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Building a Smarter Drumline

By Gene Fambrough

As marching percussion continues to evolve into an increasingly sophisticated medium, our approach to teaching technical concepts must increase in efficiency. Although it is important to have technique-building exercises for the hands, it is equally important (and necessary) to have exercises for the mind as well. This “mental approach” is one area that continues to be problematic for students of all ages.

More often than not, students will readily admit that their mistakes are because of lack of focus, not lack of practice. I like to incorporate some additional concepts into our exercise program in order to keep the student from “checking out” during practice. After a full day of classes, work, personal issues, or car problems, it is often necessary to “force” the drumline to focus on the rehearsal at hand. I would like to share a few examples of exercises I

have developed throughout my teaching career, geared towards addressing this issue.

HAND MOTION

One of the most problematic areas we encounter is the changing of hand speed. In solo performance, hand-speed issues translate into rushing and/or dragging of individual rhythmic figures. In marching percussion, however, hand-speed problems are magnified and equal poor performance (i.e., “dirty” or poor execution). I find that including hand-speed changes periodically in the exercise program makes it less of an issue within musical settings.

Hand-speed changes can be as basic as a simple duple to triple transition, or as complex as your imagination can make it. Below is an extended hand motion exercise to work exclusively on the changes of hand speed one may encounter within a typical chart. Although

it is a difficult exercise to play cleanly, it tackles some basic issues that can transfer to many other musical situations.

ACCENT-TAP EXERCISE

The next exercise (see page 47) is an extended accent-tap control study. Although accent-tap exercises are as old and varied as they come, I try to inject some new variations from time to time. The opening five measures of the exercise are typical patterns of eighth-note accents. The first “curve ball” I throw is the change of sticking throughout the pattern: right for two measures, left for two measures, right for one measure, inverted on the repeat. This creates enough of a variation to prevent the auto-pilot syndrome from setting in too quickly.

The second phrase of the exercise begins to incorporate basic changes of hand speed, moving to eighth-note triplets within eighth-

Motion Control

Alternate sticking REF

The first part of the exercise is titled "Motion Control" and is marked "Alternate sticking" and "REF". It consists of three staves: Snare, Tenor, and Bass. The Snare staff starts with a half rest followed by eighth notes. The Tenor and Bass staves have eighth-note patterns with triplets. The exercise is divided into four measures, with a repeat sign at the end.

(invert sticking on repeat)

(mirror drums on repeat)

The second part of the exercise is marked "(invert sticking on repeat)" and "(mirror drums on repeat)". It continues with the same three staves (S, T, B). The Snare staff has eighth-note patterns with triplets. The Tenor and Bass staves have eighth-note patterns with triplets. The exercise is divided into four measures, with a repeat sign at the end.

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note accent-tap patterns. Notice measure six has split accents around the sections and measure seven utilizes unison accents. The third measure of the phrase presents a longer triplet figure before the change to the left hand on the repeat.

Measure nine is where the fun really starts: two eighth-note quintuplets (one on each hand) with a rimshot release. Certainly, this is a difficult measure to execute correctly at first. Once the students understand the “5 over 2” concept, however, it becomes a great mental challenge for the entire section. Following the quarter-note rimshot (defined in our line as a 12-inch stroke) the students must re-enter at a three-inch level for the ensuing taps. This brief pause of hand motion is crucial to understand for all members of the line, and serves to introduce the concepts in the last phrase.

A characteristic I have integrated lately is to specify changes of foot motion or “marking time” within any given exercise. We encounter many starts and stops within a single halftime show, and it helps to get the entire body involved in the exercise program as well. With a little forethought, it could be fairly easy to “compose” a section that utilizes a halt and restart of mark time. So to add a little extra spice to the challenge, we stop marking time on

measure nine and restart on measure ten. When we use this exercise as part of our “track-work” sessions, this measure becomes an actual halt, resuming “forward march” on the next phrase. This adds enough of a twist to the routine to make the students concentrate harder, all the while simulating drill moves that we will surely encounter in the show.

The final phrase of the exercise presents concepts that are very challenging for many lines, but again, will help the students tremendously. We use the accented figures to work on different stroke types within the immediate vicinity of one another (marked “U” for upstroke and “D” for downstroke). A quick look at the mathematics of each measure will reveal an interesting pattern that evolves in the relationship of the last accent to the next tap: measure 10 presents a two sixteenth-note space, measure 11 presents a three sixteenth-note space, and measure 12 presents a four sixteenth-note space. This space becomes increasingly more difficult to navigate as the gap widens, making concentration a vital part to success. The final measure of the exercise presents a two-handed figure (with a crescendo) meant to incorporate several elements at once, releasing on a 12-inch double-stop stroke.

TRIPLET TRANSITION

Many contemporary drumlines use some variation of diddles within triplet figures as a means of working out the technique for various drag patterns and triplet-based rolls. I have taken a standard variation that works single diddles and five-stroke rolls and inserted a hand-motion change in the middle of the check pattern (see page 48). Our check pattern consists of two counts of triplets, two counts of sixteenth notes, then two counts of triplets. This check pattern appears in all three variations of the diddle sequence, making sure that the ensemble is consistently thinking about the “form” of the exercise.

The fourth phrase incorporates an accent-tap pattern in triple time, expanding the previous concept into hand-to-hand combinations. Although each part (snare, tenor, or bass) is not difficult by itself, the combination of the parts is where the challenge lies. If you look closely at the accent patterns generated by the basses against the accents of the snares, you will find a carefully placed hemiola; although the triplet hand motion continues, the accents generate a slower, duple-sounding groove pattern (notated as “Triplet Transition [duple feel]”).

The next challenge in this exercise is the last measure of the fourth phrase, where the hand motion stops at a dotted quarter. This simulates a rhythmic figure that may occur in musical settings and helps the ensemble make better sense of the left-hand reentry after the pause. Finally, the phrasing in the last part of the exercise further resembles figures that may occur within a musical context, offering accented and unaccented roll figures off of the right hand as well as the left.

SOME THOUGHTS ON METRONOMES

It is fairly common these days to use an amplified metronome for rehearsal purposes. Although the benefits are obvious, there can be some other ways to use the metronome that can provide a needed change of pace.

The practice of “burying the metronome” is a great teaching tool, and many people use it with individual practice time. It can also be used with the marching percussion section. Too often, the volume of the metronome is turned up to assure that all members can hear the pulse, resulting in a fairly loud situation for all involved. If we turn the volume down to a level less than the volume created by the instruments, it becomes more obvious when the players are not in time. This makes the students’ listening skills come into play, rather than “beating” the pulse into them. Although it can be difficult and take extra time, it is well worth the effort.

Another approach is to set the metronome to the half note, or, if the tempo is fast enough, even the whole note. This makes each audible click of the metronome occur with less frequency, making the students responsible for more chunks of the tempo at any given time. If



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Tap-Accent Groove

REF

Snare
Tenor
Bass
Cymbals

* All repeats - R 1x, L 2x

S
T
B
C

S
T
B
C

2008 UAB Drumline

Triplet Transition (duple feel)

Snare
Tenors
Basses

Triplet Transition - '08

REF

The musical score is arranged in four systems, each with three staves: Snare / Quad (S/Q), Bass (B), and Cymbals (C). The time signature is 6/8. The first two systems show basic rhythmic patterns with triplet markings (4) and dynamic markings (>). The third system introduces hand-dominance markings (R for right, L for left) for the Snare/Quad and Bass parts. The fourth system continues with more complex rhythmic patterns and hand-dominance markings.

2008 UAB Drumline

the piece you are working on contains drumset or groove-style playing, you could call the half note metronome clicks “2” and “4” in order to mimic the backbeat.

CONCLUSION

If we approach our marching percussion exercise program a little differently and begin to challenge the students mentally as well as physically, the demands of the music become easier to meet. In any given setting, we want to have more technique than we need; this makes

the music look “easy” to the audience. The same applies to “mental” technique as well; develop the mind so that fewer repetitions are necessary. Incorporating these types of challenges will help your ensemble develop into a more mature group, and will help all of the students in musical situations beyond the marching field.

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Band, Electro-Acoustic Percussion Group, and serves as percussion arranger/instructor for the Marching Blazers. He holds degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama, and has served as marching percussion instructor and arranger at each institution as well as for the Spirit of Atlanta Drum and Bugle Corps.

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