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March to the Beat of the Drum Machine: Understanding the Evolution of Drum Corps After the Introduction of Electronic Equipment

If the average lay person is asked to describe or envision a marching band, they would most likely depict horns and drums, with performers creating various formations on a field, and would likely not include synthesizers, a sound board, or digital samples as important parts of the scene. However, the use of electronic and digital equipment is now standard practice in many marching ensembles, especially those that are part of the largest and most prestigious competitive marching circuit, Drum Corps International (DCI). These groups (drum and bugle corps, or drum corps for short) that perform and compete in DCI have recently taken to the integration of electronics alongside their field shows consisting traditionally of solely acoustic instruments. Drum corps, which has strong historical, military roots, has taken on quite a different face in the digital age of music, which has sparked extreme and polarizing controversy within its community.

The introduction of electronics into the realm of drum corps pushes against and breaks previous structure and tradition set in place by many decades of emphasis on traditional marching equipment, repertoire, and technique. This new, technological advancement brings the activity into a new era, which has been met with acute opposition, much from older veteran members who were members or large parts of the community before the shift into the digital age.

Few people have studied and analyzed the developments in drum corps from its roots to current day as those who vehemently oppose it in its modern forms, and the large and sustained outrage and criticism is indicative of significant change. In fact, the understanding and dissection of their gripes and arguments are incredibly helpful in illuminating and comprehending the effects of the electronics in the activity and the marching world. In fact, their complaints highlight precisely the important factors that have evolved in the sociotechnical systems of use in which the drum corps activity and community is embedded within. This evolution reflects shifts in the broader musical world across genres, as electronic systems, particularly electronic recording, came onto the scene.

"What a concept — bugles playing real music throughout ENTIRE show!" reads the caption of a video of the Santa Clara Vanguard performing their 1992 show, posted by a member of the Facebook group titled "I Don't Support DCI" (Schuld, 2018). This performance took place ten years prior to the legalization of amplification equipment, and seventeen years before the introduction of electronic equipment, including pre-recorded sampled sounds, including human voice, and synthesizers (Maher, 2011, p.41). Comments such as these, which are criticizing modern drum corps as lacking or even being devoid of music after their incorporation of electronics in their shows, in the form of sound effects, human vocals, and other samples, are rampant in communities such as the aforementioned Facebook group.

Members of these groups are mostly veteran drum corps members or were otherwise heavily involved with the activity in its more traditional days. Many also liken the new style of performance to a Disneyland or broadway show (Maher, 2011, p.38), lamenting the loss of time where performers solely marched and played their instruments. This so called "loss" not only

speaks to a change in sound, but a shift in the production as a performance a whole, of which the effects and necessity to the activity can be appreciated through understanding of the electronics situated within the network of drum corps performers, fans and audience members, staff, and surrounding growth in the broader music industry.

The emotional impact of a drum corps performance comes largely from the live nature of the activity; the knowledge that the performers are creating music and visuals in real time. Walter Benjamin would liken this fleeting moment of live music production to the "aura" of a work of art; a "unique phenomenon of a distance" and mystery that is destroyed once art becomes mechanically reproducible (Benjamin, 1936). It seems that the addition of pre-recorded electronic samples, at least to its opposers, are destroying aura of the drum corps performance, taking away and replacing "soul" of unadulterated instrumental music (Bonfiglio, 2017). However, this destruction of the aura, according to Benjamin, is also "cathartic" and necessary for the mobilization and accessibility of art for the masses in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1936). As drum corps is existing in an age when art and music can be shared, reproduced, and recycled and unprecedented ways, perhaps a sacrifice in this so perceived "aura" is a freeing and makes way for increased artistic and creative expression, which is evident through striking shifts in performance styles after the official acceptance of electronics in drum corps.

This shift in production style is evident when comparing any corps' performances from pre to post electronics legalization. As the winningest corps in DCI, The Blue Devils exemplify this evolution from their first championship win in 1976, when they performed a powerful arrangement of The Legend Of The One Eyed Sailor by Chuck Mangione, to their most recent

2017 show, titled *Metamorph*, showcasing extensive and emotional body work from the members, sound effects, vocals, and voice overs in addition to the musical arrangement (alex, 2009; ThatWasSexy, 2017). These changes, which by no coincidence coincide with the legalization of electronic equipment, are now adopted in some capacity by all DCI ensembles, and comprise virtually all performances today. In understanding the widespread rise and success of these facets of performance as a result of the electronic equipment used, it is vital to place the electronic sound system and digital recording in its sociotechnical system of use; the actors and networks that give it meaning to the hardware, for "without sociotechnical system of use, the manufacture of hardware would have no purpose" (Kline, 2003, p.211).

With the rapid rise of electronic equipment in the music industry at the time, including digital recording and music files, production studios, synthesizers, electronic instruments, and the means to manipulate sound in novel and exciting ways, it is no surprise that drum corps, whose members and staff are comprised of some of the top musical and innovative minds, took notice of these advancements. After a fairly arduous process of getting electronics officially approved in DCI, corps took to their use swiftly (Maher, 2011). Several factors can be tapped for this quick embracing despite some backlash from more traditionalist views, two of which are DCI's competitive basis and young membership demographic. Corps that were quicker to adopt amplification and electronics once they were legalized seemed to have the competitive edge, and ranked higher than corps that had not yet implemented the new technologies, encouraging the others to follow suit and invest in electronics (Maher, 2011, p.51-52). In addition, DCI's 21-year member age limit results in corps comprised of young musicians, which means that after a few years of electronic implementation "for them, and for their peers in the audience, amplification is

a normal part of drum corps" (Maher, 2011, p.62). These two elements, which involve many actors and structures, including corps members, staff, fans, judges, rules, policies, and competition give a glimpse into the sociotechnical system of use that give meaning to the electronic and digital components of drum corps. The integration of modern advancements in music technology in drum corps also parallels usage of these technologies in other realms of music, which speak to their abilities to expand and encourage creative and artistic innovation.

Recall that the destructive, yet cathartic changes in aura of the live drum corps performance can be seen as opening a novel avenue of artistic and creative expression. This phenomenon is not unique to the marching music world; many artists of all types were recording and sampling and mixing and stitching together pieces of music and sound to create pieces. Just as Carolina Crown wove samples of horse neighing, wind blowing, and vulture screeches into production to enhance their depiction of the unforgiving wild west in their 2016 show, *Relentless*, turntablists weave sounds and music together to create impassioned songs and performances filled with palpable emotion (DCI Videos, 2016; Katz, 2004). Though they are of very different genres, of music both turntablists and drum corps take, and have been taking, advantage of technology that encourages the "art of recycling", which speaks directly to Benjamin's ideation of reproducibility bringing and making art accessible in order to "the masses" (Katz, 2004, p.126, Benjamin, 1936). In addition, both turntablists and drum corps utilize digital sampling and mixing in ways that allow bodily movements to also become key performance aspects.

While the "body tricks" of the turntablist and the "swift and intricate motions of the DJ's" hands add crucial visual appeal to their set, the ability for a drum corps to have sounds

play electronically frees performers to explore theatrics and other expressions of the body that previously could not be achieved due to the necessity of playing the instrument at all times (Katz, 2004, p.126). Though they stand in stark contrast in terms of musical style, drum corps and turntablism both have found emotional and artistic freedom in the use of electronics in their performances, indicative of the widespread value of electronics and digital recording across different varieties of music. In the freeing of the need to consistently produce music using an instrument by utilizing recorded and shared digital and electronic sounds and samples, artists' and performers' creativity and emotional potential have been encouraged to grow, in drum corps and beyond.

It is impossible to deny the effects that electronic technology has had on music of virtually all forms and disciplines. As an activity with historically strong ties to its traditional military roots, it is no surprise that some of the older members of the drum corps community have come to condemn the effects that electronics have had on the marching arts. These changes, most notably the shift from a regimented, all acoustic performance to one adorned with digital sound effects and recorded samples and vocals, did not arise solely because of the existence of electronic equipment. Rather, its integration and usage across ensembles can only be understood in context of other elements of the sociotechnical system of use that drum corps and the electronics are embedded in, including its membership base and competitive structure of DCI. Thus, the adoption of electronics and recordings and utilization of these available technologies and resources have freed performers and show designers to experiment with other methods of creative expression on the field, just as artists in other areas of music, such as turntablists, have been doing as electronic technology came onto the scene. Though some unique facets and aura of

a completely live, acoustic drum corps performance may be sacrificed in the wake of electronics taking the field, this freeing change is a necessary step as marching music evolves alongside the rest of the musical world.

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