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Odello investigates the drum corps phenomenon: music, sport, and morality

Summary: Denise Odello, assistant professor of music, received an Imagine Fund Award to support her drum corps research.

(June 18, 2010)-Denise Odello, assistant professor of music, received an Imagine Fund Award to support her drum corps research, an investigation titled Music, Sport, and Morality: Competition and the Drum Corps.

A musicologist, Odello studies how people use music. Her project focuses on wind bands, technically drum and bugle corps, specifically Drum Corps International (DCI), headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana. Boasting the participation of tens of thousands of high school and college students annually and nearly one half a million fans attending its summer tours, DCI bills itself as “a powerful, nonprofit, global youth activity with far-reaching artistic, educational and organizational influence.” Odello wants to get behind the entertainment value and educational aspects and mine the deeper meaning of this phenomenon. Given the intensity of participants and followers alike, she wants to understand the appeal, the need it fulfills, and the statement involvement makes about our culture.

Competition means everything in DCI. Each year, more than 8,000 students from the United States and around the world compete for fewer than 3,500 available places in top-tier DCI member corps. Distinct from concert and field bands, drum corps are considered a musical subculture with a more varied repertoire. In competition, however, each corps may be judged on its handling of the same piece of music. Fans do not consider this a detractor the competitions are so popular that they are sometimes even broadcast to theaters for viewing by larger audiences.

At the heart of Odello’s investigation is the unique relationship between art and sport in this context. Many drum corps originate in veterans organizations youth auxiliaries. Odello will analyze their military origins and consider the role of spectacle and pageantry. The drum corps’ loyal fan base, akin to that of a sports team or rock group, provides another layer of insight into the human mind and heart.

Odello will use her Imagine Fund award to travel and attend drum corps competitions. This summer, she will present a paper on the topic at an international society of musicologists conference in Austria. Next summer, she will be embedded with the Blue Devils of California, the reigning DCI champions, gaining an insider’s view of the drum corps world.

Odello is one of seventeen Morris professors who received all-University 2010 Imagine Fund Awards. The program is supported in part by the McKnight Arts and Humanities Endowment. The endowment’s mission is to support, sustain, and enliven arts and humanities research and activities on the four University campuses.

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