assist the players' listening by turning their ears so that one ear can listen forwards and the other ear can listen backwards. The direction of the head turn would depend on which way the performers are viewing the drum major.

### III. Putting the Listening Focus Concept Into Practice

The music is learned by all sections of the percussion ensemble and the focus for listening has been defined by each section. It is now time to put the entire ensemble together. Let us discuss this through the following musical example (Ex. 2).

In this specific musical situation, we would follow this sequence of events. Snare Drums play alone, while the remaining sections air or rim their parts. Add Xylophone and Tenor Drums. The xylophonist locks in with the snare parts. The center tenor focuses his/her listening on the center snare drummer. Add Vibraphone and Bass Drums. The vibraphonist locks in with the xylophonist while the bass drummers align their parts with the snare and tenor drum sections. Add Marimba and Cymbals. The marimbist aligns with the xylophonist. The cymbals align their parts with the snare, tenor and bass drum sections. Add Percussion and Timpani. The Percussion and Timpani parts align with the battery percussion. If the staging of the drill is appropriate, the Percussionist and Timpanist could watch the battery percussion to assist in proper rhythmic execution.

The last tip I would offer is to give each performer a full score. By giving each performer their own score, the performer can make an informed decision where to focus their listening.