

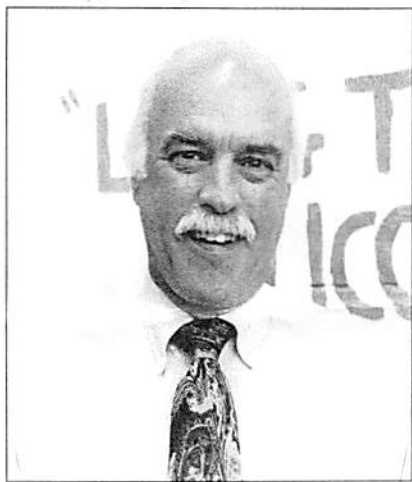
# Planning the Marching Show

By Tom Lizotte

Careful, months-long planning is key to a successful marching band season and program. Marching programs range from Bands of America aspirants to non-competitive football bands, and while the range and amount of planning activities may vary, programming is universally important. In well-established programs, that path is often established and entrenched, but how would you operate if you could start from scratch?

## Set a musical direction.

A number of years ago I was hired to teach a small marching band in Biddeford, a mill town in southern Maine. They played football games in a football-crazed community and had a moderately successful competitive marching band that played mostly pop material. The previous band director had resurrected the band from disaster to an ensemble with promise. The staff was small but dedicated; most had a drum corps background.



Tom Lizotte, director of bands at Cape Elizabeth (Maine) High School, has been a member of Drum Corps International and Drum Corps Associates design teams since 1976. He is a member of the Maine Music Educators Association Hall of Fame.

We inherited a pop and movie music show written by the former director. It fit the band's image and worked well that first year. Having this taken care of before I came in gave the staff and me the opportunity to take a breath and assess the group's identity and determine a future direction.

Many new directors make the mistake of not taking into account the group's identity or what the expectations for the group are. If a group has been known to do well with jazz and has that identity, it makes little sense to shift abruptly into Bach or Mozart. Drum Corps International groups provide a cautionary tale. At one point, Santa Clara Vanguard, known at the time for classical music and Broadway, switched to a show that mixed jazz and classical. Crossmen, known for jazz, abruptly switched to Samuel Barber and Alfred Reed. Madison Scouts, also known primarily for jazz, attempted to do Kabalevsky. All the literature was of excellent quality but didn't fit the image. These corps quickly reverted to what fit their image.

If you are new to a program and have the opportunity to start from scratch, think incrementally, especially if the band's past image doesn't jibe with where you would like to take it. Many people look at programming as a one-year process, but it is better to think long range.

For a number of years I was fortunate to work on projects with Jim Prime, the DCI Hall of Fame brass writer. He always thought four years in advance. When he first took over Boston Crusaders, he worked with a group that programmed eclectically, with lots of film music, some jazz, and some orchestral. To create a focus, he shifted focus to orchestral music, but carefully. He realized that there needed to be a definable direction that was in concert with the corps' image and past. Boston

had past success with Mussorgsky's *Coronation of Boris*, so the thread from the past that he chose to pull was that composer and *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

That wasn't his end game, but a point of departure. He had a four-year plan that culminated with Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky Cantata*. Between these two he established an evolution that included Rimsky-Korsakov, Gliere, and some populist Prokofiev.

The lesson is that by taking the long view one can orchestrate a progression that leaves a group musically far ahead of where it started. This is similar to concert band and jazz programming. Some program concert to concert, but this often leaves a group stuck in one place. You can end up programming just to fill slots rather than with long-range musical development in mind. The upperclassmen should feel that they and the group are progressing in what is being asked musically. With groups that often mix many underclassmen with upperclassmen, this can be tricky. The key is keeping technical demands reasonable while upping the ante musically.

## Determine leadership style and staff structure.

A director should decide early whether to operate the staff as a CEO – acting as the final arbiter of a staff-led creative process – or to determine the direction yourself and hand that down to your staff. This decision depends on your leadership style and the resources available to you, as physical location and budget often dictate structure and staffing. In Maine, staff – particularly visual – can be difficult to acquire because of distance from major metropolitan areas. Budgets and bands are often small, and band directors are often doing everything.

The advantage of the CEO approach – sharing creative control

## The key is giving your audience a universal message and a clear story about which they can care.

with the staff – is that the creative process is much more open and permeable to a wide range of thought. If you have the right people in the room, this can work exceptionally well. The band director is always in the mix without necessarily dictating the direction.

Under this structure, a good strategy is to set up a completely non-judgmental planning session. Any idea – no matter how crazy – is in play; the only rule is that practicality will not be discussed at this point. Can we make the entire band disappear? What would be some great magic tricks? Could we cut the drum major in half (figuratively)? What if we made part of the show audience interactive? What if there was a part of the show that was improvisational for the group and the improvisation changed every show? What about taking a small segment of the show, teaching three different segments and letting the audience decide? You'd find the synergy terrific. Many of these ideas are impractical, but this might be the next discussion: "This couldn't work, but what about . . .?"

The director as decision maker, who hands down the program direction to staff, has as its advantage that the direction is always clear. Directors who lead this way reason that concert band and jazz ensemble programming decisions are not made by committee, so marching band should operate similarly.

This approach can work, to a point. However, there must be a balance between curriculum and the creative freedom given to visual designers, particularly if the director is a music designer and not visual designer. This approach can also lead to a narrow, limited vision.

One permutation of this that worked well for me was to solicit show ideas and develop them at a basic level to present to the design team. I would take each concept and outfit it with

multiple literature choices for each tune. The staff would then decide which program it wanted to develop and choose the piece for each segment. If none of the pieces for a segment passed muster, I would go back to the drawing board for that segment. What made this work was that I wasn't ceding control of the quality of literature. To me that was critical; a band's literature is its curriculum. As the musician in charge, that is ultimately my responsibility.

### Decide what the message will be.

Some groups thrive on audience rapport; others seem to shun it. If your group has the former in its DNA or strives to create that as an identity, that will determine your musical and visual vocabulary. Study how this has been done by groups such as the Bridgemen, Velvet Knights, and Bluecoats.

The Bridgemen, a Bayonne, New Jersey group, are a fascinating case study in establishing a strong, audience-friendly identity. They were a competent, if garden-variety, DCI corps. In 1976 they flipped the switch creatively and established an identity that set up the corps for eight years of sustained success in DCI. They adopted a Harlem persona with yellow zoot suits (the corps was nicknamed "The Bananas") and chose music that was New York jazz (*42nd Street*), contemporary pop (Earth, Wind, and Fire's *In the Stone*) and light classical (*Pagliacci* with a jazz twist, *William Tell Overture*,



photo courtesy of Louisburg (Kansas) High School

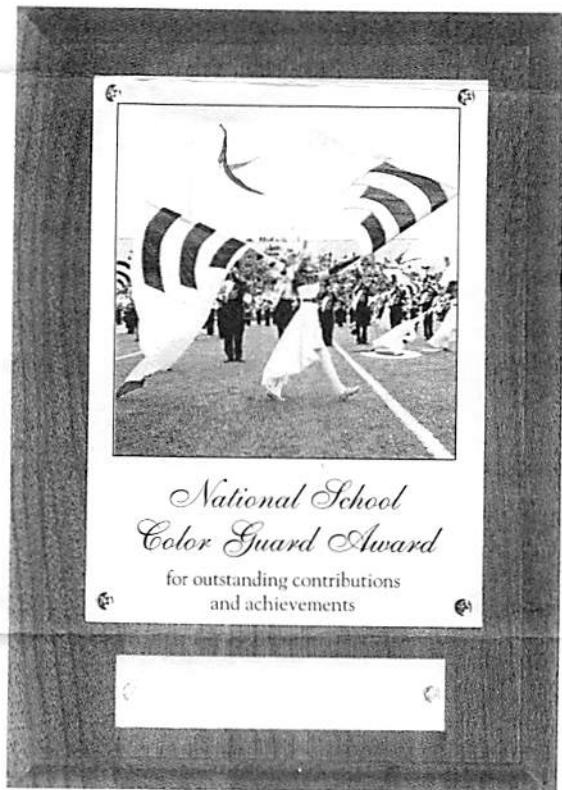
and an outside-the-box-take on *Ritual Fire Dance*). The hip persona and great arrangements of literature audiences would know made Bridgemen the prototype entertainment corps.

A similar tack was taken by California's Velvet Knights, who took the Bridgemen's approach one step further and introduced humor into the proceedings. Like Bridgemen, they performed a range of quality music leavened with audience-friendly concepts (trips around the world, for example) and biting satire, including dancing gorillas, a Carmen Miranda mashup complete with color guard giant banana implements, Miranda costuming, and a tweaking of cross-state rival Santa Clara Vanguard's famous *Bottle Dance* from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Bluecoats's 2016 *Downside Up* brought performance art to a new level with imaginative percussion staging, infectious melodic writing and a variety of devices including performers scaling a huge prop and floating down slides. The story was amorphous, but the message – fun – was clear.

If storytelling is your goal, look toward groups such as Tarpon (Florida) High School. Kevin Ford and his staff are masters of this approach. The key

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is giving your audience a universal message and a clear story about which they can care. In recent years this has been highly successful for Tarpon, which has produced shows titled *Pandora, Caged* (complete with an array of cage props), and *Man vs. Machine*. There is great depth to these designs, but the message isn't obtuse.

The key this type of design is to make sure the audience can figure it out without needing a libretto. Many groups make the mistake of designing for themselves and not the audience.

If you want a cerebral approach, make sure it has a populist element – something that will keep the audience engaged – even if the message is dark. Consider whether you are looking to be provocative, controversial, political, avant garde, or something else.

Be careful of programming by YouTube, which makes an excellent springboard for creativity but it is not in and of itself creative. Just because a design is on YouTube does not mean it is of high quality. In addition, a segment that worked well in another context might not be the right fit for you.

Plan intelligently, but don't be afraid to be you. In a Winter Guard International position paper, the late judge Shirlee Whitcomb put it this way: "Be original and take a creative step that will make you unique." She also said, "If you don't break away from the 'common' mold, what else can judges do but reward the best of what everyone is doing?"

As educators, marching band can be a great outlet for creativity. Whether you are a band with BOA aspirations, a band that performs at Friday evening football games or something in between, your audience and students deserve imagination, integrity, and vision. □

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