

Gravel crunches beneath my feet as I make my way through the crisp autumn air toward rehearsal. My watch glows in the darkness of the morning: 5:20 AM, forcing me to walk faster to avoid being late. Inside the hall, sleepy comrades mumble greetings to one another before grabbing equipment and instruments and walking outside through the cool morning dew to their starting positions. Tailgates and gameday parties are still hours away, but for the members of the marching band, the rhythm of Game Day has already begun.

Five short whistles from the drum major, and all of the surrounding dormitories are immediately awakened by the sudden blast of more than 150 brass instruments, trumpeting the arrival of the morning and the dawn of another day of SEC football. We spend hours toiling on the rehearsal field: perfecting drill and choreography, listening for the improvisations of those who haven't quite memorized the musical selections, and ensuring that the various musical harmonies are clear and free of discord. Any member who is not prepared loses their place, and an alternate readily steps in to fill the hole that they have left. While many in our audience will only seek entertainment, our instructors expect an excellent performance – in truth, each of us has that same expectation of ourselves.

The morning passes quickly, and we are given an hour after rehearsal to eat, gather our belongings, and get dressed in our uniforms. Bells are polished, drum heads are tightened, band members scramble for missing gloves, and color guard members carefully perfect their uniform ensemble and make-up. Blaring horns from the buses outside and the calls of the section leaders warn any stragglers that they will soon miss their ride to the stadium if they don't move fast. We pile into the buses, eager to arrive at the stadium and begin the pre-game festivities.

In the warm sunlight outside of the stadium, we gather together and form our marching block. Crowds gather on each side of the parade path and surround the pep rally arena, ready to

watch the marching band play the songs of the university and cheer for our team. The drumline taps out the step-off, and the band sets out as a single unit, each member moving in precise time with their neighbors to the tempo of the drums. Smiling fans, cheers, and laughter surround us, and I turn to each side to smile and wave at the young children who have pushed their way to the front of the crowd, laughing when they beam in surprise and frantically wave back. We circle the stadium and perform for the crowds, finally entering the gates and taking our seats to prepare for the pregame show. It's now 12:40 PM, with 10 minutes to go until the pregame show begins, and the real work of the day is just beginning.

Security personnel wave us down, through the crowds, to the gate that leads to the field. Stepping onto the soft turf, I hold my equipment and take a moment to step to the side, looking up at the vast rows of seats, filling with patrons, and the upper decks of the stadium that reach toward the skies. "Wow," I breathe, taking in the enormity of the stadium and reflecting on how small a single performer is on this field. Friends pass by, smiling beneath their shakos and plumes, encouraging each other and wishing one another a good performance. The timer on the scoreboard relentlessly counts down, and I move quickly to take my spot on the front sideline. The band stands in a tight block in the end zone, motionless, as the introduction video plays and the crowd grows louder and more excited, cheering with frenzy as it reaches its conclusion. I glance to my left, flash a smile at my friends around me, and look ahead to the drum major as he marches forward with his whistle to count us out. It's show time.

Five whistles, and then the deafening blast of brass fills my ears as we step out together, one unit, onto the field. The rehearsal this morning does not compare to the sound that fills my ears in this moment as each performer, playing with all their might, aims their bell to the farthest row in the upper deck, accompanied by the roar of thousands of fans cheering, ready for Game

Day to begin. Taps from the drumline signal a tempo change, and the show is in full swing, with each section moving and executing their drill with precision, mindful that every hour of rehearsal and drop of sweat in the Southern heat has been dedicated to this moment and performing it with perfection. I focus on taking deep breaths, keeping my chin up and performing to the upper decks, and keeping my feet constantly moving in time to the beat of the music. 5, 6, 7, 8.

We reach the interlude, a moment for each of us to catch our breath, heaving from the exertion of the first half of the show. The national anthem and the alma mater are performed with thousands of voices on the field and in the stadium singing in unison. The delicate trill of flutes and piccolos soar over the field with the woodwinds keeping the harmony below. It is an amazing and magical sound – to hear this glorious music accompanied by so many voices singing together at once. After only a brief pause, the drum major whistles again, and the second half of the show begins.

The crowd is on their feet now, clapping in time to the music, cheering and singing the school songs that we play. My arms and legs ache from performing and marching, but I constantly remind myself to push through, keep going – you’re almost there! We enter the finale, and all the members of the band enter into our last drill set – a massive block, spanning the entire field, facing the front sideline. The horns flash their bells to the skies, and the band moves as one unit, pressing forward with slow and deliberate steps, triumphantly trumpeting the culmination of our show, our rehearsals, our work, our dedication. The sound is incredible and surrounds me as the band crescendos to the finish. Almost immediately, the sound of music is replaced by a deafening roar that surrounds me and envelops me as 80,000 fans, unintelligible to my ears, cheer their gratitude and approval. “I want to always remember the way this sounds,” I whisper to myself between ragged breaths. “When they say ‘A roaring crowd’, this is what that means.”