

# PUTTING THE MARCHING PERCUSSION VS. CONCERT PERCUSSION BATTLE TO REST

Anthony Cananzi, Jr.

Reflecting back on my high school days, I remember how much fun I had in band, and what a valuable experience it was. The program I attended was a competitive “Bands of America style” program. We spent a majority of the fall semester preparing for competitions. When marching band was over, we immediately switched gears and shifted our focus to indoor drumline for the winter / spring. We did not have adjudication festivals, UIL, or large group performance evaluations for our concert bands. Therefore, there was not much pressure to have a stellar concert ensemble.

Embarrassingly, I did not know concert percussion ensemble even existed until my undergraduate degree. This was a long time ago (1994 - 1999), and things in this art form have drastically changed. Colleges and Universities are more competitive than ever, and producing a high school student who is well versed in the percussion field is almost essential before he or she enters undergraduate study. I love the marching arts as much as I do concert percussion ensemble, and I firmly believe that we, as educators, must expose our students to both art forms equally in order to produce students who will be marketable and successful after graduation.

## The Value of Marching Percussion

Whether you teach a competitive marching band, or a “big ten” style marching band, the same values and principles can be taught that will benefit the overall musicianship of your percussion students. The two concepts that we spend the most time on during the fall months are timing and technique. From day one of band camp we spend countless hours developing our student’s snare drum grip, Stevens grip, timpani grip, and the two-mallet grip. We use the metronome as a constant tool as we hone in on the skill sets needed to perform the show. This allows us to develop a strong sense of internal pulse in our students that will carry over into any ensemble they perform in.

Having solid fundamental techniques will also allow us to perform a wide variety of literature on the football field as well as in the concert hall. In marching band, we teach our students how to listen and how to constantly adjust to their surroundings. This skill is very important when playing in the percussion section of the wind ensemble, orchestra, or jazz ensemble, where they are forced to immediately adjust to any inconsistencies that may appear in the ensemble. Playing accent patterns, check patterns, roll exercises and flam exercises everyday will provide the skill sets needed to play the perfect Sousa march in your wind ensemble. Without spending hours everyday focusing on your student's double vertical or single independent strokes, playing your favorite John Mackey or Joseph Schwantner piece will be nearly impossible.

The marching band activity has evolved (for the better) to allow our students to use the same techniques outside as they would in the concert hall. Amplification allows the performer to be consistent with their approach no matter what venue they are performing in. Rudimental drumming will aid in preparation for the pursuit of college auditions, military band auditions, and even drum corps.

### **The Value of Concert Percussion Ensemble**

Having a concert percussion ensemble is equally as important as having a marching percussion section. Concert percussion literature allows the students to develop soloistic musicianship that is often required at higher-level institutions or professional ensembles. Gaining an appreciation for composers who write for our craft is very important for both the teacher and the student. Different genres and styles can be explored through the concert percussion ensemble. Pat Metheny, Beethoven, Debussy, Frank Zappa, and Scott Joplin, to name a few, are prolific composers, covering a wide variety of styles that can all be studied through the concert ensemble.

The concert percussion ensemble allows the students to individually explore timbres, colors, and textures on their own without the restraints of uniformity that is required in marching band. A student's reading skills are exponentially improved through the concert percussion ensemble as well. Most percussion ensembles have one player on a part, and the student is forced to independently learn without the proverbial crutch of having someone playing the same part right next to him or her.

There are many great orchestral transcriptions available for the percussion ensemble. Exposing students to Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy, and Tchaikovsky before they graduate high school will make for a smooth transition into college orchestral study.

## When Worlds Collide

Having a successful marching ensemble and concert ensemble can be quite the balancing act. I am a firm believer that marching band is an after school (or before school if you live in Texas) extra curricular activity. It is only on rare occasions that the marching equipment will make its way off the shelves during the school day. Many programs offer a percussion class during the school day; this is an excellent time for educators and students to focus on the concert percussion portion of their program. Many schools also operate on a ninety-minute block. In this situation, the block may be broken in half where the first forty-five minutes are spent on concert percussion ensemble, and the second forty-five minutes the ensemble joins the band class rehearsing at that given time. This allows the percussion students to play in a percussion ensemble and a concert band within the same class period. During the spring semester the same may hold true if you have a competitive indoor drumline. If you do not have an indoor drumline, consider having an after school concert percussion ensemble that rehearses once or twice a week. Then, implement a drumline / front ensemble spring training regiment later in the semester in preparation for the following fall.

One of the biggest challenges of having both types of ensembles is getting your students to “buy in” to the concert percussion ensemble. It is very easy for a student to fall in love with marching band because of the travel, crowds, competitions, and football games that are all encompassed within a season. Finding any performance opportunity for the concert ensemble will help the students gain appreciation for the importance of the ensemble. Recording sessions, bringing in guest artists, and exposing the students to as many performances as possible will help accelerate the student’s desire to be in the ensemble. I value the marching arts very much. I think marching band develops a skill set that is very important in the development of young percussion students. However, it is very important to make sure equal time is spent developing a student’s buzz roll, timpani roll, crash cymbal technique, tambourine technique, etc. as much as we spend developing his or her rudimental playing.

### Past Student Opinions

I surveyed a recent graduate who is studying music education at the university level with an emphasis on percussion.

**Q: How has your high school experience prepared you for college study?**

**A:** *“The transition from high school to college is not an easy one, especially if you’re a music major. This is because the level of rigor in high school is significantly lower than*

that of college. I would be lying if I said this transition was easy for me. However, the shock of the new environment has been softened because I was part of my high school's marching band and percussion ensemble.

Marching band has taught me how to work with others, how to problem solve, and how to practice for long periods of time while maintaining focus. I've recently learned that in college chamber ensembles, there are few times when you are supervised or coached. Knowing how to work with others has been very helpful because it is not an easy thing to do at times.

Playing percussion requires an open mind and creativity. Some of the repertoire I am approaching requires several instruments without specific instructions on how to set up. The training I received in my high school program allows me to work through a piece of music and create set ups and musical decisions without the help of an instructor or coach. In college, you are expected to practice a lot. Normal days for me consist of 4-6 hours of practicing. Marching band is really the only activity in high school that could have provided me with that kind of practice with that kind of intensity.

Percussion ensemble, I feel, is a necessity for high school percussionists. Percussion ensemble is where I learned a majority of the musical skills and techniques I had prior to college. Percussion ensemble was the only ensemble in which I had the chance to learn about the vast capabilities our instruments. I was fortunate enough to go to a high school that performed a variety of repertoire. Through this, I learned how to make musical decisions such as: which mallets to use, what stickings to use, what instruments to use, how to shape lines, and how to balance with others. Because these skills were practiced so often during my time in high school, they are now second nature and I do not have to focus as hard on them. I can now spend my practice on more acute details. I have noticed that this gives me a substantial advantage. Some of my college peers were not fortunate enough to be a part of a percussion ensemble in high school. They are forced to learn the previously mentioned skills very quickly. It is very embarrassing to be corrected for using 16-inch crash cymbals when you clearly should be using something much larger."

## **Creating the Next Generation of Educators and Performers**

As previously stated, today's percussion field is extremely competitive. Winning an audition for admission into university programs is harder than ever due to the well roundedness of today's young percussionists. Many young students are entering undergraduate programs with a plethora of performance experience both on the football field and in the concert halls. It is commonplace to have students that have performed on a BOA Grand Nationals field as well as on a stage at the Midwest Clinic or PAS Convention throughout their high school tenure. We are doing our students a huge

injustice if we focus on just one aspect of percussion playing. Our job is to make our students as prepared and as marketable as possible for the next level of their musical careers, and devoting equal amounts of time in the marching arts as well as the concert ensemble will set your students up for a successful transition into the collegiate level. •

**Anthony Cananzi, Jr.** is an Assistant Band Director at McEachern High School in Cobb County, Georgia. Before being named as an assistant director, Cananzi was the director of percussion at McEachern for six years. He was the former assistant band director at Tapp Middle School, and Barber Middle School. He earned the Master of Music in Percussion Performance degree from Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. He holds his Bachelor's Degree in Music Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Anthony has studied with Dr. John Parks, Dr. Michael Kingan, Dr. Gary Olmstead, Dr. Ron Horner, and Dr. Jack Stamp.

While studying at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Anthony finished first, second, and third in as many years competing in the Delta Omicron Solo Competition. In the summer of 2002, he was a member of the Crossmen Drum and Bugle Corps front ensemble. Cananzi has performed with ensembles such as the Florida State Wind Orchestra on their 2007 tour to Ann Arbor, Michigan where they were the showcase concert for the CBDNA National Conference. He also performed in Carnegie Hall with the FSU Percussion Group in May of 2007. While at FSU, Cananzi performed with the University Symphony Orchestra, Wind Orchestra, Chamber Winds, and the University Percussion Ensemble. His professional experience includes the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra, the Tallahassee Ballet Company, and the Albany Symphony Orchestra. He has also performed with the Cobb Wind Symphony under the direction of Alfred Watkins.

Anthony has taught several successful high school percussion programs including the Kiski Area Marching Band. He was the Front Ensemble instructor from 2002-2004 where the ensemble won two BOA Regional Championships and finished 7th at BOA Grand Nationals. During his time at McEachern, the marching band has been a consistent Bands of America Regional Finalist. The percussion ensemble has performed at the Georgia PAS Day of Percussion, the Lassiter Percussion Symposium, the McEachern Day of Percussion, and will be performing at the 2016 Georgia Music Educators Convention in Athens, Georgia. Cananzi spent two seasons as a member of the instructional staff at the Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps serving as Front Ensemble technician. Cananzi also spent time instructing the Front Ensembles at Spirit of Atlanta Drum and Bugle Corps in the summer of 2011, and Atlanta CV in 2013. He resides in Dallas, GA with his wife Jill, his children Luca and Sofia, and two puppies Cessa and Bela.