

Balancing Musical Difficulty with Performance Quality

BY PAUL BUYER

Throughout my career as a percussion performer, educator, arranger, clinician, and adjudicator, I have attended several performances of marching percussion ensembles in which the performance level was below average. Following these performances, I always ask myself—why? Why are students performing at this level? Is the music too difficult? Not enough rehearsal time? Lack of preparation? Poor practice habits? Poor leadership?

Though all of these factors can contribute to a below-average performance, this article will focus on how musical difficulty affects marching percussion performance. Of course, these concepts can be applied to concert percussion ensembles and solo percussionists, as well as other areas of the percussive arts and instrumental music in general.

One of my favorite quotes is, “It’s not *what* you play but *how* you play that is most important.” Convincing students to buy in to this philosophy is not easy because young players want to be challenged and play difficult repertoire. But where do we, as educators, draw the line as to what we think our students are *capable* of playing at a particular point in time? And is it our job, or right, to tell them what they *are* capable of? Jeff Janssen, Peak Performance Consultant at The University of Arizona states:

In establishing a mission for your season, it is important to take an honest yet hopeful look at the team’s ability and potential. Not only should you consider what the team has the ability to achieve, but also assess what the team wants to achieve. I like to present this as, “What can you achieve?” and “What do you want to achieve?” It is in balancing the “can” and the “want” that effective missions are created...When a team’s “can” and “want” are not in the same ballpark, problems and frustrations are sure to result.

A FINE LINE

There is a fine line between musical

difficulty (challenging our students) and performance quality (ensuring that we put our students in a position to succeed). The following is an excerpt from my dissertation regarding marching percussion ensembles:

One must always be aware of each segment’s present ability level and balance this awareness with music that will challenge students and give them the opportunity to improve. However, challenging players’ technical skills can never override performing at the highest level of quality.

Paul Rennick, in his excellent article “Art, Entertainment, and Competition,” published in the December 2001 issue of *Percussive Notes*, states:

Although the two are directly related, on many competitive levels the quality of the performance often takes precedence over the choice of music. That is not to say that the musical program is secondary; it’s just that what separates groups on a competitive level is often the nuts and bolts of playing together.

The term “musical difficulty” often relates to technical difficulty, whether playing in a drumline or performing a four-mallet marimba solo. In marching percussion, several factors that attract students to a particular program include the difficulty of the “book,” warm-ups, cadences, drill, and show concepts. But what about performance quality? According to Rennick, “We have come to value serious and difficult shows that are performed each year by the best drum corps, but would we appreciate the shows as much if the performance level wasn’t as high? What often becomes memorable is the quality in which a group plays.”

MUSIC SELECTION

The following is taken from the foreword found in the Texas University Inter-scholastic League (UIL) publication

Prescribed Music List:

The art of choosing music carries responsibilities of the highest magnitude since our students’ musical growth is dependent upon the wisdom of each decision. Therefore, the success of all performing ensembles and, more importantly, the music education of the students (of Texas) is determined in large part by how well each director meets the challenge of providing appropriate, stimulating, and rewarding literature. Always be mindful of the fact that the music chosen will clearly reflect the depth, quality, and integrity of our music programs and our priorities as music educators.

Balancing musical difficulty with performance quality is one of the key factors that will help students realize their potential. In fact, music selection is at the core of our students’ experience. For arrangers, the decisions and choices we make when arranging music for our ensembles are also part of this core. Selecting or arranging music that is too advanced can have negative effects, both for the music itself and the students’ musical experience.

According to Reginald Smith Brindle in *Contemporary Percussion*, “Nothing sounds well unless it is played well, and nothing sounds so awful as percussion which is not played well enough.” Whenever I am faced with important decisions regarding musical difficulty, two questions always drive my thinking: What is best for the music, and what is best for the students?

REHEARSAL TIME

It is no secret that marching percussionists are very enthusiastic about their art form, motivated by advanced rudiments, lightening-fast chops, popular visuals, and the most difficult music they can get their hands on. Instructors must be careful to purchase, select, and arrange music that is challenging and well written, but that can also be performed

at a high level with sufficient rehearsal time.

Nothing can replace having enough time to prepare. Drumlines cannot cram or rush through the rehearsal process in order to play advanced repertoire. Leadership expert and author John Maxwell states, "We must stop microwaving people and start crockpotting them." Some factors that influence performance success as it relates to rehearsal time are difficulty level of the music, length of the musical selections, number of musical selections, amount of time until the next performance, amount of time for sectionals, and amount of individual preparation outside rehearsal.

ABILITY LEVEL

Another critical factor involves players having the technical skills, reading ability, and chops to play the music. This is where marching percussion is unique, in that some players are usually at different levels of proficiency. The ones who are at a high level will want to play advanced repertoire, and the ones who are not will also want to play advanced repertoire, even though they lack essential performance skills. This is not to say they cannot develop these skills, but as Maxwell states, it will take time.

The instructor's job, then, is to do what is best for the group and perform music that challenges the entire drumline while putting them in a position to succeed musically. The players must put what is best for the group ahead of their individual desires. Leadership and team building are critical to the success of the ensemble.

THE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

It is common for instructors to face pressure from students to write or select more difficult music. I've often heard student responses to performing repertoire that includes, "I'm bored," "I don't feel challenged," and "Can we beef up this part?" One of the ways I have handled this situation is to talk with my players about their concerns and how the marching percussion ensemble is a vehicle for teaching music. I use the following ideas with my students.

1. Discuss how the percussion score fits into the big picture.

2. Discuss the contributions each section makes and how their parts relate to what the band is playing.

3. Teach musical concepts such as tone quality, timbre, phrasing, and dynamics.

4. Encourage your players to consider the value of the entire show instead of how many flam drags and inverts are written in their parts.

5. Emphasize the goals of playing clean and looking sharp.

6. Instill pride in playing at a high level of excellence all the time, whether in the stands or on the field.

7. Finally, talk to and treat your players like musicians, not just percussionists.

According to Rennick:

Percussionists have a natural tendency to think in technical terms. Although the technical difficulty of the music should be considered (especially when dealing with younger groups), try not to put too much emphasis on that when it comes to choos-



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ing a program. In the end, the music will speak for itself, and the most rewarding musical program is not always the hardest.

AUDITIONS

A good example of balancing musical difficulty with performance quality is the audition. When someone auditions, whether for a drumline, an orchestra, or even a scholarship, the evaluative criteria is based on *how* an individual plays rather than *what* an individual plays. For example, a student who performs a medium-level snare drum solo well is more likely to win an audition than a student who performs an advanced snare drum solo poorly.

Unfortunately, this is not always the mindset of the over-enthusiastic student. Simply playing an advanced piece of music has little influence on achieving a quality performance. In terms of making music, *how* someone plays should always take precedence over *what* someone plays.

RECRUITING

Another example related to balancing musical difficulty with performance quality is recruiting. In sports, coaches recruit the best players and the best talent to build their programs. Music educators certainly would not recruit a student based solely on his or her repertoire list, no matter how advanced. The experienced educator will want to see and hear the student perform in order to evaluate the student's talent effectively.

PLAYING DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

The other side of this issue involves the philosophy that in order to get better and keep the interest level of the players high, students must be allowed to take risks and perform more difficult repertoire. Without question, this approach will push and challenge students, while at the same time provide the motivation to work hard. Although this philosophy is valid, we must be careful not to let the *repertoire* become the primary motivator. Is it wise to provide students with difficult music just for the sake of keeping them challenged, interested, and motivated?

A fine line exists here—as educators, our first responsibility is to put students in a position to succeed. We must ask ourselves, “Can the music be performed

at a high level?” More often than not, we have to make a decision based on *performance quality* being the primary motivator.

If musical difficulty is beyond the talents and skills of the students, because of either technical demands or a lack of rehearsal time, then the students' musical experience as well as the quality of the performance will suffer. Another common scenario is students choosing to give a halfhearted effort toward music they do not consider challenging. If student effort varies according to musical difficulty, then we have not done our job as educators.

Author and high-school basketball and track coach Dr. William Warren describes the balance this way: “While goals and expectations should be realistic, they should be challenging enough to give your players the opportunity to discover that they can do more than they thought they could.”

A DRUMSET LESSON

The phrase “less is more” is commonly used by drumset artists to describe their approach to playing. Many legendary drummers from all genres of music have stated that playing time and laying down a solid groove are their most important responsibilities. Although these artists are certainly talented enough to play difficult fills and impressive solos, they often choose not to because they believe that playing simply is best for the music.

Not surprisingly, young drumset players tend to gravitate toward the opposite philosophy. Flashy solos, fast hands and feet, and large drumkits often take precedence over playing time, supporting the band, and making a musical contribution. Mature musicians will choose to sacrifice their own personal glory for the good of the group and what is best for the music. This philosophy is what professional players model, and what has helped them become successful.

CONCLUSION

Willa A. Foster wrote, “Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction, and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.” If we apply these attributes to ourselves as well as our students, we can say that high intention is our vision for our program, sincere effort is our work

ethic, intelligent direction is our leadership, and skillful execution is our performance quality.

“The wise choice of many alternatives” has to do with the choices we make every day based on what we believe is best for our students, and in the case of the marching percussion ensemble, what is best for the entire group. How do we know if a piece of music can be performed at a high level? By knowing our students' abilities, considering how much rehearsal time they have to prepare, and trusting our instincts, intuition, and experience.

There are always reasons why some people perform at a high level and some do not. As musicians, understanding the balance between musical difficulty and performance quality can be a very important step towards discovering what we are capable of achieving.

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