



PRE-DRILL CAMP 2026 · LEADERSHIP SEMINARS · DAY 2

Interpreting the Music

"Two Halves of One Show"

Dr. Thomas L. Jones, Jr.

Director of University Bands · Auxiliary and Ensemble, Sunday, August 2, 2026

The Hampton University Marching Force

HAMPTON'S HEARTBEAT

Icebreaker

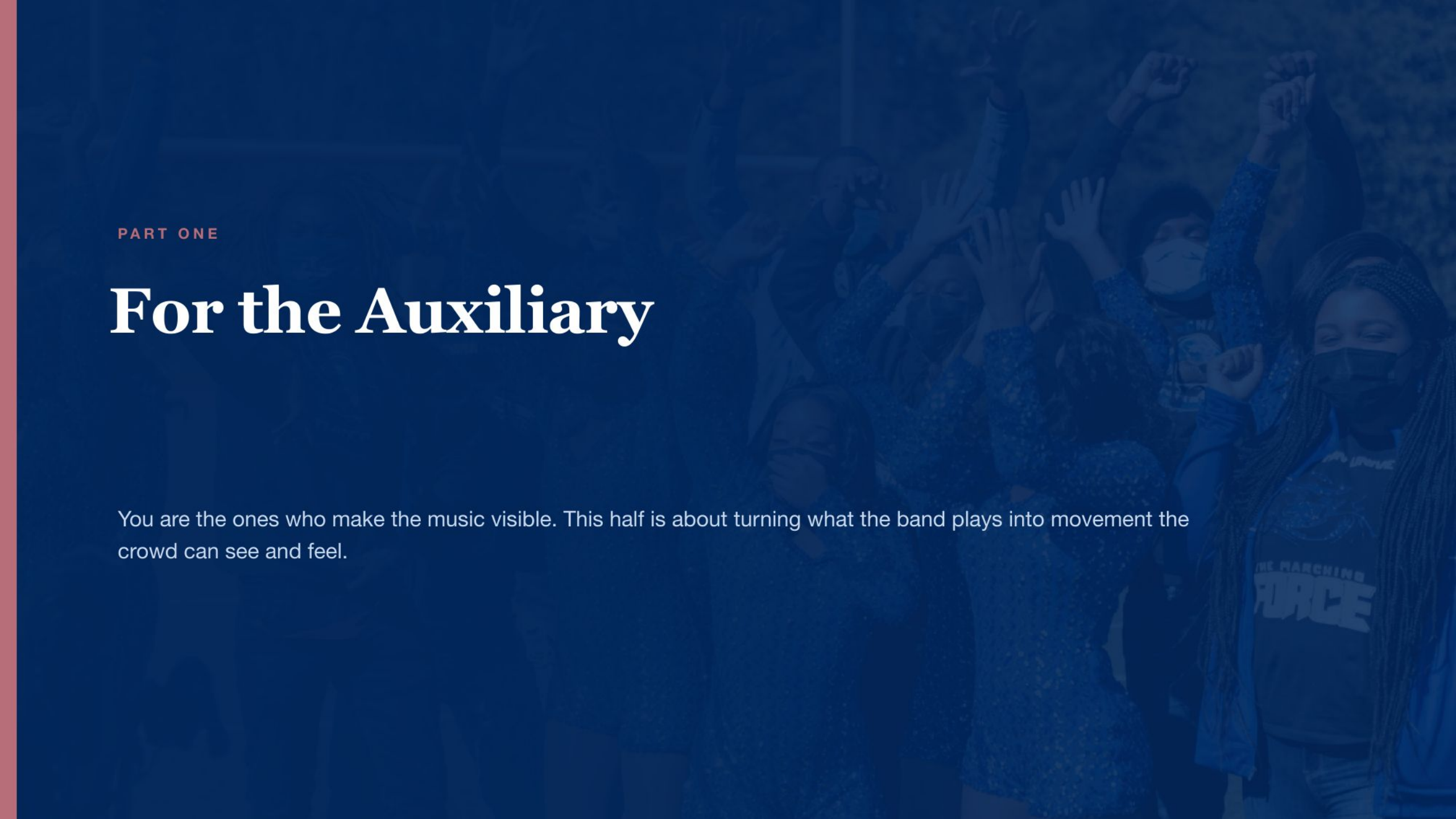
The song is a spiritual; the dancers never say a word, yet they tell its whole story. This is interpretation at its highest—movement that means every note.



Alvin Ailey — “Wade in the Water” from *Revelations*

youtu.be/k5IoS5gSA74

WATCH · 3:14



PART ONE

For the Auxiliary

You are the ones who make the music visible. This half is about turning what the band plays into movement the crowd can see and feel.

— THE PREMISE

The band gives the music its sound. You give it its face. The crowd does not just hear the song—they watch you feel it. Your job is to make the music visible: to turn a melody into a moment they can see, and a lyric into a story they cannot look away from.

— MAKE THE MUSIC VISIBLE.

01

What You Really Do

The auxiliary is not decoration—it is the music, made visible.

1 Amplify the Music

When you hit the accent with the band, the whole crowd feels it twice—once in the ear, once in the eye.

3 Set the Picture

Your bodies, levels, and formations paint the image the music is painting in sound.

2 Tell the Story

The lyrics have a narrative. You are the ones who act it out, so the audience feels what the song is about.

4 Move the Crowd

Emotion is your product. People forget the steps and remember how you made them feel.

Listen First

You cannot interpret what you have not studied.

- ◆ Before you invent a single count, **learn the song**: its mood, its story, and where it builds and breaks.
- ◆ Map the **structure**—intro, verse, chorus, the hits, the pause before the hit. Movement lives inside that map.
- ◆ Read the **lyrics** like a script. What is the song saying, and how does it feel when it says it?
- ◆ Find the **accents and the pocket**. Great interpretation starts with great listening, not great tricks.

Move the Feeling

Match the quality of your movement to the feeling of the music.

- ◆ When the music is **smooth and lyrical**, move sustained and flowing. When it is **sharp and aggressive**, move strong and direct.
- ◆ Movement has qualities—**light or strong, sudden or sustained, direct or indirect**. Choose the one that matches the sound.
- ◆ A soft ballad danced hard, or a hard groove danced soft, tells the crowd the wrong story. The **quality** is the interpretation.
- ◆ Let the music decide how you move, not just what you do.

Sources: Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*; Laban and Lawrence, *Effort* (movement effort qualities).

Hit the Music

Move on the music, not just to it. This is musicality.

- ◆ **Catch the accents.** When the band snaps a hit, you snap with it—together, on the exact count, or the effect is lost.
- ◆ **Phrase your movement** the way the music phrases: breathe with the melody, and let a musical line become a movement line.
- ◆ **Use the pause.** The silence before a hit is as powerful as the hit—stillness makes the next move explode.
- ◆ **Ride the pocket.** When you are locked to the groove, the crowd feels the music and your movement as one thing.

Sources: Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances*; Blom and Chaplin, *The Intimate Act of Choreography*.

Tell the Story in the Lyrics

The words are your script. Act them.

- ◆ **Know what the song is about**, then let the gesture say it—reach on "rising," fall on "let go," open up on "free."
- ◆ **Hit the key words.** The title phrase and the hook are where the audience is listening hardest; give them something to see there.
- ◆ **Show the arc.** If the song travels from struggle to joy, your body should travel there too, from tight and low to open and high.
- ◆ Do not mime every word—capture the **feeling** of the line. Suggest the story; let the crowd complete it.

Bigger and Smaller

Match your dynamics to the music's—and use contrast to keep it alive.

- ◆ When the music **swells**, grow: bigger shapes, higher levels, more space. When it **drops**, shrink and settle.
- ◆ Work in **levels**—low, middle, high. A flat visual reads flat no matter how clean it is.
- ◆ **Contrast is what the eye loves.** Unison, then a ripple; stillness, then a burst—the change is what people watch.
- ◆ Never dance every eight-count at the same size. Give the big moment its build-up so it actually lands big.

Sources: Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances* (dynamics, design, and contrast in choreography).

Serve the Show's Theme

Every show tells a story. Your job is to make the audience see it.

- ◆ Our shows are **theme-based**: the music, the drill, and the visual all serve one idea. Your choreography has to serve it too.
- ◆ Ask what **picture** this part of the show is painting, then choose movement and formations that paint it with the band.
- ◆ **Visual storytelling is the evolution.** The goal is not just clean—it is a moment the crowd will still be talking about.
- ◆ You are a co-author of the show, not an add-on. Interpret the theme, and the whole picture comes alive.

Clean and Together

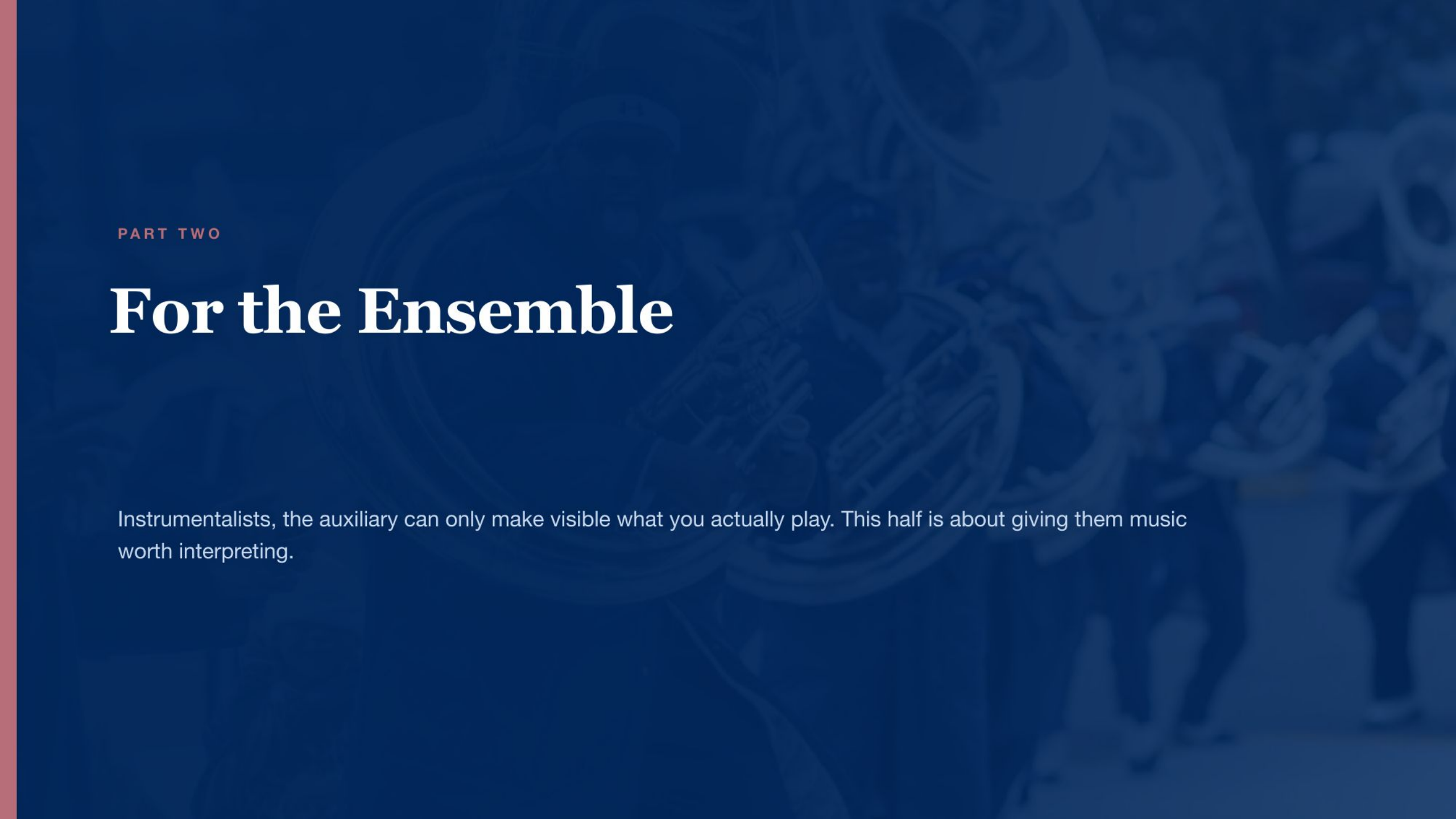
Feeling only reads when the line is together.

- ◆ **Unison is the frame** that makes emotion readable. One person early or late, and the whole picture blurs.
- ◆ Agree on the **exact count and the exact angle**—same timing, same level, same finish. Precision is not the enemy of feeling; it is what lets feeling land.
- ◆ Drill the counts until they are automatic, so your mind is free to **perform**, not to remember.
- ◆ A clean line moving as one is its own kind of power—the same "one voice" the band chases in its sound.

Sell It

A perfect routine with a blank face moves no one.

- ◆ **Perform with your face, not just your body.** The crowd feels exactly what you feel—so feel it, and show it.
- ◆ **Commit all the way.** Half-energy reads as no energy from the stands. Full-out, every rep, every time.
- ◆ **Connect with the audience.** Play to the crowd and the cameras; make them feel invited into the moment.
- ◆ Confidence is part of the choreography. Own the field, and the crowd will believe every step.



PART TWO

For the Ensemble

Instrumentalists, the auxiliary can only make visible what you actually play. This half is about giving them music worth interpreting.

— THE PREMISE

The auxiliary just learned to interpret the music—but they can only work with what you give them. A rushed tempo, a mushy hit, a flat dynamic, and there is nothing good to shape. Your playing is the raw material of their art. Your job is to make it worth shaping.

— THEY CAN ONLY SHAPE WHAT YOU ACTUALLY PLAY.

02

They Ride Your Time

The auxiliary choreographs to a tempo—yours.

- ◆ Every count they drilled assumes your tempo is **rock-solid**. Rush the exciting parts or drag the hard ones, and they cannot stay with the music.
- ◆ **Lock to the drum major and the pulse.** Steady time is the floor the whole visual stands on.
- ◆ When you move the tempo, you move the ground under their feet—their hits land early or late through no fault of their own.
- ◆ Hold the pocket, especially in the exact moment everyone wants to speed up.

Hit the Hits Together

Their visual hit is only as clean as your musical hit.

- ◆ The auxiliary snaps **with** the band. If your hit is ragged—some early, some late—their hit looks ragged too.
- ◆ Play **tight, unified accents**: same attack, same length, same release. A clean band hit is what makes a clean visual hit possible.
- ◆ Honor the **rest before the hit**. The silence is theirs too; clip it and the pause lands for no one.
- ◆ One sloppy entrance can undo an entire eight-count of clean choreography.

Give Them Dynamics

You cannot interpret a wall of one volume.

- ◆ The auxiliary grows when the music **swells** and settles when it **drops**. Play everything the same, and there is nothing for them to match.
- ◆ Play the crescendos and the softs **for real**. Your dynamic contrast is what gives their movement its build.
- ◆ A true pianissimo lets them go small and intimate; a real fortissimo lets them explode. Give them the whole range.
- ◆ Flat music makes flat choreography. Shape the music, and you shape the show.

Play With Feeling

Clean is not enough—give them something to feel.

- ◆ Play the **style**—the groove, the swing, the soul—so there is a feeling in the music for them to interpret.
- ◆ **Bring the melody and the hook out.** The crowd's ear is on the tune the auxiliary is telling the story of; make sure they can hear it.
- ◆ **Phrase it.** Let the music breathe. A phrased line gives the auxiliary a line to move.
- ◆ Your energy on the horn becomes their energy on the field. Play like you mean it.

Be Consistent

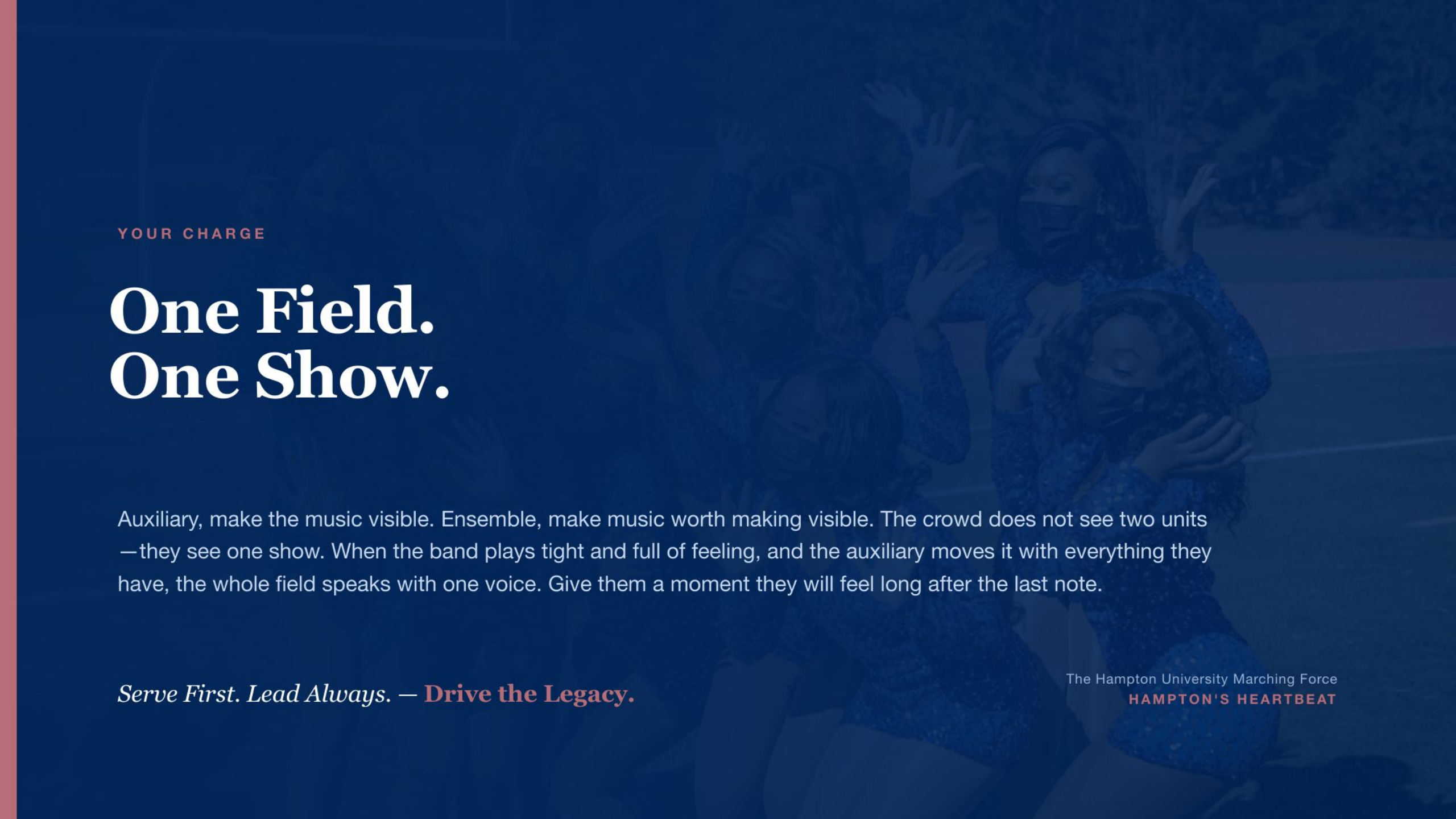
They choreograph to how you played it—so play it that way every time.

- ◆ The auxiliary sets their movement to your **rehearsal** performance. Change the tempo, the dynamics, or the feel on show day, and you pull the rug out from under them.
- ◆ Lock in **one interpretation** and repeat it. The same performance every time is what lets them count on you.
- ◆ If the music has to change, **tell them early**—the choreography has to change with it. Never surprise the auxiliary on the field.
- ◆ Reliable is a compliment. Be the section they never have to worry about.

Make Them Look Great

You are not each other's background. You are one show.

- ◆ **Know the visual.** When you understand what the auxiliary is doing, you play to make it land—you serve the moment together.
- ◆ When you play tight and full of feeling, the **auxiliary shines**—and when they shine, the whole crowd feels the music you are making.
- ◆ Rehearse as one. The band and the auxiliary locking in together is what turns a routine into a moment.
- ◆ Great bands make their auxiliary look great; great auxiliary makes the band unforgettable.



YOUR CHARGE

One Field. One Show.

Auxiliary, make the music visible. Ensemble, make music worth making visible. The crowd does not see two units —they see one show. When the band plays tight and full of feeling, and the auxiliary moves it with everything they have, the whole field speaks with one voice. Give them a moment they will feel long after the last note.

Serve First. Lead Always. — **Drive the Legacy.**

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