

Big Band Drumming at First Sight!

Presented by Steve Fidyk
The Midwest Clinic – International Band
and Orchestra Conference

- Wednesday, December 17, 2025
- 4:30 PM – 5:30 PM
- Room W192

Overview

Big Band Drumming at First Sight explores the essential skills and mindset needed to lead a large ensemble from behind the drums — especially when sight-reading. Drawing on his experience recording for the Belwin Jazz catalog, Steve Fidyk shares practical strategies for interpreting figures, shaping dynamics, and maintaining professional groove and clarity — even on a first read.

Clinic Objectives

- Improve rhythmic accuracy and interpretation.
- Strengthen phrasing, articulation, and dynamic awareness.
- Develop stylistic vocabulary through concentrated listening.
- React to form and rhythmic cues in real time.
- Build stronger communication and trust between drummers and directors.

I. Read with Purpose

- Scan the chart for tempo, style, and roadmap directions such as double bars, D.S. markings, and codas.
- Recognize form and transitions before starting — see the forest, not just the trees.
- Establish the pulse during the count-off and protect it.
- Mark the part clearly — use pencil cues, dynamics, and important reminders to help when reading.

II. Interpreting What You See

- Drum parts provide guidelines, not fixed instructions — listen as you read for intent and concept.
- Understand figures as musical gestures rather than literal rhythms or beats.
- Let your ears lead your eyes; interpretation comes from listening in the moment.
- Use form cues, articulation, and dynamic markings as your roadmap.

III. Make the Notation Come Alive

- Understand that figures come from larger phrases — connect them with setups and a solid pulse. Sing the phrases you aspire to play for a clear approach.
- Improvise conversationally; sometimes match, sometimes respond to the written figures.
- Draw rhythmic ideas from the arrangements vocabulary to unify the ensemble sound and concept.
- Shape form through orchestration — color, texture, and rhythmic phrasing.
- Voice ensemble figures by section, matching the horn sections register and dynamic.
- Play beyond the written notes — listen for what's missing and support musically.
- Balance power and sensitivity; the best big band drummers think like small-group players.

IV. Time, Feel, and Sound

- Balance every voice of the kit — ride, snare, bass, and hi-hat must balance and work together to create one unified pulse.
- Internal consistency builds external confidence in the rhythm section.
- Practice with a metronome — steady time creates confidence and trust within the ensemble.

V. The Band Director–Drummer Partnership

- The drummer and director share leadership of the band.
- Encourage communication and musical freedom, built on trust.
- Encourage your drummers to study the entire score — melody, counterlines, and form.
- Support the music, not just the meter — serve the composition with musical awareness.

VI. Preparation Matters

- Unprepared drummers may read rhythms but fail to interpret musically.
- Learn tunes, not just beats — sing melodies to develop musical awareness and articulation.
- Listening is key. Doing so builds style, concept, and confidence.

Common Pitfalls and Fixes

Issue	Likely Cause	Solution
Dragging figures	Overreading or tension	Simplify; subdivide internally, concentrate on the melody and work daily with a metronome for consistency
Inconsistent fills	Weak form awareness	Mark phrases; internalize structure
Flat dynamics	Single-volume playing	Practice crescendos/decrescendos in time and listen as you perform. Record yourself as often as possible to make necessary adjustments.
Poor dynamic balance at the drum kit	Overplaying the drums and cymbals; issues with set and posture while seated behind the kit.	Listen outward; match rhythm section and lead trumpet blend.

Key Takeaways

- The drummer defines time, energy, and dynamics for the ensemble.
- Listen as you read.
- Simplicity is better than complexity in most cases.
- The drummer and director share ensemble leadership.
- Good time should be the rule, not the exception.
- Make the first read sound like a performance.

About Steve Fidyk

Steve Fidyk is widely recognized for his versatility as a musician, composer, author, and educator. For more than 21 years, he was the drummer and featured soloist with the Army Blues Big Band, a prestigious 17-piece jazz ensemble based in Washington, D.C. During his tenure, Fidyk performed for seven US Presidents, various dignitaries, and jazz icons such as Clark Terry, Slide Hampton, Doc Severinsen, and Benny Golson. He also participated in goodwill musical missions to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina for Habitat for Humanity, and to the Middle East in support of troops stationed there. Presently, Fidyk leads ensembles showcasing his original compositions and arrangements. Additionally, he performs nationwide with small groups led by tenor saxophonist Walt Weiskopf and is a member of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra of Washington D.C. A respected educator, Fidyk shares his expertise as a faculty member of the jazz studies department at Temple University. He also serves as an educational consultant for Jazz at Lincoln Center's Essentially Ellington Program, and Artistic Director of Naptown Jazz Kids, a 501(c)3 arts education nonprofit that provides performance and community service opportunities for students in Annapolis, Maryland.

Optional Handout Additions

- Quick-Read Reference: Common figures, cues, and setups.
- Listening Guide to key recordings.
- Preparation Checklist: "How to prepare for the first read."