

Integrating the Front Ensemble with Battery Exercises

By Gene Fambrough

When developing a front ensemble technical program for a marching percussion ensemble, there are many things to consider. Do the exercises focus on techniques that are needed and develop them in a logical sequence? Are the exercises idiomatically correct for the instruments? Is each technique “tempo appropriate” within each exercise? Fulfilling all of these requirements without overburdening the students can be a tricky proposition. This article offers some suggestions on pairing keyboard and battery exercises.

INTRODUCTION

There are different types of exercises that do not meet the above criteria. First, there are “battery-type” exercises. These are often just the snare part of the exercise paired with some type of mallet part (either scalar, arpeggiated, or chromatic) that work on the same technique. This is little more than a functional approach, as most keyboard players don’t have the same facility as the snare drummers. Additionally, most of these patterns are never encountered in the music they play, so why should we drill them so much? Examples of these are often found with accent-tap patterns, double beat exercises, and sextuplet timing exercises (see Example 1).

Example 1

Example 1 displays three systems of musical notation for a marching percussion ensemble, each system pairing a Snare (SD) part with a Keyboard part. The notation is in 4/4 time and includes rhythmic markings (R for right, L for left) and dynamic markings (accents).

System 1: The Snare part features a series of eighth notes with accents, followed by a quarter rest and a half note. The Keyboard part mirrors this pattern with eighth notes and a half note. The notation includes "R" and "L" markings below the notes, and "etc." at the end of the sequence.

System 2: The Snare part features a series of eighth notes with accents, followed by a quarter rest and a half note. The Keyboard part mirrors this pattern with eighth notes and a half note. The notation includes "R" and "L" markings below the notes, and "etc." at the end of the sequence.

System 3: The Snare part features a series of eighth notes with accents, followed by a quarter rest and a half note. The Keyboard part mirrors this pattern with eighth notes and a half note. The notation includes "R" and "L" markings below the notes, and "etc." at the end of the sequence.

Another approach is to have the front ensemble warm up completely separate from the battery, only coming together when it is time to work on music. This eliminates a key responsibility and skill set from their technical program—the ability to “listen back” as the ensemble is playing. This crucial part of the student development, whether it involves only the battery or the full band, should be addressed and reinforced from as many different angles as possible.

One more trend that has developed is to use stand-alone “etudes,” or short pieces of music, as a means of developing ensemble techniques. Proponents of this method believe in using *music* to teach musical ideas. In and of itself, this is a perfectly valid approach for more advanced players. It has been my experience that most students are still working on the basics of grip, sound production, and timing. They need repetition of basic, key elements in order to develop consistency with their playing before they can even begin to approach musical ideas.

As a teacher, I have used a specific approach when starting students on four-mallet marimba. Integrating this approach to our front ensemble exercises with the drumline capitalizes on the short amount of time we have for warm up, while addressing the issues mentioned above. Another reason behind the development of this system is to incorporate the stylistic aspects of my arranging into exercises that the students will work with on a daily basis.

Many drumlines use the type of exercise shown in Example 3 as the very first thing they play together as a group. Avoid having the keyboards play scales in octaves with this one, as shown in Example 2.

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Example 2

Musical score for Example 2. It features two staves: Snare and Keyboards. The Snare staff is in 4/4 time and contains a sequence of eighth notes, with labels 'R' and 'L' indicating right and left hand strokes. The Keyboards staff is in 4/4 time and contains a sequence of chords. The score ends with a double bar line and the word 'etc.' below the Keyboards staff.

Although it is a good skill to develop, doing that first in rehearsal may not be the right time. Use this time to focus on double vertical strokes in quarter notes, eventually condensing from longer phrases per chord (5 and 4 counts) to single counts on the way down, as shown in Example 3. This also helps to develop the players' vision in between hands and across multiple octaves.

Example 3: legato strokes/double verticals [mm = 108–132]

Musical score for Example 3. It features five staves: Snare, Tenors, Basses, Cymbals, and Keyboards. The Snare, Tenors, and Basses staves are in 4/4 time and contain a sequence of eighth notes, with labels 'R' and 'L' indicating right and left hand strokes. The Cymbals staff is in 4/4 time and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The Keyboards staff is in 4/4 time and contains a sequence of chords. The score is divided into two systems, with a double bar line and a '5' indicating a measure rest between them. The score ends with a double bar line and the word 'etc.' below the Keyboards staff.

The next exercise provides a good opportunity to increase the tempo of the double vertical strokes and subsequently transition into single independent and single alternating strokes for the keyboard players. This is also a good time to incorporate dynamic contrast, timbre changes, and four-bar phrase structure. In Example 4, notice how the keyboard part starts with left-hand double verticals, moves to single independents, and ends up on single alternating strokes in the 1324 permutation. The second half of the exercise incorporates the same progression starting on the right hand, ending with the 4231 permutation. A touch of harmonic variety is added to the second phrase as well, all while keeping the interval at a fifth for each hand.

Example 4: sixteenth notes/double vertical and single alternating [mm = 112–124]

to edge ----- edge ----- to center -----

SD/Tenor

Bass

Cymbal

Keyboards

S/T

BD

Cym.

Keys.

9 11

ff *p* *f* *p*

f *f* *f* *p*

p *f* *f* *p*

p *f* *f* *p*

The use of a battery exercise to address triple strokes is an important method for developing rebound control and strength in the back fingers of the fulcrum. Keyboard players never use this technique; instead of allowing them to “sit this one out,” the challenge is to find a technique that is tempo appropriate for them to develop at the same time. Referring back to my studio teaching, I incorporated an exercise that I use frequently to develop double lateral strokes.

Example 6 shows a simple, repetitive pattern that can be memorized fairly quickly. Many intermediate-level keyboard players will need a good deal of work on this before it becomes smooth, which is reason enough to include it in the exercise program. The pattern is four counts of “inward” double laterals (4312) and four counts of “outward” double laterals (3421). This is played four times through, and then changed to two counts of each, and finally one count of each. The overall structure of the repetitions can be changed to fit whatever the battery is playing. This type of exercise is a good example of providing a skill set to the players that will give the arranger more freedom and flexibility when writing music.

Example 6: triple strokes/double lateral strokes [mm = 112–124]

The musical score for Example 6 is written in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system includes parts for Snare, Tenor, Bass, Cymbal, and Keyboards. The second system includes parts for SD, TN, BD, Cymbal, and Keys. The score features complex rhythmic patterns with triple strokes and double lateral strokes, indicated by 'R' and 'L' notation. The tempo is marked as mm = 112–124.

System 1:

- Snare:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil). The pattern is 4312 (inward) and 3421 (outward).
- Tenor:** Similar to Snare, with triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- Bass:** Similar to Snare, with triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- Cymbal:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- Keyboards:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).

System 2:

- SD:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- TN:** Similar to SD, with triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- BD:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- Cym.:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).
- Keys:** Four measures of triple strokes (Rrr) and double lateral strokes (Lil).

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The top system contains the percussion parts: SD (Snare Drum), TN (Tom), BD (Bass Drum), and Cym. (Cymbal). The bottom system contains the keyboard part, labeled 'Keys.'. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 9, 11, and 13 indicated. The percussion parts feature complex rhythmic patterns using 'R' for right and 'L' for left strokes. The keyboard part features a melodic line with arpeggios and chromatic runs.

Another basic skill set needed for the battery is the ability to play triplet diddles, 5-stroke rolls, and triplet rolls. Keyboard players will always need to develop facility on arpeggios and chromatic runs, and the two exercises in Example 7 are a good pair. These two fit together for a couple of basic reasons: tempo and math. Both skill sets can be developed at approximately the same tempo, and the “math” works out for a variety of factors: the 12/8 time signature, 12 notes in the chromatic octave, and the three “sets” of the battery exercise divide the octave by major thirds (creating the check patterns on C, E, and A-flat).

This exercise is easily altered to create interesting new patterns as well. Keyboard players can start on the left hand and play the arpeggios going up/down instead of down/up. Instead of an ascending pattern (C, C-sharp, D, etc.), you can use a descending pattern (C, B, B-flat, etc.). For an interesting harmonic blend, have woods go up first and metals go down; slight variations like this will challenge the students to think more!

Example 7: triplet transition/2-mallet arpeggios [mm = 130–144]

The musical score for Example 7 is divided into three systems. The first system includes Snare/Tenor, Bass, and Keyboards. The second system includes S/T, BD, and Keys. The third system includes S/T, BD, and Keys. The music features a triplet transition and 2-mallet arpeggios.

Flams are an essential skill for any drumline. Additionally, many players love to “chop out” on any and every flam exercise they can find. Example 8 gives the battery their flam workout without forcing the keyboard players to sit out. Marimba and vibe players will benefit from concentrated work on the 1234 permutation while also working on vision of the keyboard on different “white-note” arpeggiated chords. This exercise is a great way to address both skill sets at the same time. Example 8 is challenging because of the interval changes in both hands (between thirds and fourths), coupled with moving between similar chords (A-minor, C-major, E-minor, F-major).

Regarding tempo, this works best at a slower pace to begin with because of the nature of the skills being developed in both battery and front ensemble. Flams (and correct execution of tap heights) need to be addressed and fixed slowly, which will give the keyboard players more time to familiarize themselves with the part, therefore improving their accuracy.

Example 8: flams/1234 permutation on white-note chords [mm = 90–120]

Snare / Tenor substitutions at brackets:

- Flam taps
- Pataflaflas (regular and alternating)
- Single sextuplets (no flam on release)
- Paradiddle-diddle sextuplets (no flam)
- 3-stroke rolls (no flam)
- Accented tap rolls (no flam)
- Full rolls (no flam)

Split version: snares take 2nd ending 1st

Of the more advanced marimba techniques that may be encountered, the most common is the execution of a melody in right-hand octaves with some type of left-hand ostinato. As it turns out, a standard sixteenth-note roll exercise works within the same tempo range as an introductory approach to this keyboard technique.

At this level, most students will be more comfortable with their left-hand ostinato as single alternating strokes at the interval of a fifth. The majority of Example 9 is structured this way (seven of nine measures), changing to a fourth, and eventually an octave at the last two measures. These interval changes, coupled with the syncopation of the right-hand melody, may prove to be a bit more difficult for many players and will need some attention. The inclusion of a few more difficult passages and techniques will only serve to help the players, provided it is kept to a minimum.

Example 9: rolls/four-mallet “tune” with R.H. octaves vs. L.H. accompaniment [mm = 94–120]

The musical score for Example 9 is divided into three systems, each containing staves for Snare/Tenor (S/T), Basses (BD), Cymbals (Cyms.), and Keyboards (Keys). The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of 11 measures.

- System 1 (Measures 1-3):** The Snare/Tenor and Basses play a continuous sixteenth-note roll. The Cymbals play a simple pattern of eighth notes. The Keyboards play a melody in the right hand (treble clef) and a bass line in the left hand (bass clef).
- System 2 (Measures 4-6):** The Snare/Tenor and Basses continue their rolls. The Cymbals play a pattern of eighth notes. The Keyboards play a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.
- System 3 (Measures 7-9):** The Snare/Tenor and Basses continue their rolls. The Cymbals play a pattern of eighth notes. The Keyboards play a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.
- System 4 (Measures 10-11):** The Snare/Tenor and Basses continue their rolls. The Cymbals play a pattern of eighth notes. The Keyboards play a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, time signatures, and note values. The key signature is one flat (B-flat).

CONCLUSION

With some thought, time, and experimentation, you can come up with creative ways to incorporate skills that players need in the contemporary front ensemble. Developing a cohesive percussion section is vital to the success of the marching band. One of the best ways to do this is to have them play together as much as possible, utilizing techniques that will help them cultivate the skills they will need in order to produce the highest quality product in performance.

Music examples arranged by Gene Fambrough

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