

The Five Deadly Sins of a Pipe Band Drum Corps

Published: April 23, 2011

Author: Greg Dinsdale

By Greg Dinsdale

This article is based on material from a presentation I gave at the Pipers and Pipe Band Society of Ontario Judges Symposium in March 2011. The talk was part of a discussion on ensemble judging and was entitled the "Top Five Ways That Drum Corps Screw up Ensemble." Afterwards the presentation was referred to as the "Five Deadly Sins of Pipe Band Drums Corps"; an appropriate view and hence a good working title for this piece.

The main requirement of drummers or percussionists in the pipe band idiom is to be effective time keepers. That is to say, they need to ensure the pipe band plays in a consistent fashion and that proper tempos and note values are maintained. The importance of this cannot be understated; however the role of the drum corps is to move beyond this core requirement and begin to enhance the overall melodic and harmonic efforts of the pipers. Achieving success in this endeavour is often difficult, and sadly, attempts to achieve this success often have the opposite effect. Drummers end up ruining the ensemble performance either through not understanding their role in the pipe band performance or through misguided attempts to "create" music.

After a number of years of adjudicating drum corps and being cognisant of some of my own ill-fated attempts to "create music" as a former lead-tip, I felt compelled to share some of my ideas on how drums corps often ruin the ensemble performance of the band. So without further ado let me begin discussions on what I see as the Top Five Ways Drum Corps Screw up Ensemble.

I will blatantly steal a presentation concept from an American late night talk show host and begin with the fifth most important way that drum corps screw up ensemble.

Number 5: Drummers forget to be effective time keepers

A drum section forgets that steady tempos and consistent note values are important as they strive to execute more complex and innovative percussion scores. If the reader thinks this is something only occurring in the lower grades, I suggest they listen to some of the Grade 1 MSR performances from the 2010 World Pipe Band Championships. There are a number of well respected drum corps playing well ahead of the meter at various times through their performances. No amount of musical interest and emotion can save an ensemble performance when the drum corps is either consistently ahead or falling behind.

The drum section that does understand the importance of time keeping will use it to their advantage by defining a groove. As a listener you know when this happens. It is that moment when you can't stop your foot from tapping or your shoulders from moving in sympathy with the band performance. The mundane role of time keeping is magically transformed into something that enhances the ensemble performance. One hears this in all kinds of music, whether it is jazz, rock or even 18th century classical music, and pipe band drummers need to embrace this element in their playing.

Number 4: Thinking the performance is all about them

The fourth most important way that drum corps screw up ensemble is thinking the performance is all about them. We have all heard and seen this often enough. The drum corps takes centre stage and puts on a performance for the ages. The issue is that the performance is only loosely connected to the overall musical presentation of the band. This often happens if the drummers are under the rather outdated view that the drum section that puts on the most complex and in-your-face presentation will win the drumming prize. This can also happen if the drum corps feels it is their sole role to "create" music, as this will often lead to overcompensation in terms of overall volume or presence.

This is particularly true of some bass-sections that are often under the delusion that they are uniquely qualified and responsible for creating the pipe band "ensemble" sound.

There are many performances that hit the ensemble waste-bin as the medley performance nears its completion and the bass-section rises in full concert to the heavens. Again one doesn't need to stray too far from some of the Grade 1 performances at the World Championships to get a sense of this. Have a listen to some of the performances at the 2008 World Championships for a clinic in this regard. I often remember the words of a wise drummer by the name of Jim McComb who understood that the role of the drum corps was to enhance the music of the pipes. He liked to tell me that a good drummer needed to think of himself as a piper's apprentice. I am sure this is a description that would not be popular with most drummers, yet there is a message here that is valuable and profound.

Number 3: Pipe band drum corps thinking of themselves as two separate sections

The third most important way that drum corps screw up ensemble is based on the notion that pipe band drum corps are increasingly thinking of themselves as two separate sections; a side section and a bass-section. When this happens, the contribution from the percussion section becomes disjointed and often at odds with one another. In an orchestra, the violins, violas, cellos and bass need to work in concert with one another to create a consistent contribution from the string section. The pipe band seems to have abandoned this strategy and sees a third section quite distinct from the side section and the pipe corps. This results in performances that lack a consistent musical theme and direction, as each section vies for its moment in the spotlight. I have often judged drumming performances where either the bass-section or the side section forgot they were part of the percussion section and went on to ruin the musical performance of the band and their overall drumming ranking as a result.

Number 2: Not understanding how to approach playing a strathspey

The second most important way that drum corps screw up ensemble is they do not understand how to approach playing a strathspey; in effect they play it like a jig. This is classic in all grades and all skill levels and for pipe band judges it creates one of the easiest ways to differentiate bands. Sadly though, from a listener's perspective, it ruins the musical performance. This musical result is caused by a lack of understanding of the idiom, by side scores focused on triplet movements throughout, and by bass-sections that are not sympathetic to strathspey phrasing. One great way for drum corps to get it right is to focus on how their performance could complement a Highland dancer as she dances to a strathspey. Many of today's attempts would have the young dancer running off to the beer tent for relief.

And Number 1 . . .

And finally, the number one way that pipe band drum corps screw up ensemble is by not understanding that their role is to enhance the musical performance of the pipe band. The key here is to *enhance* the performance and not try to *make* the performance. Drummers need to recognize the critical contribution that drumming makes to the overall musical idea. A drum corps that fails to do this will hurt the overall ensemble mark of the pipe band as well as their overall ranking as a drum section.

Drum corps have ability through dynamics, pitch, scoring, and sound to provide colour, definition and scope to the performance. Although the pipe corps provides the melodic and harmonic ideas – in essence, the music – the drum corps has the unique opportunity to add excitement and emotion. Drum corps that understand this truly enrich the overall musical presentation and the ensemble performance of the band.

There are so many brilliant performances that demonstrate this it is difficult to choose just one or two. However for illustration purposes consider the 1999 Medley performance of the 78th Frasers (click on the first sound wave image above). The contribution of the bass-section and sides working together as unit showed a unique understanding of the role of percussion in enhancing musical performance and in the power of creativity in developing musical themes. Also consider the on-the-edge excitement and emotion displayed by the St. Laurence O'Toole drum corps in the Medley performance at the 2010 World Pipe Band Championships (click on the second sound wave image). This was an inspired performance that helped to define a wonderful ensemble performance by the band.

Drum corps have a great opportunity to contribute to the ensemble component of pipe bands and a responsibility not to screw it up as described in earlier sections. The key is for the drum corps to focus on the complete band experience, while at the same time pursuing the enormous challenge and privilege of enhancing the musical presentation of the overall band.

Greg Dinsdale was formerly lead drummer of the Windsor Police Pipe Band and the Metro Toronto Police Pipe Band. He was a member of the British Caledonia Airways Pipe Band after being invited to play in Alex Duthart's drum corps. A member of the PPBSO judging panel as well as an International Adjudicator with the RSPBA, Greg Dinsdale lives in London, Ontario, and is the CEO of a software and IT services company.