

Marching percussion in the 20th Century

by Lauren Vogel Weiss

To many of today's drummers, marching percussion "began" with the formation of Drum Corps International in 1972.

Memories of drum and bugle corps with marching keyboards -- as opposed to xylophones and marimbas in the "pit" -- or even with single tenor drums -- compared to five or six toms mounted on one carrier -- fade as the years pass by.

And marching percussion is no longer limited to drum and bugle corps, but has expanded into its own genre and can be found everywhere from high schools to amusement parks.

To understand where this ever-changing medium is going, it is important to know where it has been.

Marching percussion traces its roots to the

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military where drums were used to awaken soldiers in the morning, notify them when to retire at night and signal maneuvers to the soldiers in the field in between.

Colonial fife and drum corps were an important part of the American Revolution and recreations can still be seen today, especially in Williamsburg and other parts of Virginia and Michigan.

The traditional "drum lines" of modern day drum and bugle corps date back to early in the 21st Century when the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion sponsored [senior] corps for the men returning from World War I. Many of them had become interested in drumming in the service and continued to play in these corps as a hobby.

Locally-based organizations were extremely active in their hometown's patriotic celebrations -- from Fourth of July parades to standstill performances on Memorial Day. These exhibitions soon became local competitions which eventually became drum

and bugle corps contests on a national scale.

By the 1930s, junior drum and bugle corps began as a youth activity for the children of the World War I veterans. Still sponsored by VFW and American Legion posts, these drum corps were especially strong in the Northeast and Midwest.

The drum lines of the 1930s and 1940s were relatively large -- an average corps usually marched eight to 10 snare drums (12x15 inches), several tenor drums (snare drums without the "snares"), bass drums and cymbals (usually 14 or 16 inches).

As the drills became more open (for their time) and the corps started marching more, the drum lines were gradually reduced in size.

By the beginning of the 1950s, the standard instrumentation in these smaller drum sections was three snares, three tenors, two bass drums and a cymbal player. Marching patterns usually revolved around squads of three and drum sections were rarely larger than nine people. (Of course, the horn lines weren't very large either,



ST. ANN'S LOYALAIRES, Bridgeport, CT (1964).
Photo by Moe Knox.



ROYAL LANCERS, Wyandotte, MI (1968).
Photo by Moe Knox.



DEBONNAIRES ALL-GIRL, Norwood, MA (1966).
Photo by Moe Knox.

generally 30-40 players.)

Marty Hurley, an alumni of 1950s and 1960s drum corps powerhouses Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights and Hawthorne Caballeros and a former instructor with the Phantom Regiment during parts of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, recalls that almost every youngster in New Jersey where he grew up was either a horn player or a drummer.

"Drum corps went on all year round -- it was a part of your life. It was a social thing to do as well as a musical one. Being in the corps was not just competitive -- we had car washes and spaghetti dinners to raise money, too.

"Everything was very localized and there were parades almost every weekend." Besides the obvious musical instruction, drum corps taught these young people about dedication, sacrifice for a common goal and how to get along with others.

During this era, most of the drummers were basically taught by rote. "A few could read music, but the majority could not -- a far cry from today when many members of top drum and bugle corps are college music majors," elaborates Hurley.

"Even when most of the drummers are required to read music, when you need to make a part change on the spot in the middle of the summer, we still teach it to them by rote. It's beneficial for a drummer to develop both ways, using his eyes *and* his ears."

Perhaps the most important innovation in marching percussion in the 1950s was the development of the plastic drum head by Remo Belli in 1957. No longer would drum lines be silenced due to rain -- they could now play in any weather conditions.

Throughout the 1960s, drum lines began to grow and expand their instrumentation. One of the first "new" instruments introduced to the drum and bugle corps activity was the rudimental bass drum (not to be confused with the regular bass drums which just kept a straight beat).

Bobby Thompson, one of Marty Hurley's most influential teachers, borrowed the idea of the rudimental bass drum from the old fife and drum corps. "A rudimental bass drum was a little smaller," Hurley explains. "Usually 12x24 inches which allowed for better articulation. Played with hard wooden mallets, rudimental bass drums supported the rhythmic pulse of the snare line."



Gerry Shellmer, percussion instructor for the Boston Crusaders, bolted two bass drums together in 1967 and "invented" multi-toms. (Photo by Moe Knox)

This decade also saw the introduction of Swiss rudiments into the drummers' technical repertoire. Although the Swiss are generally credited as being the first nation to use drum rudiments, the Standard 26 American Rudiments are descendants of the British rudiments used during the American Revolution. Now, in addition to flams, drags and paradiddles, drummers were playing Swiss triplets and pataflaflas.

Around 1963, experimentation was being done in the Midwest utilizing pitched bass drums in an effort to expand the voicing of the drum line. Larry McCormick of the Chicago Cavaliers was one of the first percussion writers to use the pitched bass drums.

In 1965, he tuned them in a G-C-G structure to be used as fills and tag endings. Other corps like the Phantom Regiment (instructed at that time by Al LeMert) and the Chicago Royal Airs pioneered the use of these bass drums to reinforce the lower horn voices.

In a 1987 interview with *Modern Percussionist*, LeMert reminisced that "bass drums were the hot item. Corps were marching four to six -- and sometimes more -- bass drums down the sideline to show the world how great they were at playing triplets down

the line or in unison.

"In 1966, the pitched bass drums began to be used to augment the brass, so the width of the drums was increased to 14 inches to improve the tone quality," LeMert added.

During this same time, other attempts to expand the voicing of the drum line were going on in the East. Gerry Shellmer of the Boston Crusaders mounted two single-headed bass drums horizontally. This new instrument was the forerunner of the timpani duos and trios. This was mainly used for fills or soloistic purposes as the idea of musical reinforcement (both melodic and harmonic) had not yet been fully developed.

Soon, professional musicians with degrees in percussion -- like McCormick and Shellmer -- began to combine their drum corps background with their schooled musical background for the best of both worlds; a musical drum line.

In 1966, the Cavaliers fielded one of the largest drum sections of that time, consisting of four snare drums and four tenor drums, in addition to the rest of the instruments. But, as Hurley remembers with a laugh, "Blessed Sacrament went one better and marched a drum line consisting of *five* snares, *five* tenors, two straight bass, two rudimental bass and three cymbals players.

"People said you couldn't put that many guys out there who could play together, but, of course, we did." Even with all these changes, who could dream of the innovations yet to come over the next 30 years?

The experiments with the single-headed bass drums mounted horizontally led to baritone and bass tom combinations, which were used to substitute for the timpani voice (which could not be used on the field yet).

In 1968, the American Legion Uniformed Groups Congress allowed timpani in competition for the first time and as soon as a carrying device was created, marching kettledrums began to cover the traditional bass and timpani parts of the repertoire.

By 1969, the drum section of the Racine Kilties was playing a very melodic arrangement of *Night Train*. Their instrumentation included three tenor trios, three bar trios, three bass trios (14x24, 14x26 and 14x28 inches) along with four snare drums, four pitched bass drums, four pairs of cymbals and four marching timpani.

In 1971, the last big nationals was sponsored



SOUTH WIND, Baltimore, MD (1977). Photo by Moe Knox.



SQUIRES, Watkins Glen, NY (1976). Photo by Moe Knox.



SIMPLEX MINUTEMEN, Gardner, MA (approx. 1978). Photo by Moe Knox.

by the VFW which saw a new corps from Santa Clara, CA, called the Vanguard come out of nowhere to beat the Troopers. And in 1972, Drum Corps International was formed to allow the drum and bugle corps activity to expand its musical horizons.

"Around this time, drum lines began adding visual effects to their musical programs," Hurley states. "The first real stick visual was probably the use of backsticking. Instead of just using their hands straight up and down, drummers began flipping and twirling their sticks, too."

Another important innovation radically changed marching percussion in 1974 -- the development and widespread use of the snare drum carrier. The drums tended to bounce around quite a bit when worn on a sling, limiting the amount a drum line could



St. Lucy's Cadets from Newark, NJ, introduced a "cymbal rack" in 1969. (Photo by Moe Knox)

physically march.

With a carrier, the drum stayed in place so the drummers could move around yet not have execution problems. This was particularly important as the drum lines expanded their involvement in the drill, no longer just marching up and down the 50-yard line.

However, the snare drum carrier also created a new dilemma -- traditional versus matched grip. Drum lines that historically played traditional grip (because of the angle of the drum on a sling) switched to matched, but over the years, more and more drum lines incorporate both grips into their performances, showing the versatility of their snare

drummers.

The use of timpani and tuned bass drums were making the drum lines more melodic. In 1974, DCI expanded that concept by allowing two keyboards into the marching ensemble -- a set of bells and a xylophone (both 2 1/2-octaves and worn on carriers).

By 1978, two additional instruments were added -- a 2-octave marching marimba and a 2 1/2-octave marching vibraphone. The 1970s also saw the expansion of the marching timpani trios into quads as the arrangers continued to search for new voices.

As the sounds of the drum lines began to change, so did the sizes of the drums. The large size trios of the 1960s (originally bass drum sizes) shrunk to 14-16-18 inch configurations, which were then reduced in size and weight to accommodate increased drill

movement. Trios became 12-14-16 inch which, in turn, became quads of 10-12-14-16 or even 8-10-12-13. Some people began to use 12x14-inch snare drums to achieve the higher-pitched sound they could not get from a highly-torqued 15-inch drum. (Of course, the number of tension rods on a snare drum had gradually increased from eight to 10 to 12 to facilitate better tuning).

Cymbal sizes increased from the popular 20-inch size to as large as 24 or 26 inches and the number of cymbal players increased, too, as arrangers began to utilize them as ride cymbals for the snare drummers.

By the end of the 1970s, drum lines had expanded to well over 32 members -- 10 to 12 snare drums (the 12x15-inch size was still the most popular); four to five tenor players (quads were the preferable configuration); four to six bass drummers (with a few corps marching an 18x40-inch drum for special effects); several cymbal players (at least one for every two snare drummers when cymbal rides were required); four timpani players; and four keyboards.

As the marching drills became more complex, the drum line tended to remain near

the 50 yard line, with the keyboards and timpani placed near the front sideline for better projection.

The 1980s continued to bring change to the drum line. In 1982, DCI allowed the timpani to be grounded on the front sideline. The following year they allowed the grounding of all marching keyboards in a specially-marked area between the 40 yard lines -- the first "pit" as we know it today.

Soon, concert keyboard instruments became

Typical instrumentation

approximate quantities/sizes based on "average" drum lines

1940s

8-10 snare drums (12x15")
4-5 tenor drums
4 bass drums
4 cymbals

1950s

3 snare drums (12x15")
3 tenor drums
2 bass drums
1 cymbal

1960s

4 snare drums (12x15")
4 tenor drums
2 "straight" bass drums (10x26 or 10x28")
2 "rudimental" bass drums
3 cymbals

1970s

6-10 snare drums (12x15")
3-5 timpani trios
4-6 "pitched" bass drums
4 cymbals
4 marching timpani
2-4 marching keyboards (bells/xylo only until 1978, then plus mar/vibes)

1980s

8-12 snare drums (12x14")
4-6 quads/quints
4-6 "pitched" bass drums
4 cymbals
Pit

1990s

6-9 snare drums (12x14", some 13")
3-5 multiple tenors (4-6 drums)
4-6 "pitched" bass drums
Expanded "orchestral" pit



VALLEY FEVER, Modesto, CA (1982).
Photo by John Wacker from the collection of Drum Corps World.



VELVET KNIGHTS, Santa Ana, CA (1975).
Photo from the collection of Drum Corps World.



ST. ANDREW'S BRIDGEMEN, Bayonne, NJ (1973).
Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World.

commonplace, along with more advanced four-mallet techniques that had been almost impossible on the smaller, marching versions. In addition to the keyboards and timpani, various other percussion instruments -- tom toms, gongs, steel drums, Latin percussion instruments, sound effects -- made their way into the "pit," which was now an equal to the "battery" instruments (snare, tenor, bass and cymbals) remaining on the field.

During this decade, there was experimentation with the actual drums themselves. Full shell tenor drums were being replaced by toms with a portion of the front shell cut away. Although this reduced their sound projection, it did make the drums lighter and easier to carry through increasingly difficult drills.

The 14-inch snare drums became the norm, as did the addition of smaller bass drums to the line (some as small as 16 or 18 inches in diameter).

In 1982, Ward Durrett founded the Percussive Arts Society Marching Forum (now known as the PAS Marching Percussion Festival) which provided an outlet for the drum lines of college marching bands (to be followed by high schools and individual competitions).

Taking their lead from the drum and bugle corps, these drum lines moved the genre in a new and exciting direction, proving that marching percussion did not have to take place solely on a football field during the summer.

Soon other organizations like Bands of America and Winter Guard International added contests for this growing segment of the marching percussion activity.

The 1990s saw a shift in the emphasis of drum lines in the drum and bugle corps activity. With a drop in the percentage of points toward the total score from 20 to 10, DCI focused on marching and visuals more than percussion.

Drum lines have gradually diminished in size (allowing for more horn players or



In 1976, the Concord, CA, Blue Devils used North drums with an unusual sound projection design. Although the drums were only used for two seasons, this led to attachable scoops on snares. (Photo by Mark Boisclair from the collection of Drum Corps World)

dancers/color guard).

Another interesting phenomenon is the growing size of the pits (where 8 to 12 performers can play on dozens of different percussion instruments) and the diminishing size of the battery. Many corps do not even march cymbal players any more, but simply

utilize cymbals in the pit.

Non-DCI events even allow electronic percussion instruments to be included.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable trends of marching percussion during the last decade of the 20th Century was the incorporation of world instruments and rhythms into the percussion sections on the field. Some of the first "international" instruments were those to give the music a Latin flavor, such as congas, bongos and timbales, cowbells, etc.

Soon there were African and South American instruments used with greater frequency -- like djembes and surdos -- as well as their traditional rhythmic parts.

The Blue Devils' "Rhythms . . . At the Edge of Time" program in 1999 emphasized percussion -- from the African drums at the beginning, to the driving pulse of Alberto Ginastera's *Malambo* from his ballet "Estancia" to the 3-2 clave rhythm in Graeme Koehne's *Powerhouse, Rhumba for Orchestra*.

Even rope-tensioned snare drums (once the



By 1968, the Racine Kilties (and many other corps) were using large sets of manufactured triple toms. (Photo by Moe Knox)



AMERICAN WOODMEN, St. Louis, MO (1994). Photo by Walt Niekamp from the collection of Drum Corps World.



SUNCOAST SOUND, Pinellas Park, FL (1986). Photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World.



WINDJAMMERS, Toms River, NJ (approx. 1975). Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World.

only kind available for marching drummers) made a guest appearance in the Boston Crusaders' 2000 production of "Red."

Sound effects like thundersheets, wind machines and rainsticks are no longer rarities, but appear whenever the program calls for them. Crashing trash can lids together (a la "Stomp") has also been done by more than one drum and bugle corps.

Handbells, once a staple of church choirs, have also been found in both the pit and on the field. Metallic sounds continue to increase as percussionists explore tuned gongs, crotales, a myriad of cymbals, brake drums -- even air tanks "tuned" to specific pitches. Castanets create a Spanish feel, while gongs move the stage to the Pacific.

Another non-traditional "marching percussion" instrument that made its way into the pit was the drumset. Although drumset-style parts were played by many traditional drum lines over the years -- Dennis DeLucia's scoring of the Bayonne Bridgeman's drum line in the late 1970s and early 1980s is a prime example -- drumsets (obviously) could not be "marched" by a drum and bugle corps.

Marching cymbals often did double duty as hi-hats and ride cymbals. Early pit instrumentations included "stand up" kits featuring several mounted toms and cymbals, but rarely a complete drumset including a pedal bass drum and hi-hat.

In 1994, the Cadets of Bergen County (who won High Drums that year) had seven snare drummers move to the pit area, remove their marching snare drums and sit down behind seven three-piece drumsets during Leonard Bernstein's *Cool* from "West Side Story."

That same year, the Bluecoats opened their "Blues" show with a solo drumset playing in the pit. In 1995, the Cadets again used seven drumsets in *Swing, Swing, Swing* from the film score to "1941" and six drumsets in the 2001 version of Van Morrison's *Moondance*.

The Crossmen are also known for their use of a drumset in the pit, especially in their signature piece *Birdland*.

Drumsets were a big part of the 1997 junior drum and bugle corps season -- the Blue Devils used "cocktail drumsets" during *Tunisia*. These sets consisted of a deep floor tom with a bass pedal underneath that hit the bottom head, along with two mounted toms (8- and 10-inch) plus three different cymbal setups -- ride, crash

and splash -- and a hi-hat was attached to each one of the sets.

Their pit also featured several djembes, a dumbek, finger cymbals and tambourines to create authentic Moroccan sounds. And the Bluecoats' seven snare drummers marched up a ramp to an elevated platform where each one stood in front of a pedal-operated bass drum and a crash cymbal in *Harlem Nocturne*.

Not only have the instruments evolved over time, but so have the *implements*. No longer are snare or tenor drums just played with sticks -- drummers use brushes, mallets, rutes, even their hands. Mallets in the pit create every sound color imaginable, from the most delicate ping to the loudest bang.

Individuals and ensembles

In addition to the innovations and advancements being made to the full drum lines, individual percussionists have impressed judges and fans alike by their amazing technical abilities, eye-catching visual effects and

unending creative imaginations.

Rudiments and backsticking once considered difficult in the middle part of the 20th Century are basics now compared to the hybrid-rudiments of today combined with stick tosses and even three- and four-stick playing.

Two decades ago, a winning keyboard solo might have consisted of a two-mallet piece on the xylophone, whereas individuals today play complicated four-mallet -- and sometimes even six-mallet -- passages with ease.

Multiple percussion, which years ago meant a cymbal or cowbell played by a quad player, now involves intricate drumset solos played by the next generation of rock stars.

Many former I&E winners have gone on to successful careers in music, with many more returning to teach in the drum and bugle corps activity. One former snare drummer individuals winner from 1994 and 1995, Blue Knights alumni Jeff Queen, went on to be a professional rudimental snare drummer in the



A decade after triple drums were introduced, a few corps mounted Roto-toms for additional effects, like the 1977 Hawthorne Caballeros. (Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World)



MADISON SCOUTS, Madison, WI (1979).
Photo by Dave Page from the collection of Drum Corps World.



NORTH STAR, North Shore, MA (1978).
Photo by Ron DaSilva from the collection of Drum Corps World.



The 1983 Bayonne Bridgemen performed one of the most famous percussion features in drum corps history to Dennis DeLucia's original *Black Market Juggler* -- blindfolded! (Photo by Orlin Wagner)

London and Broadway productions of the Tony-award-winning "BLAST!" How often do you get to see a snare drum solo in the theater?

Phantom Regiment alum Lee Hansen, who won the Best Individual Multi-Tenor Award back in 1991, spent years playing tenors with Future Corps at Florida's Walt Disney World.

Another noteworthy I&E winner is the Bass Drum Ensemble from the Santa Clara Vanguard which won the DCI title five consecutive years (1994 to 1998).

There are so many special percussion memories from the past decade. Who could forget the heart-pounding rhythms of the 64-member drum line (including 28 snares, seven tenors, 11 bass drums, nine cymbals and 11 pit) of the 27th Lancers Alumni Drum and Bugle Corps in their exhibition at the 1994 DCI Championships in Boston?

Or the spinning cymbals rack of the Madison Scouts' 1997 show "The Pirates of Lake Mendota"? (And their almost annual "cymbal toss"!)

How about the six drummers from Les Étoiles who were strapped onto pivoting

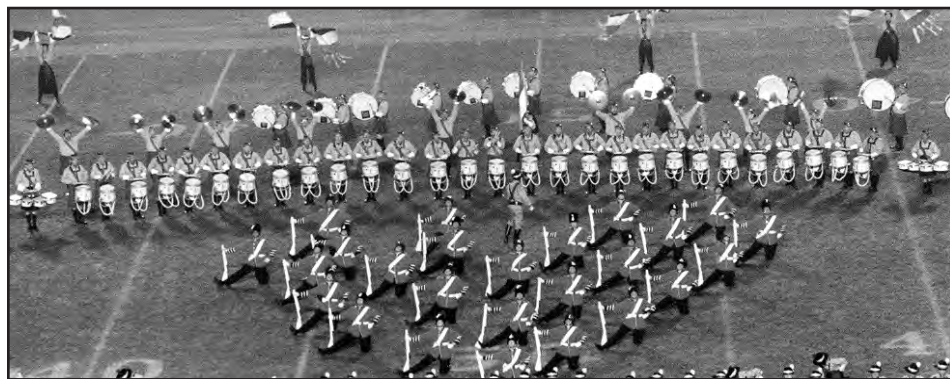
backboards with roto-toms in front of them and spun around as they played a linear drum part?

Or the traditional patriotic rhythms of the United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps making everyone proud to be an American?

As marching percussion continues to grow and explore new musical avenues -- in the drum corps activity, schools and other musical organizations -- the spirit of the original

military drummers lives on in football stadiums and school auditoriums across the country and around the world. Who knows what the future for marching percussion will hold?

The next generation of arrangers and inventors is just learning how to play a flam and mark time as marching percussion continues to make its indelible mark on the DRUM and bugle corps activity.



The 27th Lancers regrouped for a huge reunion corps in 1994, performing a shortened drill with nearly 300 members at DCI Finals in Foxboro, MA. (Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World)



ETOILES, Dorion, QUE (1998). Photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World.



ST. LUCY'S CADETS, Newark, NJ (1968). Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World.