

Marching to the beat of a laptop?

Computers now taking center field in high school marching band shows

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Halftime has gone high-tech.

Computers are changing the way area marching bands look and sound when they take the field. Military formations to the school rouser just won't do anymore.

Software programs are helping band directors design complex formations. Others focus on enhancing the musical arrangements. Now, bands are even relying on computer-generated sound effects and synthesizer programs in their shows. The goal is a theatrical experience.

"The laptop is the brain," said Andy Combites, a visual instructor for the Irondale High School Marching Knights. "We can do things we can't achieve (just) with the instruments."

The region's best marching bands will take the Metrodome field Saturday for the annual Youth in Music competition in Minneapolis. The latest in band technology will be on full display.

The Irondale band, which draws its members from the entire Mounds View School District and is continuously one of the region's top competitors, has fully embraced the addition of technology. Its performance, an interpretation of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" dubbed "Nevermore," involves sound effects like thunder, live narration and musicians equipped with wireless microphones.

"(Marching bands) have the ability to be more theatrical," said Brent Turner, president of the Youth in Music Association. The drills can be more complex, the music arranged for dynamic contrast.

Every Second Of The Show / Before the band steps out onto the field, many

marching band directors have created the entire performance on a computer.

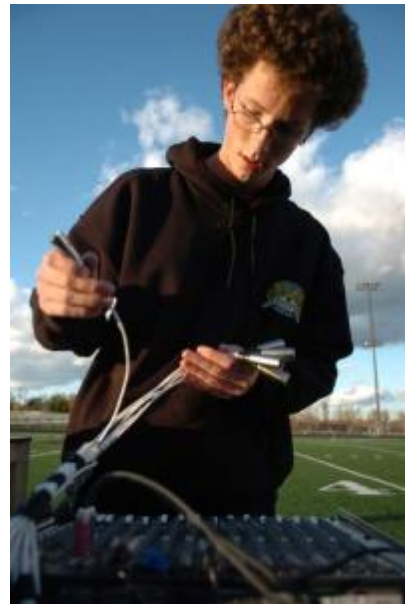
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Software programs now allow them to create a three-dimensional formation, set it to music and show it to students. Then each student gets a computer printout of where to stand, march and play.

"Where you used to think of it in your head, now you can see it on the screen," explained Dustin Merrell, a lead technology support official for Pygraphics Inc., which creates the drill-formation software used by bands nationwide, including Irondale and the University of Minnesota.

This option saves instructors hours of pencil-and-paper labor. And it helps students see what they'll be doing on the field.

"So you're seeing what the music is saying," Turner said. "They can overlay the music onto this visual computer-generated drill, so we can see and hear what it will feel like



Irondale High School senior Aidan Hennessey, 17, tinkers with a soundboard before band practice. (TYLER MCKEAN, Pioneer Press)

 [Photo slideshow](#)

every second of the show."

It is also easy for students to latch onto, Combites said.
"They grew up with the pop culture and electronic elements."

Like all technology, the programs are evolving and getting better, directors say. It is also not cheap.

"Every time I turn around, we have to put more money into electronics," said Bill Sucha, director of the Irondale band.
"You can pound out the dents in a tuba but you can't pound out the dents in a synthesizer."

Yet electronics remain a drop in the bucket in his band's six-figure budget, where a new tuba can cost several thousands of dollars.

Increasing Possibilities / Electronics are more accepted now in the marching band community, but not everyone uses them, Sucha said. There are a lot of traditionalists out there who say, "That's not marching band," he said.

What and how electronics can be used is still being explored.

The Rosemount High School Marching Band, which won last year's Youth in Music competition, is using a soundboard for the first time this year.

"If it's raining, we just have a plan that we won't bring it out," said Leon Sieve, one of the band's three directors.

The use of technology is largely unregulated, so marching bands don't have a set of rules to follow, directors say.

"I think it all depends on philosophy and idea," Sieve said. "Some judges like that, some don't. Some audiences do, some don't. It's all about trying new things."

The creativity of a band's performance is limited only by the innovation and direction of its leaders. Emerging technologies simply increase the possibilities.

"Now the sky's the limit," Combites said.

So where does it go from here?

It is only a matter of time before shows become full multimedia events, with images and even videos projected onto fields and screens, said Turner, of Youth in Music.

"When will the performers be wearing jet packs?" Combites asked, jokingly.

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If You Go

Youth In Music 2007 Marching Band Championships

What: 19 bands from six states

When: Saturday, preliminary round begins at 11:30 a.m., finals begin at 7 p.m.

Where: The Metrodome, Minneapolis

Cost: Preliminary rounds: \$10-15; finals: \$10-25.

Online: To see an animated drill designed for the University of Minnesota Marching Band, go to www.music.umn.edu/marchingband/