Marching Band Design:
For groups of all shapes, uniform colors and sizes

Presented by:

Michael Huestis, Clinician

Mr. Michael Huestis has been involved in music education since 1991 and has taught at The Colony High School in North Dallas since 2010. Throughout his career Mr. Huestis' bands, percussion ensembles and drumlines have performed at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, Music for All National Percussion Festival, MENC Biennial Conference, Bands of American Grand National Championships, President Bush's inaugural parade in Washington D.C., the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City and the Drum Corps International World Championships. Mr. Huestis was featured as one of the "50 Directors Who Make a Difference" by "School Band and Orchestra Magazine in 2008.

Mr. Huestis earned his Bachelor of Music Degree was from the University of North Texas where he performed with the 3 O'Clock Lab Band, U.N.T. drum line, Steel Band, the Brazilian Ensemble, Afro-Cuban Ensemble and Percussion Ensemble. He then earned a Masters in Percussion Performance from B.Y.U. serving as a graduate assistant for the Cougar Drumline and Latin-Jazz Ensemble. Mr. Huestis has studied with David Glyde, Shawn Glyde, Paul Rennick, Ron Fink, Dr. Jon Kellis, Dr. Ronald Brough and Dr. Robert Scheitroma.

A highly sought after composer and arranger, Mr. Huestis is the percussion arranger for Pacific Crest Drum & Bugle Corps from Diamond Bar, CA. His compositions are published by JKS Music, Rowloff, Key Poulan Publications and HuestisMusic Publications. Michael is the author of the classroom method, "Developing the Percussionist-Musician" which was developed for middle school and high school students.

Mr. Huestis has presented clinics and master classes at numerous state music education association conventions and universities. Michael serves as the assistant coordinator of the Music for All, National Percussion Festival held yearly in Indianapolis, IN. His professional affiliations include Texas Music Educators Association, National Association for Music Education, Jazz Educators Network and the Percussive Arts Society, where he served one term as a chapter president. Michael is an endorser of Yamaha Instruments, Vic Firth drum sticks and Evans Drumheads.

Part 1

- Establish a schedule for the design process and create targets for design concepts being accomplished.

- The original "list of ideas" should be made without concern as to the ability to pull them off or the ability to play them, etc. just list as many great ideas as possible. Nothing is off-limits.

- Look for ideas outside of the "pageantry arts". Artists, films, commercials, museums, magazines, foreign films, short films, architecture, historical novels, etc.

- Give yourself time to "simmer" on the ideas. Something that might seem impossible at first might become "do-able" with enough time to consider the "how to".

- "Design weekends" don't usually work without a ton of prep-work. Sitting down with NO ideas and trying to design a show in 2-3 days isn't always a realistic goal.

- Getting feedback from others is a great idea. Sometimes the act of "saying the idea out loud" makes it clear that a show design is a bad one or a good one.

- "What came first the chicken or the egg?" – Music first or concept first? It today's competitive design world, the concept first approach is becoming more and more the "norm".
    - There is lots of great music. It is tough to narrow it down sometimes. Letting the show concept drive the music selection is a way to make choosing music a more narrow selection process. (Think Martin Scorsese films)

- Music should always be considered in relation to the visual idea.

- The show design that has the most ideas and that you find a wealth of musical selections that you think will communicate the design will be the strongest vehicle for your program.

- Now that you have a design chosen and many, many ideas to go along with it, it is time to design the show.

- Too many ideas or moments within a show design are great (at first). Narrow them down by deciding which ones help promote the overall show design. Or more simply, pick the very best ones from the list.

- Establish your beginning, middle and ending. Three major effects that "sell" the theme to your show.

- Fill in the major moments with minor moments and transitional material that lead you from one effect to another.

- Play to your strengths.
    - Make a list of every section in the band and rank them from strongest to weakest. Pit and battery are two separate design sections.
    - List every student who would be considered as a soloist or as part of a small ensemble moment in the show.
    - Consider the visual strengths and weaknesses.
    - Is the color guard a strength? Weakness?
    - Is there a guard soloist who could handle being featured?
    - Can the band handle modern "movement"?

Part 2

- Now, each idea, or moment, within the show should be given an estimated "time frame" and sequence. Move ideas around; create an order and a pacing that works to begin to create a structure for the overall show design. If you know that you want to have a couple of soloists, a guard moment, a drum feature and a full band "movement" moment; then you already have a few min. of your show "designed". An example of an outline could look like this:

  - Movement 1
    - Part 1 (1:00)
      - Intro – soft chords – soloist w/pit
      - Visual idea is _____
      - Pit continues, battery enters w/low brass (groove)
      - Building and layering, crescendo to first ensemble impact
      - Guard is staged _____ Visual focus is _____
    - Part 2 (:45)
      - Pit transition
      - Woodwind musical moment
      - Visual staging is _____
    - Part 3 (:45)
      - Melodic content in the brass, full ensemble is in
      - Visual idea is _____
      - Middle voices have a moment and then full impact
      - Large impactful chords with battery interruptions
      - Color guard staging is _____
      - Conclude movement with punctuation coordinated with the color guard ending in thematic pose.
  - Movement 2 (etc)

- Lots of shows seem to have one great idea and do not sustain the commitment to the concept throughout the show. Usually the one great idea is at the beginning and the show never regains the interest created at the beginning.

- Some shows begin and end well, but lose the audience in the middle.
- Beginning and Ending need to be slam dunks, with at least a handful of nice, solid moments in between.

- **DO NOT FALL DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE!!!**

- Don't fall in love with your own design. Feedback is usually best when it is negative. "I don't get it" needs to be addressed. Don't overreact, but address the issue and see if a solution can't be discovered.

- Human reaction is the best way to earn "General Effect" points
  - If the performers & educators don't react, then the audience won't either
  - Natural reactions are better than forced reactions (think about "bad" comedy movies…sometimes you laugh, but only because it is uncomfortable or awkward)
  - Soft and simple is as natural a human reaction as loud. Use both.
  - Will the audience want to see it again? "I can't wait until next time…."

Part 3

- Beyond the music and drill

    o Stages
    o Floors
    o Sets
    o Props
    o Costuming
    o Flags
    o Color
    o Narration
    o Electronics

- "Deep Thoughts"

    o Generally a "deep" concept is really difficult to pull off.

    o Storytelling is difficult unless the audience already knows the story (Spartacus).

    o Audiences are trying to take in music, drill and then a thematic element, which can be a sensory overload.

    o Simple ideas that can be conveyed in seconds with a sound-bite (ticking clock) or one body movement ("Tilt") are best.

- Narration isn't "cheating", it is a device to help portray a thematic idea.

    o If a show doesn't work at all without the narration, the show isn't strong enough to begin with.

    o However, narration can help draw an audience in emotionally with a simple phrase, a quote, an exclamation, etc.

    o Try not to depend upon narration, but don't be afraid of it either.

    o Grandma (or any non-band audience member) might "get it" if there was a little help along the way....

- Floors and props, particularly for smaller bands, can help to narrow the visual focus and create a smaller "stage" for the performers. It can make bands appear to "fill up" the performance space a bit more and limit the audience's eye. Create a focus for attention.

- If the audience knows what the show theme/concept is before you ever play a note, then the design aides provided by props, floors, costumes, etc. is worth the time and effort.

Part 4

- Music should always sound good. (Don't laugh)

  o Play music that can be executed by your group and that plays to your strengths and hides your weaknesses.

  o Play music that is familiar, or that sounds familiar, to an audience. Is there something in the show that Grandma, Mom, Dad, Sister, Aunt or Uncle will like?

  o Have contrasting styles of music, which fit the thematic idea of the show.

  o Leave room for the transition AWAY from a major impact or event.

  o Create contrasting musical effects:
    - Emotional effect (aww....)
    - Intellectual effect (did you see how....)
    - Adrenal effect (that was loud/fast/rhythmic....)

  o Is there interest and development of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and textural elements?

  o Pageantry arts seem to have an aversion to playing music that has been "done before". But doing something that has been done before, but presented in a new way, is a perfect balance of old and new.

  o Find at least one place to use silence in your show.

- Don't try and be something you are not. Don't show what you can't do.

  o Smaller bands in particular should exploit the softer moments and thinner textures that come naturally to smaller numbers.

  o If your band can't play virtuosic moments, create interest with rhythmic moments and lyrical passages.

  o If the percussion section is strong, use them often for MUSICAL moments, transitions, pit accompaniment to soloists, etc.

  o If the percussion section is weak, have them play simple grooves with "clever" implements or simply as textural time keepers.

  o If the band can't march and play a section of music, hold them in a "pose" and have the guard carry the visual moment, etc.

  o Regardless of who wrote the musical score, take ownership of the final product. Does it fit your ensemble?

Additional Thoughts

- Musical score
  - Sketch the show out with "source material"; even if the source material isn't the "right" music or if it is too long, or not exactly right. Just get the feel or "the vibe" of the music right.
  - Movie directors do this with rough cuts of a film before the actual film music gets written. "Place holder" music can tell an arranger what feel, tempo or mood you are going for. Original music or another arrangement can be substituted later, but getting the feel correct is key.
  - Understand that adjustments in time can be figured out as rough drafts become final drafts.
  - If the score is developed early then adjusting moments in terms of length, difficulty, pacing, etc can happen and things can get dialed in before drill is being written.
  - "Performance Quality" is a difficult thing to quantify and to judge, but WE ALL KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT. There is nothing more fun ("effective") than watching a band perform a selection of music that they have completely mastered and can play with confidence. So, in a nutshell...don't over-write the demand.
  - Pick your battles. Each section (brass, woodwind, battery, pit) can have a moment that is challenging for them (a calculated risk), but the other 90% of the show should be in their "wheel house".
  - Risk vs. Reward
  - Be honest and answer these two questions.
    - Do my kids have the skill set to perform this section of music correctly?
    - Do I have the skill set as a teacher to get my kids to a point where they can perform this section of music correctly?

- Visual design
  - Get a team together to be a part of the "think tank".
  - All ideas are good during initial discussions. Images are the place to start, not "drill moves". Costumes, colors, visual images/concepts.
  - Go back and tag the best ideas that relate to the thematic and musical ideas of the show.
  - Eliminate ANYTHING visual that dilutes the thematic idea or show concept. "Cool visuals" or "visual eye-candy" that do not support the show's theme are a waste of time and effort, both in cleaning the show and in terms of creating a clear and concise visual show design.
  - The overall visual concept should advise the other visual decisions (costuming, flags, colors, props, etc.)
  - Does the design provide:
    - Opportunity (space & density)
    - Clarity
    - Positive Experiences

- Drill Design and Color Guard integration
  - Understand the struggles and the limits of these jobs.
  - Communicate and set-up the drill designer for success.
    - Give them enough time to do the job correctly
    - Which sections have the melody?
    - Where the guard changes flags?
    - When the drumline is loud?
    - When you want "movement" instead of drill?
  - Just like the music, take ownership of the drill and color guard integration. If it isn't correct, get it fixed.