Typical Musical and Marching Problems and Solutions for the Modern Marching Band

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Clinic Notes Excerpts from
THE SYSTEM: Marching Band Methods
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MUSIC

Musical style, or the way music is played, is the key to excellent musicality and interpretation. The slightest deviation from the proper tempo or an articulation might destroy the precision, meaning, and character of the music.

When rehearsing music, make stylistic interpretations clear so that uniformity is achieved within the ensemble. For example, if a note is to be played short, determine how short, and whether it is heavy or light. Vocalizing articulations, pitches, expressive inflections, phrasing, and rhythms are an effective way to refine style while simultaneously conserving the wind players' endurance.

Expressive Style

Most marching band musicians do not emphasize expressive playing to the extent that occurs when playing concert music. As a result, it is seldom that marching bands achieve lyrical qualities when performing sensitive music. Consider these common stylistic interpretations when teaching lyrical music.

- Stretch and taper ends of phrases. Do not "clip" them, leaving big holes between the old and new phrase
- When playing softly, darken the tone
- Play longer phrases, shaping the dynamics with the contour of the melodic line
- Enrich the tonal balances by decreasing treble voices and increasing lower voices
- Avoid strident sounds when increasing volume especially when playing in the upper registers
- Encourage players to feel the emotional aspects of the music
- Develop a strong sense of inner pulse to avoid rushing or compressing rhythms
- Strive to blend individual sounds within each section, and the total ensemble
- Weigh the longer notes more heavily than the shorter notes

The Basics of Swing Style

Marching bands commonly experience stylistic problems when playing in the swing style. This feel is challenging to achieve because wind players tend to articulate too heavily. Rhythms often sound "square" because they are more closely associated with duple patterns rather than with triplet patterns. To develop proper style, begin by learning to articulate lightly, and smoothly, verbally producing triplet-based patterns with the syllables *'DOO DOO DOO DAH'* (or *'DU'*). Use 'OO' or *'U'* vowels for dark sounds. Use *'AH'* for normal textures, and *'EE'* for bright sounds. Use *'T'* attacks for neutral, accented,

Rock & Latin Styles

The character of most *Latin* and *Rock* styles of music is largely determined by articulations. As in the swing style, vocalizing vowels and consonants helps achieve uniformity of articulations, phrases, and inflections. When the ensemble can sing the phrases with precision, the stylistic uniformity will be improved. The total meaning of a musical phrase is defined by how the articulations are played. This is also true of the tempo, pulse, phrasing, dynamics, balance, and expression.

Some rock style arrangements are not always marked with articulations, and must be interpreted by the director and the ensemble. In most cases repeated eighth notes should be played with a hard-legato articulation. Accents should be played full value. For syncopated patterns, play on the "back side" of the beat for better style.

Most Latin rhythms should be played with lighter articulations. The pulse should never feel rushed, therefore, establishing a tight groove with the rhythm section. Inflections are not always marked in the music, but they must be played and felt by the ensemble. Vocalizing is the key to uniform articulations, phrasing, and inflections.

Achieving Uniform Balance

Construct a perfectly balanced ***Bb chord*** by individuals, not parts. Go through the entire wind section, assigning concert ***Bb—D—F***—equally distributed. For example, assign the trumpets and clarinets their ***C—E*** and ***G*** on the staff. Stay in the middle *tessituras* and make sure each section has an equal number of players for each cord tone. Keep the bass instruments on middle ***Bb concert***.

Have everyone play what they determine as *mezzo forte*. Make adjustments until all instruments are balanced with a uniform and desirable *mezzo forte*. Use two arms held chest level, fingertips touching to indicate the dynamic level of *mezzo forte*. Use the arms like a volume control raising and lowering them to standardize a balanced volume level for *pianississimo, pianissimo, piano, mezzo piano, mezzo forte, forte, fortissimo, and fortississimo*. Maintain a consistent balance and timbre at all extreme dynamic levels.

In addition, work to extend the quality of these extreme dynamic levels. Refine balances by holding up the right arm for brasses only and the left arm for woodwinds only. Experiment separating both arms at chest level and changing the balance between the woodwinds and brasses.

Pointing the first finger up or down will indicate moving the pitch up or down by half steps. Continue to utilize the same hand signals used for the scales such as cutting off the winds and having them hum and match pitches within a chord structure.

Maintaining Focus During Rehearsals

One technique to help maintain the focus of an ensemble in rehearsals is to utilize various unison verbal responses from the group to select questions. This requires a much more active level of attention than when passively listening.

Internalization: The Key To Rhythmic Precision

Before beginning the process of teaching fundamentals, it is important the students understand that a solid foundation of fundamentals is what facilitates good marching and playing. The level of execution is directly related to command of the basics.

Begin by defining and illustrating the concepts of *Style* and *Precision*. Introduce the process of *Internalization* and how it is the ultimate key to achieving good precision and timing. Also define and demonstrate *Subdivision* and how it is an integral part of internalization. Explain that subdivision is the process of dividing each beat into two or three equal parts. When a group can mentally subdivide effectively, it will be significantly easier to follow the conductor, especially when the tempos change or are extremely slow. The tempo is established by a reference, either a conductor or an audible time beating device such as a drum tap or amplified metronome. This reference is called an *external pulse*.

Demonstrate subdivision simply by having the group count four beats divided in half while someone conducts various tempo changes ('*one and two and three and four and*'). This is a great illustration of how subdivision makes it easier to maintain a precise tempo as a group, even when the *tempi* change radically or the ensemble is in a spread formation.

Next introduce inner pulse, a mental process. This is demonstrated by having the group count out loud subdividing for four counts, and then do the same mentally—while someone con-ducts various *tempi*. The process of maintaining a subdivided pulse while following a visual pulse is called internalization. Develop exercises that teach the group internalization to improve precision.

Example Exercise 1: Have the group count four subdivided beats out loud, and then do the same mentally for four counts while someone conducts a consistent tempo. Once this is achieved with precision, start the same exercise, and then stop conducting to determine whether or not the group is able to maintain pulse periodically without an external reference (conductor).

Example Exercise 2: Practice with an external pulse of four subdivided beats counting out loud, followed by four subdivided beats counting internally, and then clapping on the ninth count. If the clapping is together, the internalization is working. Practice this with various tempos. Once this is mastered, the silent counts can be extended.

Example Exercise 3: Have someone conduct a four pattern with a steady tempo while the group counts out loud on count one and on the *'AND'* of count three, internalizing the beats between. Once this is achieved, do the same exercise while changing the *tempi*.

Executing these types of mental exercises with the ensemble teaches individuals to develop a mental process that is synchronized within the larger group. This produces the effect of rhythmic precision, both musically and with marching execution. It is similar to Christmas tree lights all blinking at the same time. The electrical current that flows through the lights is similar to the internalization of beats that flows through the minds of the ensemble members. Try creating additional exercises to improve the process of internalization until it becomes natural for the entire group.

Editing Existing Arrangements

For bands that do not have perfect instrumentation, modifications can be made to existing music arrangements to achieve more desirable results. If the music has not been imputed into a music software program, it would be worthwhile to do so, for making any modifications simply and quickly. The following are typical examples on how to alter an arrangement to solve music problems, customize structure and improve quality.

Saxophones

The saxophone family provides a wealth of doubling possibilities. The alto saxophones have a wide range and can be used to strengthen, or replace second/third trumpets, mellophones/ horns, upper trombone parts or other critical woodwind parts that need enhancement. The tenor saxophones can strengthen or replace trombones, mellophones, and baritones (euphoni-ums). Finally, baritone saxophones can support the basses.

Using Instruments With Rests

Sometimes parts need reinforcement; double them with instruments that have rests. The possibilities are unlimited.

Re-Assign Parts

If there is a section in the band that has ample numbers, re-assign some of them to play a different part where there is a lack of instrumentation. Modern scoring software makes it is easy to transpose a new part from a different line in the score.

Change Keys

If the *tessituras* of an arrangement are too high causing a strained sound, transpose the entire arrangement down to a more comfortable range for the players.

Simplify

Simplify wind and percussion parts when the players are struggling with execution. Change rhythms, alter melodies and cut parts from the music. When it becomes obvious that a particular music passage is not going to improve with rehearsals, do not hesitate to make changes that make the music more accessible for the students. For example, a quick solution to resolve a challenging percussion part is to extract a phrase from a different location in the chart and substitute it for the trouble spot. An advantage to this solution is that the percussion players do not need to learn new music.

Cut & Paste
Do not be afraid to cut and paste various sections of the music to accommodate a better structure for the arrangement. There is nothing wrong with extracting music phrases from different locations in the score to customize the structure of the music. Provide a solution that might be used to strengthen the end of the show, or improve the transitions between various sections in the performance.

Change Octaves
Try taking a phrase up or down an octave to improve the quality of the sound.

Change Articulations
The character and style of the music is largely determined by articulations. Changing articulations to make a phrase more stylistically correct is a simple process. For example, add a *forte piano crescendo* to a long note, insert *accents*, change *staccato* to *slurred,* and etc.

Change Dynamics
Sometimes changing the dynamics can make the music more interesting. Adding a crescendo or decrescendo is an effective way to merge an old phrase into a new one.

Cutting Or Adding Parts
A solo, or even a passage for full band, can be altered to feature a section, or vice versa.

Insert Drum Breaks
Insert short or long drum breaks in appropriate places to heighten the impact of an introduction to a new musical section.

Change Rhythms
Alter rhythms to solve drill problems when more, or less counts are needed to make the maneuvers easier to execute. Doubling note values adds drama. Simplifying complex rhythms saves a lot of stress and rehearsal time.

Common Music Problems

Problem 1

Serious pitch problems occur in extreme temperatures, as several conflicting forces are working against each other. Wind instruments have proven tendencies to be flat in cold weather and sharp in hot weather. Keyboard and membrane instruments do the opposite. As strange as it sounds, piccolos sound flat when the temperature is hot and sharp when it is cold. This is due to the instrument's smaller size; therefore, their pitch will be affected to a lesser degree than that of the larger instruments.

Solution

Ideally, it is best for students to adjust their tuning apparatus the least amount possible. This means the center of pitch must be allowed to move up and down with the temperature to avoid excessive adjustments on the wind instruments.

Tune a ***Bb*** clarinet to a tuning device indoors at normal temperatures (around *75 degrees*). Leave the clarinet physically adjusted when moving to the performance location. Allow the clarinet's pitch to rise or fall with the climate of the performance location. Tune one person from each section to that clarinet reference pitch in the conditions in which the performance will occur. Then tune the section to that person. This allows for more precise tuning of like instruments, to the pitch center.

Using tuning devices in extreme temperatures will not allow the pitch center to deviate. This will cause excessive adjustments of the instruments resulting in serious pitch problems for each instrument. For colder temperatures, once the tuning process has been completed, keep the internal air temperature constant by blowing air through the instrument until the performance begins.

Pit-type instruments should be protected from weather related damage with coverings (such as shipping quilts). This also helps large pitch conflicts with the wind instruments during extreme temperature swings.

Keeping instruments up to temperature requires preparing for a performance. Bands typically complete a thorough warm up, which includes a carefully executed tuning sequence. With a normal body temperature of 98.6, it can be estimated that even in cold temperatures the wind instruments are brought up to a temperature much warmer than the outside temperature. During the transit from the warm up to the performance, the instruments could drop in temperature as much as 30 degrees. To maintain intonation, it is very effective to continuously exhale through the instruments to keep them up to temperature.

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Problem 2

Most mellophones usually sound flat in a marching band.

Solution

Pitch is a problem for all instruments in a marching ensemble, but the mellophones tend to sound flat even in ensembles with good overall pitch. This is a result of tuning mellophones to a B-flat concert. This pitch is problematic as it is not in the usual *tessitura* they play in during performances. A better pitch center will be maintained by tuning an *F concert arpeggio* (their upper *C-E-G*). This puts the horns in a higher register for tuning, and will be closer to their normal playing range. In addition, playing a mellophone in tune involves more than adjusting slides. No matter how they are tuned, there will be other pitch problems in other registers. However, it is the upper register that is the most exposed.

Problem 3

The full harmonic balance of sound is not achieved.

Solution

Ever try memorizing a third trumpet part? Melody, bass lines, or counter-melodies are much easier to learn. It is a common tendency for inner parts to gravitate toward the melody or other dominant lines when playing by memory. Sometimes the problem is the result of assigning less experienced players to inner parts. Reassign more evenly across the section and ensemble to distribute the talent levels to cover all parts. For example, eliminate the third trumpet part and transpose it for some of the alto sax players, or eliminate the third trombone part and transpose it for the tenor saxophones. The possibilities are unlimited when transposing various parts to other instruments to strengthen inner voicing and improve harmonic balances.

Problem 4

When arrangements have high *tessituras*, the pitch and tone qualities are poor, especially at louder volume levels.

Solution

Before purchasing a new arrangement, check the range and make sure it is within the comfort level of the winds. When hiring an arranger, be sure to provide him or her with the ranges of the players. One possibility is to input the arrangement into a music software notation program and lower the key for the whole ensemble. Another possibility is to re-score/re-voice the portions of the arrangement where the ranges are too high. This must be done with portions of the music in which improve-ment may never occur. There is no reason to allow strained portions of the music to go on without change.

Problem 5

Impractical placement of instruments during a drill causes a variety of phasing problems.

Solution

The most obvious solution is for the drill writer not to design drills using placement that induces phasing problems. However, if it is too late and the drill has already been taught, then the solutions are more challenging, but possible. To minimize this problem, some players will need to adjust the pulse to remain "in sync" with other instruments. All musicians must learn two concepts of pulse: following the pulse of the conductor regardless of what they are hearing from other instruments, or following what they are hearing from other instruments and ignoring the conductor's pulse. The choice is dependent upon the placement of the instruments.

How to adjust for phasing problems

When the marching percussion is backfield (or to the side), they will phase with the percussion in the pit, or the brasses up front (or to the opposite side). In this case, the pit players or the brasses in front (or side) must ignore the conductor and learn how to "listen back (or to the side)" and "sync-up" with what they are hearing from the backfield (or side) percussion. The percussion backfield (or side) must ignore what they hear and follow the conductor.

When the marching percussion players are close to the conductor and the brasses are farther away, the percussion must not follow the conductor, but must "sync-up" with what they hear from the brasses backfield (or to the side). The brasses must ignore what they are hearing from the percussion and follow the conductor.

In all cases, common sense prevails. Sometimes the drills can be modified to resolve phasing problems.

Problem 6

Phrase endings are "clipped-off" during expressive passages.

Solution

During warm-ups, play scales, chorales, or chords to teach "tapered" releases, making sure to stretch note values. Expressive passages should be played in the same style as a concert ensemble, shaping lines with dynamics, stretching phase endings, tapering releases, and using rubato to enhance the lyrical qualities of the ensemble.

Problem 7

Articulations are not uniform or in the proper style of the music.

Solution

Practice vocalizing phrases using appropriate vowels and consonants. This will improve uniformity and help save players' "chops" as well. Use the section on *Teaching Articulations,* earlier in this chapter, to learn how to vocalize articulations to achieve uniformity amongst the wind players.

Problem 8

The winds do not sustain long tones or finish long phrases with substance.

Solution

Wind players must learn proper breathing habits, particularly in a marching ensemble where movement is combined with music. Use the exercises described in the *Marching While Playing an Instrument* section found in *Chapter IV*. These exercises will help to develop breathing, sustaining, releasing, and attacking notes uniformly as an ensemble.

Problem 9

Attacks in the winds are "mushy" and sloppy.

Solution

This is usually caused when the attack is out of ratio with the breath. Here is an exercise that helps to develop clean attacks in the winds: Play a ***B^{b} scale***, holding each note four counts. Attack each note using only the breath (no tongue at all). This will sound very sloppy and first, but with practice, it will become more precise. Start each note on ***count 1***, release on ***count 3*** and take a huge breath on ***count 4***. Once the ensemble can attack each note precisely using only the breath, start using the tongue on the same exercise. The improvement in achieving clean attacks will be obvious.

Style & Precision

Every marching ensemble aspires to achieve a high standard of excellence in both music and marching. Style is defined as the total look and sound of an ensemble. It is important that each participant can perform all fundamentals with ease and consistency to attain precision. Participants must understand what is correct and how to accomplish it. In addition, they must be willing to work hard at refining their individual performance skills.

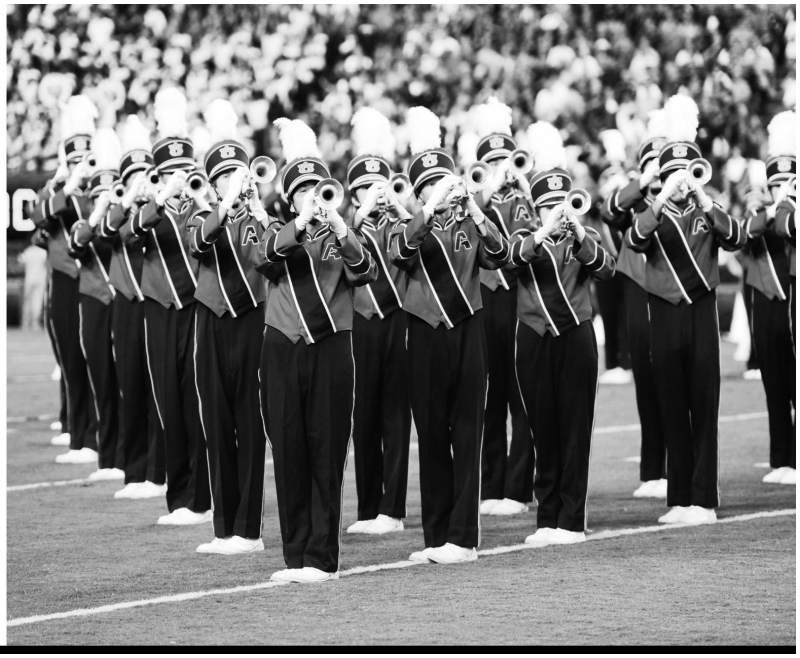
Before you start teaching

marching fundamentals

Meet with all participants to describe why learning the basics is important. Ensemble members must understand of the goals and how their achievement will ultimately provide the basis for a great ensemble.

To improve communication while teaching marching fundamentals, the following terms should be clearly explained, listed here in the order in which they should be introduced.

In addition to defining these terms, it is beneficial to use visual demonstrations illustrating the importance of these fundamentals.



anticipation—beginning movement and / or sound before the proper time
dragging—executing movement and / or music increasingly slower than the established tempo
execution—movement and / or music in action
hesitation—beginning movement and / or sound after the proper time
inner pulse—subdividing the pulse mentally to achieve ensemble precision
point 'a'—the clearly defined starting position of any movement
point 'b'—the clearly defined ending position of any movement
rushing—executing movement and / or music increasingly faster than the established tempo
smooth movement—moving from point "a" to point "b" evenly, in ratio to the tempo
snappy movement—moving from point 'a' to point 'b' as quickl, regardless of the tempo
style- the overall characteristic sound and / or appearance of an ensemble
subdivision—dividing beats into smaller increments for better precision
tempo—the speed of the rhythmic pulse of music and / or movement
timing- defined movement between points "a" and "b"

The Bracket

The Bracket is an exercise which quickly and easily solves many posture problems all at once. It can be used to teach perfect posture at attention and while marching. This procedure should take place at the beginning stages, before using any instruments.

BENEFITS:

- Stretches the entire body upward to align the hips with the shoulders
- Distributes the weight perfectly in the center of gravity
- Makes the head up higher to prepare proper horn angles
- Stretches the upper torso to eliminate “slumping”
- Helps develop muscle strength and endurance
- Results in uniformity with the group

Steps to Define the Bracket

1. Put the arms in the *bracket* position, right arm on the top, parallel to the ground.

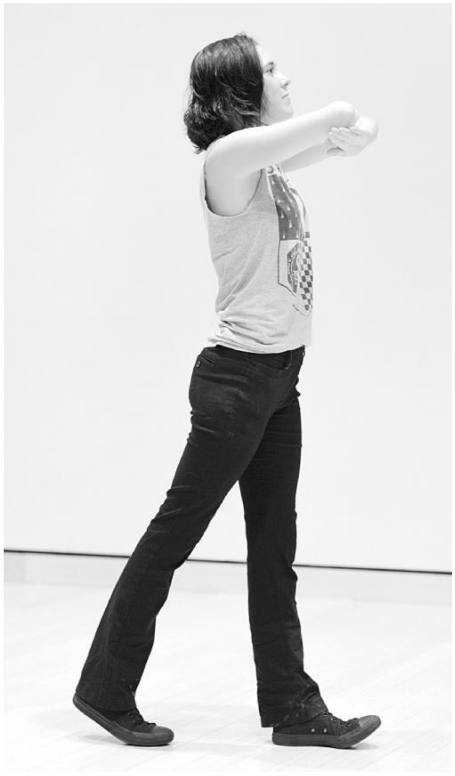
2. Next raise the arms to the angle that of the desired horn angle

3. Then stretch the head up until the chin is at the height of the arms. Do not roll the head back, but stretch up from the neck.

Steps to define the Bracket Continued

4. Raise entire body up as much as possible on the tips of the toes. Hold this position maintaining balance. This dis-tributes the weight to the center of gravity resulting uniformity of body angles in the group.

5. Slowly lower the weight, keeping the head high, until the heels barely touch the ground. Strive for about ***60%*** of the weight on the balls of the foot and ***40%*** of the weight on the heels. Doing so creates a perfect posture at attention.



6. Use this same body position when teaching standing and marching funda-mentals. It will develop strength in the upper torso and be a faster method to achieve uniformity in the group. Use this position whenever drilling without instruments rather than letting the arms hang down at the sides.

Achieve uniformity by teaching the proper technique.

The Glide Step

The Glide Step is a stylized version of walking and is the most practical for playing and marching simultaneously. While shifting the weight forward, roll from the heel to the toe, creating a smooth "gliding" action. Stylistic variations of this step are possible, depending on the defined foot and knee action. The standard size step is generally a ***22.5"*** step (eight steps per five yards, or "eight to five") for corps-style groups, although a ***30" step*** (six steps per five yards, or "six to five") is common for military-style groups.

To understand the basics of the *glide step*, think of taking a normal walking step with toes turned forward and with the inner edges of the feet parallel and close together. This concept can be easily taught by utilizing a visualization known as "ski-line." Imagine a person skiing down a hill. To order to proceed, the skier must keep the skis perfectly parallel. If the toes turn in, crossing the skis in front, or if the toes turn out, crossing the skis behind, the skier will likely fall. While marching, the feet must remain in a similar position. Care must be taken especially when stepping off out of a foot position with open toes.

When stepping forward, keep the toe turned up and roll from the heel to the toes while shifting the weight. This slight difference from walking gives the glide step its characteristic appearance. The "gliding" action is caused by smoothly shifting the weight through rolling from the heel to the toe. This action can be practiced by rocking back and forth; from the back to the front foot while keeping the body level. Keep the body erect, as if balancing books on the head. The articulation point should be the back edge of the heel (not the ball of the heel). Smoothly roll from the heel to the toe in a straight line to shift the weight forward.

A feeling of stretching upward must be maintained to achieve a gliding action. The shoulders should be square with the hips. There should be no movement from the waist up; do not bounce or swing the shoulders from side to side, and do not lean forward or allow the shoulders to move ahead of the hips.

The following teaching technique is geared toward achieving a relaxed, straight-leg style. A more exaggerated style can be gained by increasing the action of the knee. Generally, either technique should be taught with as little discussion of the knee as possible, although instructors must be completely familiar with how the technique they desire will occur.

A slight knee bend happens in the straight-leg version, but it is best to encourage students to keep their knees as straight as possible without locking them—while concentrating more on accurate heel attacks, weight distribution, and proper posture. The bend in the knee of the exaggerated style is more easily taught by concentrating on the increased action of the foot in the roll-through (in addition to the above). It is challenging to be aware of the angle of one's knee (to say nothing of trying to control it). Therefore, it is much simpler to focus on the angles and attack points of the foot.

Each step can be broken down into four incremental parts to develop perfect timing and uniformity of movement, weight distribution, and body posture. These parts are labeled as such: *'ONE'* (or the number of the step being executed), *'EE'—'AND'*—and *'UH',* just as beats are subdivided into four parts in common music notation counting systems. Keep all movements smooth and flowing from one part to the next. The weight of the body must be constantly gliding forward from foot to foot. Begin the teaching process by breaking down the glide step, defining key positions and movement of the body using the following procedure.

1. Start with the feet together. Make sure the body is stretched upward and the horn angle is defined. Give a four-count prep to establish the tempo and prepare the movement. On the *'AND'* of ***count 4,*** or ON count four, the left heel raises slightly off the ground and the body begins moving forward. Push off the right foot to get the body moving forward. On *'UH'* of count four, the left foot and the body continue to move forward. The front heel should pass by the back toe on *'UH.'*

2. On *'ONE',* the body should arrive in the position of a perfectly symmetrical upside down *'Y',* with the weight distributed evenly between the left heel and the back toe. *This is the key position of the glide step***.** Hold this position and define the exact position of the body and the distribution of the weight. The left toe (the height may vary depending on desired style) and the right heel should be up off the ground. The legs should be straight but not stiff to avoid *squatting*. The body should be stretched up forming an upside down *'V'* from the hip to the ankles. The shoulders should always remain in line with the hips to avoid *leaning,* and the upper body should be erect.

3. On *'EE'* the body continues moving forward, rolling from the left heel, shifting the weight to the front foot. The left leg is straight and the right leg is bent with the heel off the ground, toe pointed touching the ground. The shoulders should be in line with the hips.

4. On *'AND'* the body continues moving forward until the right ankle is in line with the left ankle. The heel is up slightly with the foot barely off the ground. The right leg should be slightly bent, the left leg is straight.

5. On *'UH'* the body continues moving forward. The back edge of the right heel should pass by the front edge of the left toe on *'UH.'*

Glide Step

Upside down 'Y' position

6. On count *'TWO'* the body arrives to the upside down *'V'* position with the right foot forward. This body position should be the same as count *'ONE'*—with the exception of the right foot forward.

Once these positions have been defined, it is best to combine parts of the movement, as it is impossible to stop the forward motion without losing one's balance. It is also more productive to practice this exercise with the instruments in playing position to help achieve proper balance and develop strength and endurance in the upper body.

7. Practice combining *'AND—UH—ONE'* in one motion. Be sure to push off the back foot to arrive on the front heel exactly on *'ONE.'* A common problem is arriving on count *'ONE'* late because the movement of the first step must be initiated from a static position. Be thorough about checking the upside down *'V'* position of the lower body for uniformity. This position is the key for developing stylistic consistency. It will take a significant amount of time until everyone is able to hit this position precisely without losing their balance. This can also be practiced in the beginning stages without instruments and locking arms to help maintain balance.

8. Once this has been perfected, do the same exercise and add the *'EE'* position by shifting the weight to the front foot. Hold this position and make sure the shoulders are in line with the hips, the left leg is straight, and the back leg is slightly bent with the heel off the ground.
'AND-UH-ONE-EE.'

9. Next, practice the exercise adding the next *'AND.'* Hold this position making sure the ankles are in line with each other. The right foot is slightly off the ground with the toe pointed. The left leg should be straight.
'AND-UH-ONE-EE-AND.'

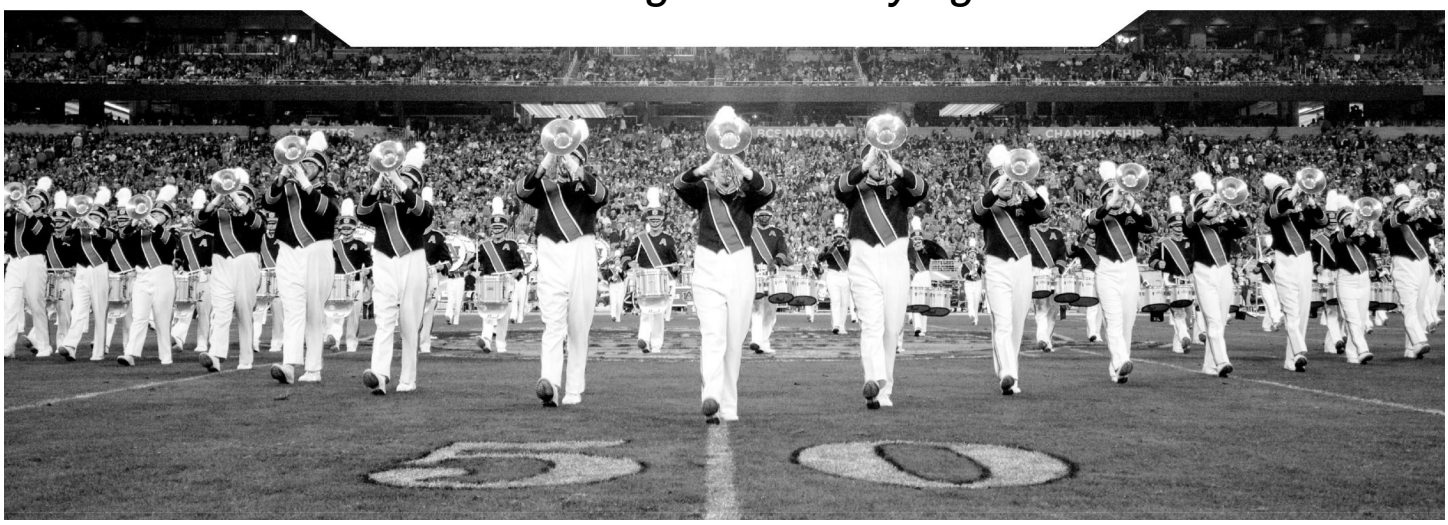
10. Finally, practice this step to *'TWO.'* Check the posture in the upside down *'V.' 'TWO.' 'AND-UH-ONE-EE-AND-UH-TWO.'*

22.5" Glide Step
A standard glide step used for marching eight steps in five yards.

30" Glide Step
A longer glide step is used for marching six steps in five yards. Shorter people can tend to bounce while executing this step. Pushing forward with the back foot can eliminate the bouncing.

31.8" Stride Step
This larger step used to maintain eight steps to five yards while marching at ***45-degree*** angles.

Marching While Playing



Learning how to march while playing an instrument is a critical and challenging process for beginners. The procedure begins by teaching the music and marching separately. Once the marching fundamentals have been taught, it is important to develop exercises that introduce the process of marching while playing. Many ensembles skip this process and begin teaching the drills, resulting in poor execution when the drill and music are combined. Once the music is prepared, and the ensemble is able to march while playing, the drill can be taught. Practicing the drills with recordings makes it easier to understand the relationships between the music and the drill. The last step of this process is combining the music and drills.

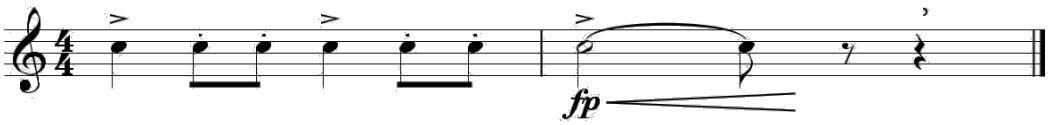
The following exercises are designed to help students learn how to march and play before combining the music and drill. By using simple musical exercises that are memorized easily, the students can concentrate on the coordination of breathing, articulation, sustaining long tones, and phrasing; combined with various fundamental marching routines.

These exercises help the ensemble learn to project sound with clean attacks and releases by instilling the practice of breathing uniformly. The overall sound of the winds eventually becomes fuller as the group develops confidence in marching while playing. Each exercise can be rehearsed with or without per-cussion and auxiliary groups. When the percussionists partic-ipate, they should play simple repeated patterns with a solid pulse, that fits rhythmically with the musical exercises. When the auxiliary groups participate, they can add fundamental routines with their equipment, that also are compatible with the phrases of the music exercises. The three exercises below are straightforward and can easily be memorized. They must be rehearsed first, without marching until they can be played with confidence.

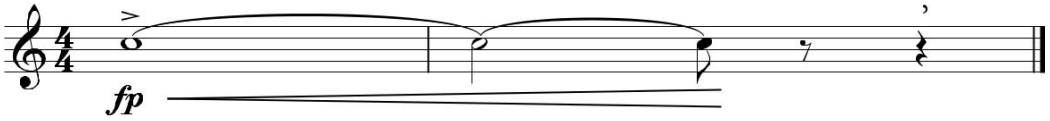
Students should play each pattern one time, on each note of any scale, ascending and descending. Play the pattern twice on the top note of the scale, creating an exercise of ***128 counts*** (***64 counts*** ascending and ***64 counts*** descending). The ensemble should breathe uniformly in tempo on ***count 8*** of each pattern, filling their lungs completely during each breath. All articulations must be solid, using the tip of the tongue. For each long tone, the air should move for the full duration of the note. Stylistically, the longer notes will have more weight and volume; the shorter notes will have less weight and volume.

Once these exercises have been taught without marching, they can be combined with various marching routines. Keep the routines very simple at first, and restricted to ***8-count*** patterns to coincide with the phrasing of the exercises.

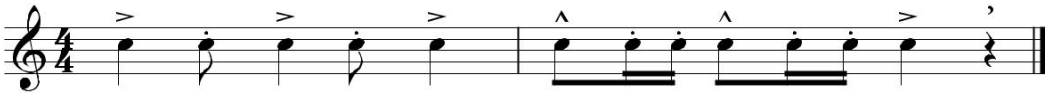
To begin, practice each exercise while marking time, adjust to moving the feet in sync with the music. Transition to exercises marching forward on yard lines, taking eight steps per five yards, as this corresponds to the breath that occurs each time they hit a yard line.



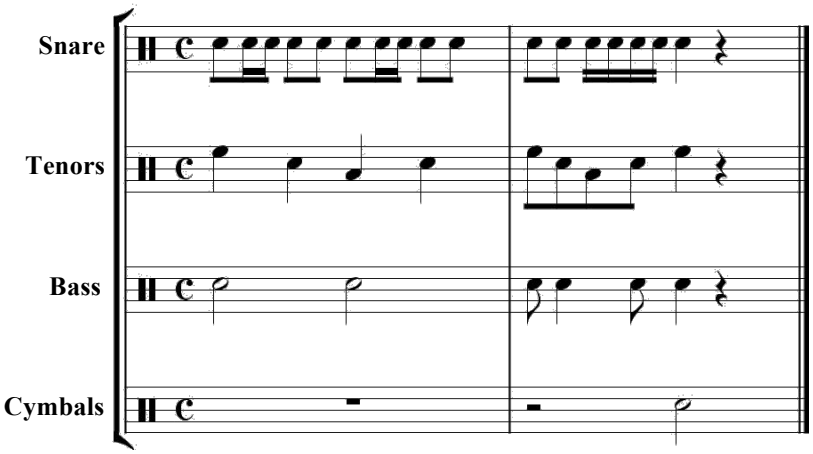
This eight-count exercise helps to develop solid attacks and clean releases. The quarter notes should be played long with a heavy attack, and the ***eighth notes*** played short, with a crisp attack. Play the last note with a solid attack, drop the volume quickly, and then make a fast crescendo with a clipped release on the ***count 7***. On ***count 8***, take a full breath. As mentioned above, marching eight steps per five yards allows breathing when stepping on the line.



This exercise emphasizes sustaining long tones, and the concept of phrasing. Make a solid attack on ***count 1***, and soften to a ***piano*** dynamic level on ***count 2***. Play a gradual ***crescendo*** with a clipped release on ***count 7***, and a breath on ***count 8***.



This exercise teaches clean articulations and the concept of weighting notes on primary and secondary ***accents***. On the first measure, play the quarter notes heavy and long, and the ***eighth notes*** light and detached. On the second measure, play the ***eighth notes*** heavy and short, and the ***sixteenth notes*** light and short. Breathe on ***count 8***.



This eight-count percussion vamp can be memorized and played with the ensemble on all the previous exercises.

Once the students become comfortable with these shorter exercises, more challenging drill sequences can be created, to incorporate turns or alternating forward march and mark time with turns.

Here is an excellent example of a routine for 128 counts, which can be used to review the basics of marching while playing:

1. Forward march eight, and right flank four times (box), forward march eight, and left flank four times, forward march eight, and to the rear four times, forward march eight, and mark time eight twice.

2. Create various simple drill patterns to help the students relate musical phrasing with marching patterns.

3. Once success is achieved with this process, practice marching the full length of the field while playing the school song, or a musical selection the students have thoroughly memorized. This helps the players develop endurance, confidence, and a more advanced level of marching while playing.

Common Marching Problems

Squatting

Proper small size glide-step backward

Proper small size glide step forward

Problem 1

When marching with larger step sizes, some individuals tend to bounce or sway the upper body.

Solution

Bouncing when marching forward is a typical problem, particularly when taking larger steps. To eliminate the bounce, keep the upper body stretched upward and keep the body moving forward on the *'AND'* of each step. Keep the back straight and head up to avoid slouching. Practice marching forward at six and four steps per five yards, to develop uniformity and comfort with this larger step size. Avoid "squatting" by keeping the legs straight.

Problem 2

Typically, many marching groups "shuffle" their feet when taking very small glide steps, and tend to "slump" their upper bodies. This is common on "adjust"-type drills when everyone is taking various sized steps during a drill transition.

Solution

Keep heads and sternums high. To remedy this, line up everyone in vertical forms on the yard line with instruments in playing positions. Have the students practice tapping the back edge of their heels on the ground a few times on their own to regain the "feel" for where the articulation is. Practice marching 16 steps per five yards, keeping the full body weight entirely on the heels with the toes curled up. This will look very awkward and stiff, but it forces everyone to make contact with the ground, on the heels at the beginning of each step. After repeating this several times, allow marchers to roll from the heel to the toe, with each step. Define how high the toe should be curled.

In general, the smaller the step, the less pronounced the curl of the toe. Remind students to keep the upper body stretched upward at all times. A common side effect of posture work, is better foot technique, and uniformity of the foot action. Correcting poor posture can produce immediate improvement in the feet.

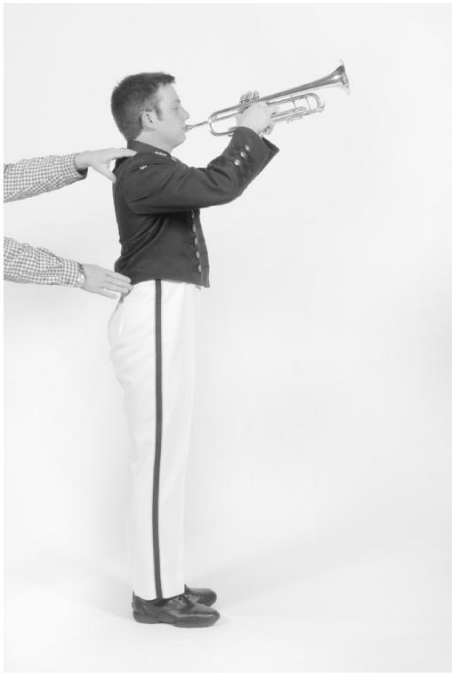
Problem 3

Marching backwards with very large or very small size steps is not uniform, looks awkward, and is sometimes out of rhythm. Marchers also tend to lean the upper body forward with the shoulders in front of the hips. “Squatting” is another common problem with large or small size steps.

Solution

To correct *squatting*, practice small backwards step sizes to immediately improve style. To make large steps easier and more uniform, teach students where their “power muscles” are. Begin with both feet flat on the ground, then launch up onto the toes. Be aware of the muscles used to accomplish this. Use these muscles to propel the center of the body backwards. Be careful not to rise upward first. One final consideration is the motion of the foot for backward steps. If no roll down is desired, make sure that the foot is almost “locked” into position, as it slides against the ground and pushes off into the next step. Too much play in the foot will usually cause instability.

Shoulders ahead of hips



Physical correction

Proper alignment

Problem 4

When marching forward, many students moved the upper body and bounce.

Solution

Without instruments, have students pretend to hold an imaginary bowl of water in front of their face with the tips of their fingers. Pretend the bowl is filled with water to the brim. Practice forward marching without spilling any water. This exercise helps develop the concept of smooth and graceful movement, while maintaining upper body control.

Problem 5

Individuals do not arrive simultaneously at the end of each drill segment.

Solution

When teaching or cleaning drill, have everyone freeze on the last count of each drill segment. The leading foot on that count should be in the assigned position of that form. Next, close the other foot, and correct any alignment problems until the students understand their positions in that form. Retrace that drill

to the previous form. This saves time and teaches the drill backwards and forwards. Run the drill again, instructing students to correct their paths, and step size, until they can reach their exact targets on the same count. Once this is accomplished, they are ready to practice the same drill using the "overlap" concept. This is by doing the same maneuvers, but taking one more count into the next drill.

Possibilities might include a turn into the next form, halt, or mark time. Helping to eliminate false turns, stops, or step offs, as everyone is learning to make these changes at the *end of drill one*, instead of at *the beginning of drill two*.

Problem 6

When standing in a stationary position, many performers tense up their shoulders, or allow their upper body to slouch.

Solution

This exercise can be done with instruments in playing position, or in the down position (while standing at attention or parade rest). Have everyone rise up on the tips of their toes as high as possible. Hold this position while maintaining good balance.

Tell them to imagine themselves as rubber bands being stretched upward as tightly as possible. This forces the student to center their weight in the same place.

Once they have gained control of this position, tell them to slowly lower their weight from the shoulders down. Just until their heels barely touch the ground, while pretending to leave their heads in the *'UP'* position. The body angles should be uniform. Tell them to develop the feeling that they are constantly being stretched upward, whether marching, or in a still position.

Another concept to facilitate proper upper body positions, is to instruct the marchers to imagine that each one is a puppet suspended from above, by a string attached to the top of the head. The string is so tight that the feet are barely able to touch the ground. This should give them a constant feeling of being pulled upward from the head, demanding the feet to be pushed down to make contact with the ground.

Slouching shoulders

Tense shoulders

Relaxed shoulders

Problem 7

Good posture requires the upper body be stretched upwards and erect. This includes the head angle. Bad head angles affect posture and horn angles.

Bad head angle

Solution

The bracket check is an easy way to quickly resolve bad head angles.

Bracket check

Problem 8

Spacing and alignment are inconsistent.

Solution

This problem is multi-faceted and ongoing at all levels of achievement. During the teaching of fundamentals, each individual must learn about maintaining equidistant spacing in all forms, covering down in files, and keeping curves and arcs smooth. Learning to use one's peripheral vision takes time, and must be exercised from the early stages of aligning formations. When making adjustments to correct flaws in various drills, the most common dispute is whether an individual should go to the wrong position in order to be in the form, or go to the correct position and be out of the form.

The rule of thumb for this situation, is to adjust to the form for performances, but go to the correct positions during rehearsals, hoping to correct the accuracy of the drill set for the future.

If inaccurate forms do not get corrected in rehearsal, they will deteriorate until they become unrecognizable from their original design.

Problem 9

Horn angles tend to droop, especially at the end of the show.

Solution

This tendency is usually the result of ensembles that practice drill without instruments. Marching without instruments completely changes the balance of the body when marching. In addition, upper body strength must be built over a long period of time in order to develop the endurance to perform with good posture for the entire show.

The only time instruments should not be carried during drill, is while learning new maneuvers/commands, while holding drill charts. Most drill cleaning and review of fundamentals should be done with instruments in playing positions. Vary horn angles by pointing the bells toward a defined object, such as the press box or the podium.

Problem 10

Neck extension is another typical problem.

Solution

Think of keeping the ears centered with the shoulders.

Improper neck extension

Proper neck extension

Problem 11

Turning the toes outward or inward while doing the glide step is a common problem. Spreading the feet is also a common occurrence.

Solution

Practice marching parallel to yard lines. The yard lines provide a visual aid and a “ski line” concept to keep the inseams of the feet parallel, and in line with each other.

Problem 12

When preparing to move, if performers stand with all of their weight toward the back of their feet, some students will have difficulty with the weight shift necessary to achieve the correct step size on count one. This can also cause problems with pulse on count one.

Solution

Establish the concept of “the platform” of the foot. Ask students to perceive the front half of their foot as the “platform”. Prior to a step-off, have the students shift their weight to the platform. They should only feel the shift, but not lift the heel. This will be an internal shifting of weight as preparation, not a visual shift. In the same way that all moving changes of direction take place on the platform of the foot; count one from a standing position will be improved, if this technique is used with consistency.

Toeing out

Spreading

Ski line correction—Forward

Ski line correction—Backward

DRILL DESIGN

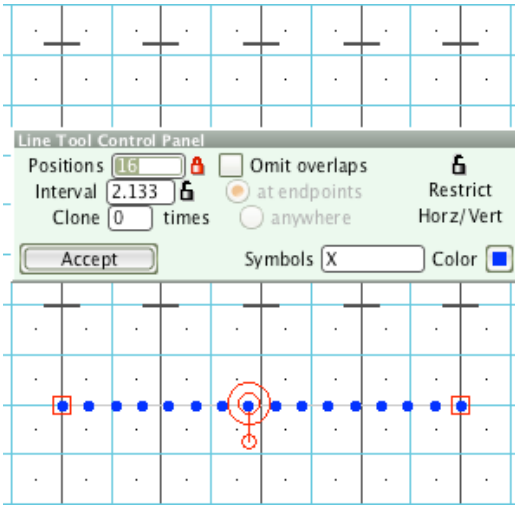
Dr. Corey Spurlin – Auburn University

PLACEMENT OF PERFORMERS

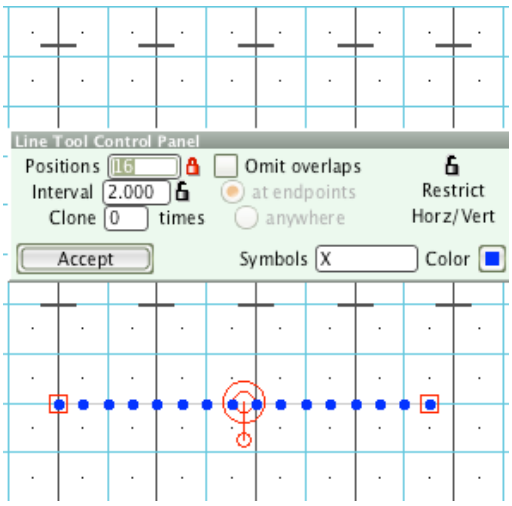
LINEAR CHARTING: FRONTS AND FILES

- Use the grid
- Use exact spacing
- Consistent intervals among similar performers

NO



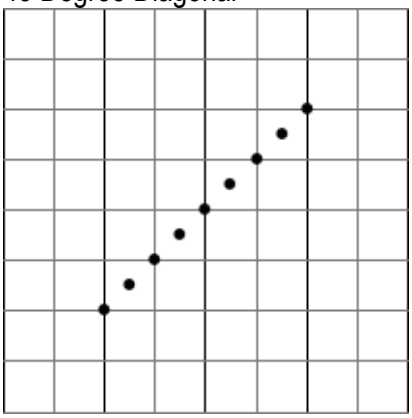
YES



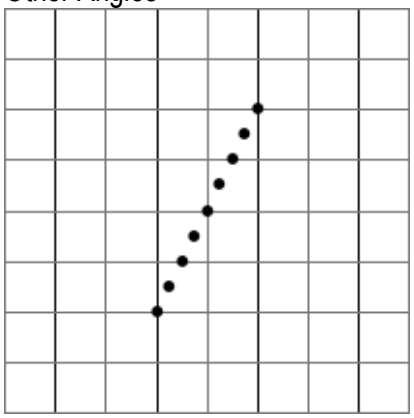
LINEAR CHARTING: DIAGONALS

- Use the grid
- Use 45 degree diagonals as much as possible
- Use specific patterns to create other angles

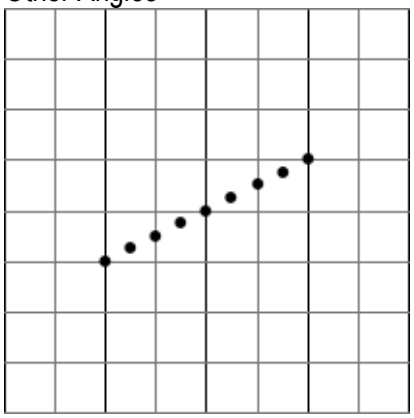
45 Degree Diagonal



Other Angles



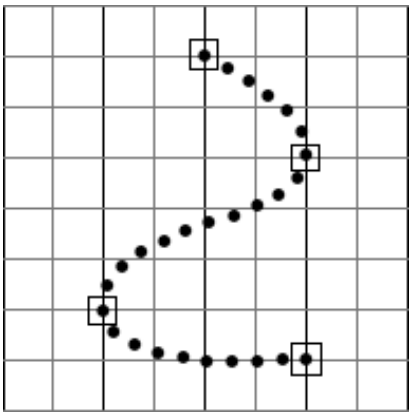
Other Angles



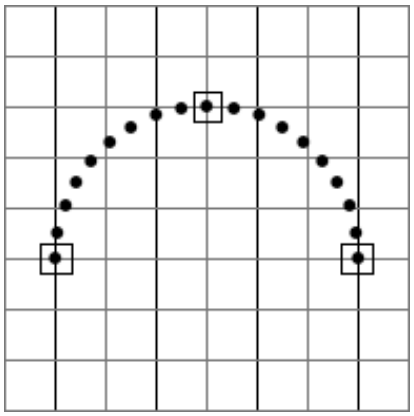
CURVILINEAR CHARTING

- Chart arcs instead of curves
- Chart important dress points on the grid
- Maintain intervals close to 2 or 3 steps (1.9-2.1) (2.9-3.1)

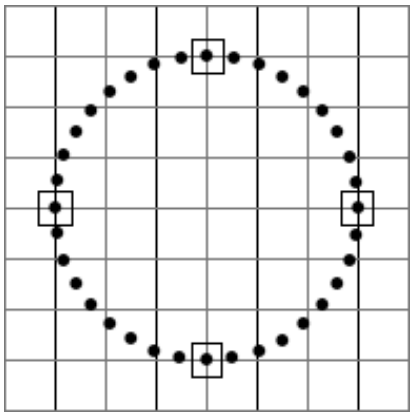
Curve, Regular Spacing



Arc, Regular Spacing



Circle, Regular Spacing



PERSPECTIVE

CONSIDERATIONS

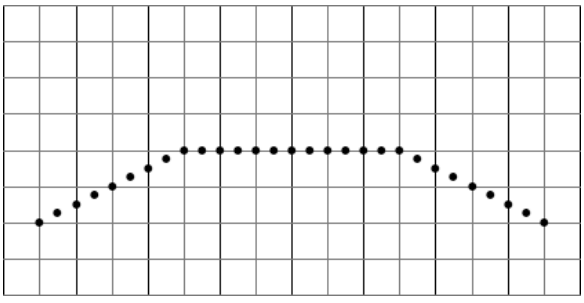
- The distance of the formation from the bleachers
- The height of the viewer in the bleachers

GENERAL SOLUTION

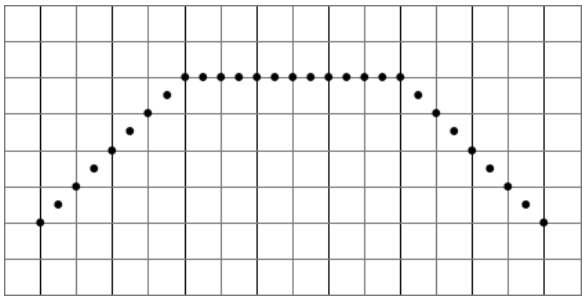
- Elongate vertically and compress horizontally

AVOID SUBTLETIES

This angle is too slight to create the desired appearance



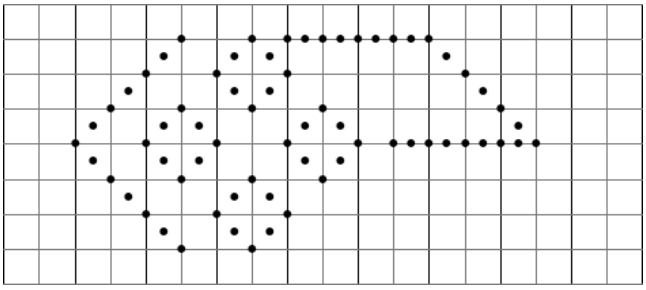
This adjustment improves the definition of the form

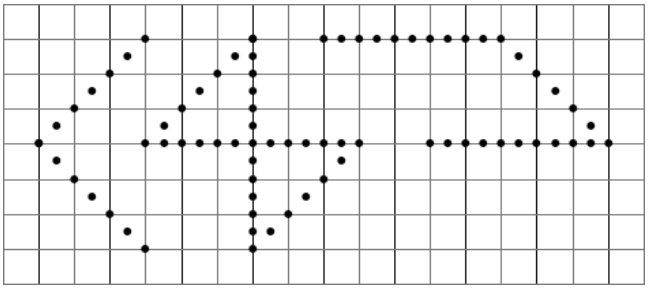


AVOID CLUTTER / PROPORTION ELEMENTS

These elements are too small and too close together

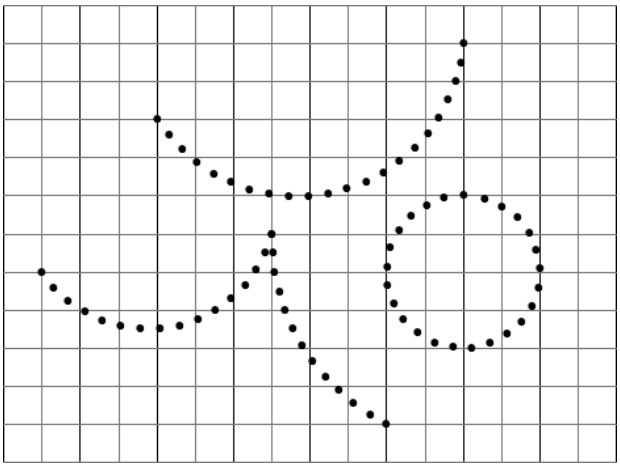
These elements are joined and reconfigured



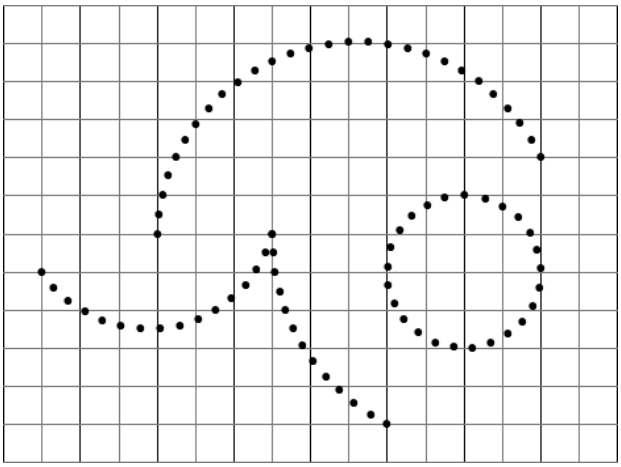


AVOID SCREENING OR MASKING PERFORMERS

Because they are so close together, the front elements will appear blended with the back arc form



Inverting the back arc allows for adequate space between front and back elements



STAGING

WINDS

- Draw audience attention to most important timbres
- Consider listening environment for each segment of the show

PERCUSSION

- Integrate with winds
- Allow musical demand to dictate mobility and spatial separation
- Consider listening preferences (center snare)

AUXILIARY

- Integrate with winds and percussion
- Strive for field coverage when appropriate
- Strive for fluid equipment changes

COLORGUARD

Problem 1

One of the biggest problem when staging any type of auxiliary group is the choreography is either too difficult, or there has not been enough time to clean the material.

Solution

If the material is the appropriate level for the group, but not precise enough for competition or performance, consider leaving out the visuals during transitions and focus on cleaning the material during features, or when in static formations. Then once the visuals are clean, start gradually adding material during transition.

Problem 2

Sometimes the choreography is constantly advanced.

Solution

A good rule to follow is to make the choreography simpler when the drill is difficult and use the more advanced material on features, static forms, or when the drill is simple.

Problem 3

Exchanging equipment can look awkward and messy/

Solution

Encourage the drill writer to design the drills so that the auxiliary groups are staged close to the area for exchanges.

Problem 4

The auxiliary groups do not contribute to the overall strength of the total design of the drill. “Framing” or placing the them behind the band does not strengthen the visual picture.

Solution

The auxiliary groups can enhance the pictures by superimposing on the picture, become extensions to forms, become a separate but complimentary form, pass through the band. In addition they can make smaller bands look larger by integrating them into the band forms.

Problem 5

Dropped equipment is a distraction to the visual precision.

Solution

Sometimes the wind can cause this problem. Always have a backup plan to eliminate tosses when it is windy. Make sure the flag poles are “weighted” which helps the overall control of spins and tosses.