

Drums Corps for Marches and Demonstrations

Drumming at demonstrations can be as simple as getting a couple of drummers to find a song with a nice beat and practicing the different parts or more ambitiously organizing a bigger group to drum, rehearse and plan your instruments, coordinate with organizers and even wearing matching colors or costumes. Here are a few tips.

Why drums?

They can bring rhythm and festive energy to otherwise staid vigils. Marches and demonstrations become livelier, more aggressive, more confrontational, and more fun. Drums say “No Business As Usual!” and “Let’s Dance!” in a universal language. Drumming groups are easily organized compared with melodic marching bands. Chanting only gets so loud, and there are tighter restrictions on amplified sound than un-amplified sound. No one asks why people bring signs, and bullhorns to demonstrations, but drums historically have also been a valuable tool in the struggle for social change, and they are resurging.

Drum etiquette

Unfortunately, drums can also disrupt your own organization. If people aren’t listening to each other, the music will be bad, and people won’t be energized. Also, drumming for demonstrations generally means maximizing the volume in order to disrupt an event or reach a large crowd, but for the people right next to the drums, the noise can cause physical pain and permanent hearing damage. The social dynamics at demonstrations are different than drum circles. Know when NOT to play.

Playing along with chants

The message of drums is often ambiguous, so leave space for people who want to use words to clarify the issue. If you can organize it beforehand, find someone with a good sense of rhythm to lead chants that match your rhythm. Or have that person start a chant when you stop drumming. Make sure the chant leaders understand that they have to stay near the drums, and can’t run ahead or fall behind. Once you’re solidly locked-up with the chanters, try playing in the spaces

where they are not chanting: “The people [ba-boom] united [ba-boom] will never be defeated [ba boom].”

Playing at other times

Drums are most powerful when they are played sparingly and with discipline. It’s annoying to hear drums during moments of silence, candlelight vigils, when people are speaking, or even when people are clapping (it’s like saying, my expressions are more important than yours because my sound is louder). Drummers who aren’t constantly evaluating their surroundings and the effect their drumming has on people, risk being totally obnoxious. It’s a good habit to put your sticks away until you’re ready to play as a group. We call this the “No noodling!” rule. Another way to put it is: “Don’t play unless everyone else is also playing!”.

While Marching

Keep the drum section together. Don’t let drummers spread out. Playing in unison requires being able to hear the other members of your group, which becomes more difficult the farther away you get.

Where to find drums?

Drums are everywhere: buckets, barrels, 5-gallon water bottles, pots and pans. Avoid bringing drum sticks that look like clubs to a demonstration. For more information on how to make drums, check out this website:
<http://puppetista.org/drums/>

Where to find drummers?

Drummers are everywhere too, and if you bring extra drums to a demonstration you can recruit people at the last minute to play along. But hopefully you can get a core group of people to practice before the demonstration, where you can learn the rhythms together.