

A Look Behind

A conversation with Iain Moyer, front ensemble arranger and supervisor for the Cadets

Dr. Iain Moyer is the Director of Percussion Studies and Assistant Director of Bands at the University of North Alabama. He is also the Front Ensemble Arranger and Supervisor for the Cadets Drum Corps. The upcoming 2014 season will be Moyer's eighth season with the Cadets. Last summer, The 2013 Cadets percussion section received the Fred Sanford Award for Best Percussion Performance.

When Moyer joined the Cadets he had 10 years of experience in the Drum Corps International (DCI) activity, including arranging and instructional positions with the Madison Scouts, Glassmen, Crossmen, and Magic of Orlando. Prior to his DCI teaching career, Moyer performed in 1996 with Star of Indiana's Brass Theatre, and the 1997 and 1998 Crossmen front ensembles.

By Timothy Heath

CPit



Heath: *Whom do you consider the pioneers of front ensemble development in the marching arts?*

Moyer: Although the front ensemble has had a short history, having been established in its modern format in 1982, there have been many pioneers and innovators throughout its abbreviated history. Names that immediately come to mind are Jim Ancona, Neil Larrivee, Jim Casella, Erik Johnson, Brian Mason, Jeff Lee, Mike Nevin, Kathy Float, Scotty Sells, Fred Sanford, Ralph Hardimon, Thom Hannum, Chris Lee, Bob Morrison, and Joey Gaudette. That really covers much of the early front ensemble lineage at corps like the Cadets, Santa Clara Vanguard, the Blue Devils, and the Cavaliers, among others. I fear making a list like this, as it is inevitable that I have left someone extremely important off of it.

Heath: *What are some of the greatest accomplishments within the front ensemble in the past thirty years?*

Moyer: I think one of the most important and ongoing accomplishments is the implementation of legitimate concert percussion techniques into front ensemble performance. I believe that this process has accelerated greatly in recent years. I think it is fair to say that when front ensembles began to emerge, they were not playing with the same techniques, creating similar sounds, or performing on like instruments as their compatriots in the highest levels of concert percussion.

I also believe that students are coming to the Drum Corps activity with much more pageantry—BOA, WGI—and academic experience than in earlier decades. In today's current environment, it would appear that the vast majority of DCI front ensemble members are not only active members of their university percussion studio or high school marching band program, but may also have more WGI Independent/Scholastic indoor or DCI Open Class experience than previous generations. As a result of this pageantry and academic cross-pollination, the instructors teaching today's students are infinitely more knowledgeable about the technical and musical developments that are available to the modern day front ensemble arranger and educator.

Equipment technology has also been a major development over the past thirty years. Not only are some of the instruments we now play on the best in the world—and similar to those found in the best percussion studios and ensembles—but they are also outfitted with frames that withstand the rigors of our activity.

Electronics and amplification have also changed the game dramatically for front ensembles. With the inclusion of amplification in 2004 and electronics in 2009 into the DCI activity, the playing field has been “leveled” between the front ensemble, brass, and battery sections. The front ensemble's voice in a drum corps, indoor percussion, or marching band show can no longer be ignored, and when done exceptionally well, can change the entire perception of one's musical presentation.

Heath: *How did you get your start in this activity?*

Moyer: My start in the activity was a bit unique. To be brief, in high school I wanted to play guitar in my high school jazz band. In order to be in the jazz band, you had to be a member of the concert band. So, one summer I learned to play percussion. After several years of high school study, I wanted to attend the University of Massachusetts as a Music Education major on

guitar. The university told me I couldn't do that because guitar was not a “band instrument.” I informed them that I also played percussion, so they suggested I audition for the music department after my freshmen year to be a double major in percussion and guitar. The teacher they assigned me to take lessons from my freshmen year, in order to prepare for the audition, was Thom Hannum. How lucky was I to take lessons from a DCI Hall of Famer!

I had never even heard of drum corps before I came to UMass, as my high school in Vermont didn't even have a football team, so obviously there was no marching band. I do remember seeing a poster once in high school for a group with the word “Phantom” in their name, but I didn't even know what it was.

During my sophomore year at UMass I played in my first front ensemble, and I continued to perform as a member in my junior and senior years before becoming the pit instructor during my fifth year at UMass. After my sophomore year in college I became involved with drum corps as a performer, participating in the 1996 Star of Indiana's Brass Theatre, which was a precursor to the Broadway hit *Blast!* After my year at Star, I followed Thom Hannum and Jim Ancona to the Crossmen in 1997 and 1998, where I played in the front ensemble.

In 1999, I began my teaching career as a front ensemble technician at the Crossmen. After a summer off in 2000, which I used to go to the Leigh Howard Stevens Marimba Seminar, I taught for two years at the Glassmen (2001–02), one year at the Magic of Orlando (2003), and three years at the Madison Scouts (2004–06). In the summer of 2007, I began working at the Cadets drum corps as a technician for two seasons (2007–08), before becoming the Front Ensemble Arranger/Supervisor from 2009 to the present.

Heath: *How has the pedagogical approach to the front ensemble changed from the past to the current teaching techniques?*

Moyer: The pedagogical approach to the front ensemble has changed drastically from those of the past, and at the same time, many of the core values that front ensembles used to play with still exist today and are still very relevant.

To explain, the way arrangers engage keyboard percussion instruments today is vastly different than in the mid-1980s. The “four-mallet revolution” of the early 2000s has front ensemble books in the 2010s sounding more like “four-mallet marimba solos on steroids” than the two-mallet passagework that dominated the virtuosic passages of the 1980s and 1990s. The implementation of what was previously considered extremely advanced techniques, like the double lateral roll or the one-handed roll, are now standard in the literature of the modern front ensemble.

However, to counter that argument, many of the core values of the early front ensembles and marching percussion, in general, are not being compromised today. The one that jumps immediately to mind is the concept of sound quality. In 2014, no matter how much you amplify a keyboard percussion instrument, if a player is creating a poor hand-to-hand sound quality on a sixteenth-note run, or if a player's inside mallets are underbalanced during a double lateral roll, these things will not be fixed with amplification. The core value of playing an instrument with an even tone or sound quality is still extremely relevant to the marching arts.



So, to summarize, the pedagogical advances of the last 30 years are still tied to certain marching percussion traditions, but at the same time, a wealth of innovation has helped reinvent the activity.

Heath: *How has writing for the front ensemble changed for you during your career?*

Moyer: Beyond the obvious additions of electronics, amplification, and advanced keyboard techniques that have made the front ensemble landscape more challenging and time consuming to write for, the biggest thing that has changed for me is how I “pace” the front ensemble.

Like many young writers, when I initially began writing, I was trying to do two things: (a) make every phrase the coolest, freshest thing I could think of, and (b) challenge the players with frequency of note and virtuosic techniques in every phrase I wrote.

Now, in 2014, I feel like I am trying to pace the front ensemble and find a balance between achievable and maintainable

accompaniment parts, and highly innovative and technically impressive front ensemble feature material. My goal for the last several years with the Cadets has been to write a show that is manageable on a daily basis, meaning the parts that are exposed are of the highest technical and musical demands, and the parts that are accompanimental in nature are maintainable with minimal rehearsal time, engaging to listen too, and enjoyable to play.

The bottom line is this: Even during a DCI season, you only have a limited amount of time to clean all the phrases in the show. Some phrases need to be low maintenance and require little daily rehearsal; some phrases need to be higher maintenance, which require a more rehearsal time but pay competitive dividends when evaluated by the judging community.

I consider myself, at all points in the arranging process, a “risk/reward manager.” I have to ask myself with each part I write and teach, “Is the risk of playing this part, based on its technical or musical parameters, worth the reward we may get from performing it in the competitive arena?”



During this portion of the process, it is also important to listen to the other folks who are involved in molding the front ensemble at the Cadets, including Lead Technician Jason Ihnat and Pit Consultant Jim Ancona. Jason's knowledge of the everyday ins and outs of the performers' tendencies, coupled with Jim's "big picture" view of the CPit as a consultant, are extremely helpful throughout the season. Phrases that don't stand up to that "risk/reward" criteria are subject to be changed, watered, or manipulated, so that their "risk," or lack thereof, is worth the "reward" that the ensemble may or may not receive from playing them.

Heath: *What is the greatest challenge of writing for the front ensemble today?*

Moyer: Time. Maybe this is just me, but to write on the highest level takes a ridiculous amount of time. I am often jealous of my Cadets writing partner Colin McNutt, who arranges for and oversees the battery segment. I know Colin toils over his snare/tenor/bass arrangements, and I know his craft takes lots of time, but my process with the Cadets feels like it is excruciatingly longer.

Part of that is what I feel I have to react to as the Cadets Front Ensemble arranger: Jay Bocook's melodies and harmonies, and the amount of previously composed material Jay leaves for front ensemble consumption. I am also reacting to Colin's rhythmic structures and voice leading, not to mention the pit cues Colin scores into his parts.

My challenge at Cadets is to find an innovative and fresh voice for the front ensemble that doesn't conflict with Jay's writing, while catering to Colin's rhythmic structures and creating a cohesive "percussion ensemble (pit/battery)" voice for the Cadets.

On top of this, I am trying to write supportive electronics parts, yet leave the appropriate space for Cadets Electronics/Sample Designer Michael Zellers

to work his magic. Lastly, I am trying to create impact material that will help the corps score well on G.E. sheets and enliven the audience. To be clear, the "woe" is not me, but all of that takes time. I am embarrassed to say how long some of the Cadets phrases take me, but I am grateful for the opportunity to write for this fine ensemble.

Heath: *Do you use any specific arranging/writing techniques?*

Moyer: Without getting into minutia, I strongly believe in making each show the Cadets Front Ensemble performs a unique



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aesthetic experience for listener and judge each season. What I mean by this is, I believe that our instrumentation and sound palette should change with every show we play. Whatever the theme of the show, we need to try to maximize the unique percussive qualities available to that show concept.

For example, in 2009, the Cadets show utilized Bernstein's "West Side Story"; that suggested to me numerous membranophone choirs, sirens, whistles, and symphonic sounds. In 2010, the Cadets show was entitled "Toy Soldier" which evoked the use of woodblocks, ratchets, field drum, and bass drum with cymbal attachment. In 2011, the Cadets presented "Between Angels and Demons," which was partially based on Asian influences that required Japanese percussion instruments like the o-daiko and shimi-daiko.

In 2012, the Cadets' "12.25" show necessitated all of the Christmas percussion instruments you can think of: sleighbells, glockenspiel, woodblocks, and slapstick, to name a few. And in 2013, the Cadets performed "Side by Side, the music of Samuel Barber"; this translated into a symphonic dominated palette. Our instrumentation for 2013 specifically required two sets of timpani, three concert bass drums, numerous Germanic cymbals, hand bells, and five sets of glockenspiel.

Now, this is not to say that our basic instrumentation for each of these seasons was not exactly the same, as we did utilize four or five marimbas, four vibes, one timpanist, one xylo/glock, and two rack players for each of these productions. However, we supplemented our standard instrumentation with "season specific" sounds that matched the theme of the show.

Heath: *What are your thoughts of the use of electronics in today's front ensemble?*

Moyer: As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the incorporation of electronics into the DCI rulebook beginning in the 2009 season has "leveled the playing field" between the front ensemble, brass, and battery sections. What electronics can do that the amplification of solely acoustic instruments cannot is transport the audience member to almost any type of soundscape imaginable. For example, if you are doing a show based on the movie *The Matrix*, it won't be marimbas and vibraphones that best deliver that sonic message; it will be electronic sampling and synthesizer design that will teleport the audience to those types of emotions and imagery.

One matter of electronics that I believe deserves more attention is their use to accompany non-front ensemble featured phrases. It is almost a stereotype in many of the pageantry arts that a front ensemble feature will be heavily laden with electronics and sampling. This allows the overall volume and depth of the pit sound to match that of the previous wind-dominated phrase. What I don't think as many people are doing as frequently and with as much skill is using sampling and electronics to create an almost unperceivable underbelly that subtly accompanies the harmonic and melodic material played by wind, brass, and battery sections without dominating the sound palette. This would serve to round out the electronics' role in an overall musical program.

Heath: *How do you incorporate technology into the Cadets' front ensemble?*

Moyer: Beyond the obvious use of microphones, mixing

boards, amplifiers, and speakers, the most important and frequent way the Cadets incorporate technology into the front ensemble is during the live performance mixing process. This is done by way of a laptop that is synced to and capable of controlling a Yamaha 01v96 mixing board. The laptop is operated remotely by an iPad that is screen sharing the laptop's screen. This allows us to tweak the audio sounds from high above the field, where the judges are listening to the show, and custom mix each show for the acoustical properties of each stadium we perform in.

This seems like a basic use of technology, and it is, but it is really the "life blood" of making the Cadets sound like the Cadets in every stadium we perform in. You wouldn't think that there would be as drastic a shift from performance venue to performance venue, but when you account for a domed stadium vs. an open-air stadium, a fully enclosed outdoor stadium vs. an open-ended outdoor stadium, metal bleachers or concrete seating areas, and stadium-specific audio characteristics, there is really a lot to adjust on a night-to-night basis.

The challenge with the Cadets Front Ensemble audio balance is that everyone has an opinion on it on a nightly basis. The hornline captain may feel that the pit was overbearing in some areas or not supportive enough in others; the battery captain may feel that the pit's accompaniment material was too loud during percussion ensemble moments and it overbalanced the battery. The corps director and designers may feel that particular audio samples may not be filling out the soundtrack of the drum corps appropriately. It is maddening on some level, but the use of the screen-sharing laptop to the iPad is a serious help to counteract any "contest dynamics" created by each stadium we perform in.

Heath: *Would you be willing to share an inside look at your exercise program and how it prepares the Cadets Front Ensemble for its show music?*

Moyer: The Cadets Front Ensemble exercise program has three components: (1) chops exercises, (2) conceptual exercises, and (3) pit tunes.

The "bread and butter" of our exercise program are the chops exercises and the conceptual exercises, which we initiate during the winter months and then fully implement during our lengthy spring training sessions. The Cadets also choose to play two or three pit tunes each season, but these are really performance pieces, used for our enjoyment and musical/communicative growth.

The CPit's chops program is made up of extremely short exercises that work on only one skill set at a time, many of which can be "looped" or repeated in quick succession to build endurance and strength. We have a double vertical chops exercise, a two-mallet double-stop exercise, a series of two-mallet chops exercises that work the most used scalar shapes in our show, and a four-mallet single-independent chops exercise that works similar scalar passages. We use these exercises as very short technical "sprints" to work chops-specific skill sets.

Beyond our chops program and our pit tunes, we have other very short conceptual exercises to work concepts like shifting, combination strokes, interval spreading, and advanced skill sets such as double laterals, triple laterals, and one-handed rolls. In totality, we feel that our pit tunes, chops exercises, and conceptual exercises help give us a well-rounded approach to

Cadets Front Ensemble Exercise Program

Following are samples of exercises used by the Cadets Front Ensemble during the winter months and the spring training season.

“Different Doubles” is a basic 2-mallet double-stop exercise. A few things to think about when playing this exercise: (1) always maintain your 2-mallet grip guidelines; (2) always play with an even sound hand to hand; (3) whenever possible, play in the center of the bars.

$\text{♩} = 120, 140, 160, 172,$

System 1:

- Mallets:** Treble clef, 3/4 time. Double-stop exercises.
- Timpani:** Bass clef, 3/4 time. Rhythmic patterns with stick numbers: 32 29 29 26 29 29, 32 32 29 29 29 32, 32 32 29 26 29 29, 32 29 29 26 26 26.
- Piano:** Treble and Bass clefs, 3/4 time. Accompaniment with chords and arpeggios.

System 2:

- Mlts.:** Treble clef, 3/4 time. Double-stop exercises.
- Timp.:** Bass clef, 3/4 time. Rhythmic patterns with stick numbers: 23 26 26 26 26 26, 23 26 26 26 29 29, 26 23 20, 29 2.
- Pno.:** Treble and Bass clefs, 3/4 time. Accompaniment with chords and arpeggios.

System 3:

- Mlts.:** Treble clef, 3/4 time. Double-stop exercises.
- Timp.:** Bass clef, 3/4 time. Rhythmic patterns with stick numbers: 29 26 23, 26 23 32 29.
- Pno.:** Treble and Bass clefs, 3/4 time. Accompaniment with chords and arpeggios.

“D.V.C.” (“Double Vertical Chops”) is a basic 4-mallet chops exercise. (1) The Cadets start this exercise in the DOWN position and prep for the first note. (2) It is imperative that all four mallets hit the keyboard at the same time and with the same touch. (3) Do not accent any of the note changes; try to play the exercise as evenly as possible. (4) Play this exercise from the wrist.

♩ = 120-180

1

Mallets *ff*

Timpani *ff*

Piano *f* (with String, Vocal or Organ Patch)

2

Mlts.

Timp.

Pno.

“Double Lateral Breakdown.” The Double Lateral stroke is a combination of a Double Vertical followed rapidly by a rotating Single Independent stroke. This exercise breaks down those two motions, beginning with the vertical, then adding the rotary motion. (1) Be sure to practice this exercise from the UP position, and make sure each mallet is striking from the same height. (2) Strive for an even sound and don’t go too fast.

Mallets

3/4 4 3 1/2 1 2

Repeat 1x, 2x, 4x, 8x, etc.

5

3/4 1/2 4 3 1 2

our front ensemble's technical and musical proficiency and prepare us for what appears in our show music.

Heath: *What direction do you see the front ensemble heading in for the marching arts?*

Moyer: I feel that the front ensemble will continue on its current trajectory, which I believe is largely due to the recent advancements seen in the WGI activity. Like many trends in the pageantry arts, I feel that the electro/acoustic balance will continue to push farther towards the electronic side. I hope that the balance between individual/ensemble virtuosity and the arranger's electronic design will not shift too far to the latter.

I am concerned that the front ensemble is still in its infancy as a part of the pageantry arts, and because of this, we are slowly developing a formulaic approach to certain types of front ensemble writing/performance. I do see a "homogenization" of front ensemble performance and arranging these days, and I fear that fewer front ensemble "original voices" are being heard, in favor of a more predictable look, sound, and aesthetic that educators and arrangers know will score well in today's competitive arena.

Heath: *What advice would you give to someone who is looking to get into the activity as a teacher for the front ensemble?*

Moyer: Be diverse. At the core of being a percussionist is diversity, as we are required to play a multitude of instruments. For a first-rate front ensemble teacher and arranger, this diverse knowledge will be required on the highest level during the rehearsal and arranging process.

To be a successful front ensemble arranger in 2014 you need to have a high degree of knowledge about the keyboard percussion instruments, their tendencies and standard/advanced performance practices; a diverse knowledge regarding classical

accessory instruments, Latin percussion, and drumset styles; a grasp of synthesizer programming and sample design; and the ability to mix audio from acoustic and electronic sources successfully.

I am proud to say that the front ensemble ranks are growing smarter, both from an academic level as many instructors hold multiple degrees, and from a musical level, as the technical and musical envelope is constantly being pushed on a yearly basis.

My advice is to go out and become as educated as possible in all of the percussive arts, so that your service to the pageantry art of front ensemble can speak to as wide a musical audience as possible.

Timothy Heath is pursuing a PhD in Music Education at the University of Alabama, where he is a member of the percussion staff with the Million Dollar Band. He is also the front ensemble coordinator for Music City Drum Corps. He holds a master's degree from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. **PN**



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WHAT'S LOUDER?



A) This Chainsaw



B) Your Instrument

ANSWER: B) Your Instrument

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