



SCAFFOLDING YOUR MARCHING BATTERY INSTRUCTION WITH SINGLE TENOR DRUMS

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Single marching drums are not a new idea in the marching percussion ensemble, and are very much a precursor to the modern “multi-tenor” instrument in the contemporary battery. That is not to say that there are not variants of the tenor drum still in practice: single tenors are still found in Scottish pipe bands as well as HBCU show-style bands (in the form of sling tenors and chest mounted tenors), duo-tenors and timbales found with groups such as the Ohio University Marching 110 (Athens, OH), and even tri-toms can still be found. A more contemporary variant has emerged in the world of “corps-style” marching percussion, in both the marching band activity and the indoor percussion activity.

This variant is the single marching tenor that I will be focusing on. This instrument shows up in slightly different designs and names, but generally present for the same educational purpose.

When our percussion ensemble began to make use of these single drums, our staff also decided to consider the name. Most of our instructional staff knew of this instrument under the name “flub drums”, but being that the word flub is synonymous with blunder, we wanted to explore alternative naming conventions. When considering the role of the instrument in our ensemble, we settled on the name “Impact Tenors”.

For the sake of discussing alternate names, we defined this instrument in our ensemble as a single large marching tenor drum, and ours are the same as the drum four on many marching tenor sets (that is the largest drum on the multi-tenors, generally 13-14 inches). We have not ruled out adding a shot drum to the side, or accessory sounds such as ribbon crashers and other lightweight mountable percussion instruments. Many ensembles that use impact tenors do have additional accessory instruments mounted, and I imagine as the instrument evolves in our ensemble, that it will head this direction.

While our ensemble uses the name “Impact Tenors” (and I will use this name through the article), many ensembles that use this voice in their instrumentation will refer to it under

different names, including but not limited to: flubs, double tenors, pod drums, impact tenors, and marching tom.

We wanted to grow the size and technique of our battery ensemble, and noticed the skills that some students were lacking to help them be successful on our current battery instruments in a marching show were not necessarily skills that would be developed through a season of front ensemble performing. An example of this from a recent audition was a student that played on par with the other younger members of the ensemble, but his hand-foot coordination needed work, as musical complexity beyond basic exercises caused his hands to fall apart when the foot timing would be added. This was not something that would be best fixed through a season on a front ensemble instrument. Too often we look at the current season's projected success for the placement of a student through auditions, and not at the long-term plan and path for the student (where are they headed and what will get them there). In this case he was passionate about being on the battery, and will be an excellent leader of the battery in his later years of high school, it was logical to scaffold his marching percussion skills much like we do any other musical skill.

We decided to use our impact tenors as a stepping-stone to many of the other battery instruments for the students that needed it. In its current iteration in our ensemble it has only one drum for the student to worry about, and is lightweight for marching. Compositionally, I write the music for it as a hybrid of the other battery instruments. It is common for the impact tenor to play skeleton rhythms of the snare and tenor parts (not always, sometimes we want a pure snare voice or a pure tenor voice), as well as the ensemble impact rhythms played by unison bass line parts, and in some phrases the exact same rhythm as the snares and tenors (if they are in unison). By skeleton rhythms, I am referring to the overarching rhythm stripped of the ornamentation (such as rolls, flams, harder stickings). Educationally this is to give them a much more skill-appropriate part for where they are at, especially in coordination with the movement demands. Their parts do not have to be completely devoid of rudimental content; in some phrases you can also have flams and the like present, however use your judgment when composing and arranging their parts to make sure that it is appropriate for the skill of the player. We have also added to their parts mid-season to increase the difficulty as appropriate. In the case of the student described earlier, it has allowed him to develop the coordination of his hand and foot timing with an easier part, while still being part of the battery ensemble, and while still allowing for the other sections to have skill-appropriate music to challenge and help them grow.

We try to use our funding wisely in our program, making investments that will last for many years when properly maintained, as well as to make use of the equipment we already had. While it is possible to purchase these instruments ready made from some percussion stores and companies, many ensembles currently own the equipment to introduce this instrument into their ensembles. It was a trend for many years to use single tenor drums as trophies at

sponsored marching band competitions, and as luck would have it, we had a few that were 14 inches, and in pristine condition from being stored in a trophy case, as well as a set of old tenors stored away that no longer matched our current drums. For hardware, we have used some old carriers, and some complementary hardware to mount them. In our case, we had an old Randall-May tenor back rail that we cut to size to mount the j-bar receivers to, and attached the impact tenor to that rail as if it were a shot drum. I have also seen many other clean and effective designs that either have been custom made or pieced together from other old hardware in the band room, including attaching j bar receivers directly to the drum shell. Our current drums are a black wood grain design; with some searching I was able to find black wood grain contact paper to allow the drums to match visually. Because our drums were from old trophy drums, they are an angle cut, as found on almost all multi-tenors, however it is also common to find impact tenors that are flat-cut, that is, the bottom cut of the shell runs parallel with the ground (much like timbale drums). With a bit of creative repurposing, you could potentially add these drums to your ensemble with parts and pieces that have been collecting dust in the forgotten corners of your band room storage. Many band parent organizations have members that would eagerly take on a DIY project like this, however I do advise you and your percussion instructor to be involved in the planning for this project.



Impact tenor with modified back rail and j-bar receivers

With a bit of work and preparation this instrument could be a cheap and straightforward way to grow your marching percussion ensemble in size and ability, and help prepare your students for more advanced marching percussion parts earlier in their school education.

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