

The Top 10 Things to Do Right Now to Clean Your Marching Band

Now that many of us are knee-deep in marching season, we are always looking for ways to make our bands better. The following ten tips are not necessarily in a specific order of importance. All of these tips have equal importance to help create a cleaner and more successful marching band.

#10 – Create Stagger Breathing Parts

Stagger breathing is an important part of creating the “wall of sound” with your marching band. This is helpful not only for you impact moments, but for keeping energy in the sound throughout all of your phrases. Since the brass section is the most audible part of the wind section, they should be your primary focus for creating stagger breathing parts. It’s recommended that you break each part into 3 parts. For example: Trumpet 1A, Trumpet 1B, Trumpet 1C, Trumpet 2A, Trumpet 2B, Trumpet 2C, etc. The tempo and volume will dictate how long each student should play on one breath. Generally, a student should play for 7-10 beats before a breath. If their part is rhythmic, they should leave out notes to breathe. If their part is more long note based, they should sneak out, take a breath, and then sneak back in. Students should not “clip” notes off to breathe on bar lines. Creating similar parts for all of the A’s, all of the B’s, and all of the C’s can make rehearsing stagger breathing more efficient.

#9 – Choose the “Hits”

Choose approximately 5 moments in your show that you will allow the students to expand their comfort zone dynamically. The students must be allowed out discover where the point is that their tone begins to distort. These should be the only moments in the show where they get to push their volume to create a dynamic impact. All other moments of the show can be brought down to focus on contrast, clarity, style, balance, etc. These “hits” must be rehearsed on a daily basis, and can be done only on air. It is possible to play loud with quality; however, it takes daily practice and patience from the band director.

#8 – Do the Math

In order to help clean your drill, “do the math” to figure out subsets to help your students understand step size and pathways. You can use the yard lines as your reference points to help give the students a checkpoint during the middle of a set. By helping students figure out their yard line crossing counts, this will give them the ability to create a more even step size. As students learn to be more consistent with their step size, the drill will become more readable.

#7 – Create Show Exercises

We all do music fundamentals and marching fundamentals to develop our student’s skills. By creating exercises based on aspects of your show, you can further develop necessary skills for your show. If you have a few rhythms that are either repetitive or that many of your students must be able to play well, create an articulation or style exercise. It can be done on either Concert F or Bb and then you can choose to repeat it ascending or descending. It’s also recommended that immediately following the exercise, the students play through the actual excerpt that the exercise is based off of. If you have specific dynamic effects that occur, you can create a long tone exercise to mimic those dynamic effects. Again, immediately following the exercise, the students should play through the excerpt that the exercise is based off of.

#6 – Adjust Your Setup

Rather than having your band always warmup in their section, create a mixed setup so that they are not standing near someone that plays the same instrument. This will no longer allow the students to “hide” in their section. For the director, it will be easier to provide feedback to a specific student since it will be

more obvious where a comment is needed. If 4 trumpets are standing together and one student is not matching style with the others, you may not know which student needs help. If the 4 trumpets are spread out across your room, it will be obvious who needs help. This will also allow the director to know which students are not contributing at the appropriate dynamic level to create proper balance. Other options for adjusting your setup would be to warmup in an actual drill page. Find one of your challenging drill pages to help the students become more comfortable in that environment.

#5 – Use Click Tracks

A click track is an MP3 of just a metronome or a metronome with the music. If you have tempo changes in one of your productions, a click track with metronome only can be incredibly useful since the tempo change will always be the same and doesn't require a staff member or student to change the metronome at a specific time. It's best to create click tracks for all of the sets in your show so that you can always start at any set in your show. Click tracks that also have the music playing can be a very useful tool for learning drill or cleaning drill with the winds on air. They can also be a good rehearsal tool for your color guard/dance team or your front ensemble to help them always rehearse with the wind music playing.

#4 – Go Outside During Class

Moving and playing is a skill that must be developed through repetition. If you have access to your rehearsal field during classes, then you are very lucky. Take advantage of the opportunity to focus more on the individual students in that class. You may not be able to "clean" all of your pictures, but you will be able to "clean" the individual musicians. Be prepared for things to not sound the same as when the entire marching band is on the field. But know that what you hear in class is actually happening when the full band is there. If you do not have access to a field, then try to setup a parade block in your parking lot or on the track. You can develop the skill of moving and playing by tracking while working on fundamentals or show music. Again, be prepared for things to sound very different than when they are standing still inside. This is why the students need to develop the skill of moving and playing.

#3 – Always Move Your Feet

With the exception of the pep tunes, the students should always move their feet. This includes all fundamentals and all show music. Unless you are working on actual concert band music, put away the chairs and have the students stand in class and mark time for everything. In addition to marking time, students are encouraged to do a step-out at phrase or set changes. When choosing tempos for fundamentals, choose tempos that are used during the marching show to further reinforce necessary skills. The students must understand how their music relates to their feet. Rather than telling them to put their feet with the music, they should be told to put their feet with the metronome (or drum major hands) and then play with their feet.

#2 – Edit the Drill

There are many sets in our show that just need reps and information in order to clean. More than likely, there are also some sets that will either never be clean, or the payoff is not worth the amount of time that it will take to clean. The audience does not know what each set is supposed to be, they only know whether it looks right. Feel free to adjust your drill for better student achievement. A few things that usually create "dirt" in the drill are large step sizes, direction changes in the middle of a set, and 90 degree slides. It may take some creativity, but rather than fighting a losing battle, save some time by making adjustments to the drill.

#1 – Edit the Music

As band directors, we know what the students are and are not capable of doing well. Whether you have a custom written show, or one that is purchased “off the shelf,” we know the abilities of our students. It becomes our responsibility to ensure that our students can sound good on whatever they are asked to do. One of the freedoms of marching band is that the judges do not follow a score like they would during concert season. We are free to make changes at our discretion to help the band sound better. Much like the drill edits, we must make decisions on whether or not the payoff is worth the amount of time that it will take to clean. Often times what may sound good on a MIDI recording may not ever sound good with an actual marching band. Sixteenth note runs are always exciting, but getting large numbers of students throughout your entire band program to play them perfectly is often an unrealistic goal. This often occurs in the woodwinds, while the brass are playing fortissimo whole notes. This can be easily edited by having the keyboards in the front ensemble play the runs while the winds focus on playing a loud chord in tune. If you have issues with balance based on staging in the drill, you may look at re-orchestrating the phrase to create a better balance. This may take some creativity, but will alleviate the frustration of continual balance problems. Another thing that may lead to improper balance, is the range that the instruments are written in. Have the students play in ranges that they are comfortable in and that project well outdoors. Finally, it’s important to ensure that all students on the field are able to contribute. This may mean that modified parts are written for the students that are still developing their ability to move and play at the same time. It’s important for their development that they are given an opportunity to improve their skills instead of being told to not play at all.

The tips above are intended as a tool to help improve your marching band during the middle of the season. Some of these may be implemented at the beginning of summer band rehearsals to expedite the progress of your students. If you have any questions about any of the tips listed above, please email Bob Chreste at bcbandsolutions@gmail.com. Have a great rest of your season!