

Several set-up configurations have been utilized for front ensembles over the past 20-25 years. A lot of these set-ups were cultivated in the 1990's and into the 2000's, mostly in the drum corps activity. They varied quite a lot from ensemble to ensemble as different people were writing in different ways with different instrumentation. I'll be discussing two common configurations.

### **“Marimba centered” set-up:**

This configuration utilizes a marimba heavy approach where the marimbas are in the front-center and the vibes are on either side, also in the front row. It's very common to see four to five marimbas in the center, two vibes on one side, and two on another. The back row can vary quite a bit depending on several factors including the number of players available, the style of music, and the style of writing. If utilizing a drum set, it's almost always placed in the center behind the marimbas. Although less common in the indoor activity nowadays, timpani is still used frequently in drum corps and marching band. There was a time when the timpani were placed on the end of the front row, making it quite challenging for the player to stay in time with the rest of the group. This is still used sometimes but it is more common to see the timpani placed somewhere in the back row. The placement of the xylophone, if one is used, is very important as this sound cuts through the ensemble and the surrounding players will naturally gravitate towards it, whether they know it or not! To sum up the back row, try to put the drum set, timpani and xylophone as close to center as possible. If utilizing a rack, I would suggest you place that on the end of the back row. The concert bass drums and gongs can also be placed on the ends of the back row. It's common to see those instruments played by the outside vibe players, although they can be played by the rack players and other percussionists as well.

The advantages with this set-up is that it allows you to showcase your marimba players, as these performers tend to be the strongest keyboard players. The one big disadvantage is that it does somewhat limit the writing possibilities in terms of variety. For example, if you want to have a phrase where the vibraphones are playing by themselves and not just in an accompaniment role, it's quite difficult for them to play together without some sort of “glue” to keep them on track. In this set-up, that glue is usually the marimbas.

### **“Antiphonal” set-up:**

This set-up simply places the marimbas and vibes on either side of the 50 yard line in the front row. The back row can be similar to the “marimba centered” set-up. Make sure to keep that xylophone player close to the center!

The advantages with this set-up are that it allows more possibilities with regards to writing. You can have the vibes play by themselves and the marimbas play by themselves quite easily. This would allow you to create “choirs” where the metallic choir on one side could be in conversation with the wood choir on the other side. This woods vs. metals approach can lead to very interesting and very musical possibilities and is not at all difficult to pull-off. One potential disadvantage is that you need to have a lot of depth and strength in your entire keyboard section because the vibes and marimbas are all front and center, particularly with regards to performing unison passages.

There are also many other possibilities, such as using an arc for the front row, alternating vibes and marimbas across the front line, or using a type of multiple-percussion “pod” approach, which was quite common in the early to mid 1990’s. Of course, the most important thing is that the group plays together easily. Ultimately, this is what you are evaluated on first and foremost. Find a set-up based on your chosen musical style, and the ability of your players, that makes it comfortable for them to play together and allows you to achieve what you want to musically.

About Ian Hale:

Ian Hale received degrees in percussion performance from the University of Calgary and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst where his teachers included Dr. Glenn Price, Eduardo Leandro and DCI Hall of Fame member Thom Hannum. He has studied marimba with Leigh Howard Stevens, Gordon Stout, and She-e Wu. He was a member of the music faculty at UMass from 2007-2008 and served as the Assistant Director of Bands for the Calgary Stampede Showband from 2009-2011. He is currently the Percussion Director for Spirit of America from Orleans, Massachusetts.

Ian has worked with many fine ensembles including the Calgary Stampede Showband, Spirit of America, Thomas Jefferson High School Band, Dartmouth Indoor Percussion, United Percussion, Boston University and the U.S. Army All-American Marching Band. He was a member of the percussion staff for the Glassmen, the Magic of Orlando, the Madison Scouts, Carolina Crown and the Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps. He is currently on the percussion staff for the Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps.

Ian is endorsed by Vic Firth Inc., Remo Inc. and Zildjian Corporation.