

Drumline Like The Pros!

A building blocks checklist for creating a great marching percussion ensemble

By David England

The following is a checklist that I like to use when evaluating our percussion program or when looking at any successful marching percussion ensemble. As elementary as the following things may seem, they are the building blocks for the various levels of achievement in the marching percussion activity. There are four broad categories here broken down in to their basic elements. Each basic element includes its own checklist in the form of questions. Answering these questions honestly will lead you through a careful analysis of your percussion program and give you a chance to focus on the elements that need work.

The Look: *The first impression. This is what people understand the most about your group.*

Uniforms:

- ✓ Do they all look appropriate in size and in the way they are worn?
- ✓ How do you carry the parts of the uniform?
- ✓ How do you put them down when needed?

Grooming:

- ✓ How do they wear their hair?
- ✓ Facial hair or clean look?
- ✓ Jewelry or no?

Posture:

- ✓ Where do your hands and feet go at attention, parade rest, when warming up?
- ✓ Is everyone standing up straight with good/correct posture?

Equipment:

- ✓ Is it worn correctly? (And/or are the drum stands set correctly?)
- ✓ Is it the right height and level? (Everybody's drum the same height or various according to the player's size/height?)
- ✓ Is it neat and clean and appealing to look at?
- ✓ Does it look "strong" and "professional"?

Set up:

- ✓ What is the warm up formation? Snares in center, basses on right, left, or back? Tenors right or left?
- ✓ What is the front ensemble set up? Is it practical/functional? Can you see/hear everyone?

Technique:

- ✓ Whatever it is, is it the same? (This includes foot/marching technique.)
- ✓ Is it acceptable from a percussionist's standpoint?

The Sound: *This tells people what kind of musicians you have playing in your group.*

Tuning:

- ✓ Are the drums tuned to their acceptable range? (Basically, are the drums too high or too low?)
- ✓ Is the tuning appropriate for the size of the group? (Two snares should tune lower than 6-8 snares.)
- ✓ Is it appropriate for the style of music? (Super high-pitched snares don't provide great backbeats!)
- ✓ Is it appropriate for the parts that are written? (Lots of notes in bass drums requires more muffling.)

Quality of sound:

- ✓ Do the players get the proper sounds from the instrument?
- ✓ Are the players using the proper strokes to get good sounds?
- ✓ Are playing zones correct?
- ✓ Are the players using the right implements?

The Parts: *This tells people the depth of your program and thought that goes into it.*

Appropriate writing:

- ✓ Is the writing appropriate for the style of music?
- ✓ Is it appropriate for the level of the players?
- ✓ Is it fitting to the wind parts?
- ✓ Do the front ensemble and battery parts work well together?
- ✓ Does it sound good?
- ✓ Can they play it well together?

Effective writing:

- ✓ Does it showcase the group's strengths?
- ✓ Is the writing interesting, creative and/or contemporary?
- ✓ How will the audience respond to the written music?
- ✓ How will the judges respond?
- ✓ Do the students enjoy playing the parts?

The Image: *This is what people remember most about your group.*

Professionalism:

- ✓ Does the group seem to be prepared?
- ✓ Does the group take care of details?
- ✓ Is the approach to EVERYTHING detailed and understood?
- ✓ Are there procedures in place for EVERYTHING the group does?
- ✓ Does the group act mature and controlled?
- ✓ Is there an attitude of humility and respect for others?

*Professionalism starts at the time you leave with the group and lasts until you return with the group.

Performance Skills:

- ✓ Does the group communicate with the audience?
- ✓ Does the group communicate with each other?
- ✓ Does the group command the audience's attention?
- ✓ What's the body language like? (Do you see confidence or weakness?)
- ✓ What's the attitude like? (Is there a respect for the audience?)

*Performance skills start when you get off the bus and don't end until you get back on the bus.

There's a lot more information available to help fill in the gaps here, but this checklist should be a means to get you started and focused. Try picking one of your favorite groups in the marching percussion activity and go through this list. I'm sure you'll find the answers as to why that group is your favorite. Now apply the principles revealed by this analysis to your own group and move on to greatness! Best wishes!