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Idea Bank: Rehearsing Ensembles Online

Shawn L. Goodman

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by *Shawn L. Goodman*



Photo of Shawn L. Goodman courtesy of Terry Bateman

As we navigate this new world in the COVID-19 era together, we all long for a return to normalcy. Although many schools across the United States are returning to in-person classes this fall, there exists a real possibility that schools may switch to online learning at some point this school year. If this happens, we can provide our students with a small sense of normalcy by rehearsing our ensembles online.

Online learning may not be the preferred way to teach music, but it can be effective. Michelle Miller, a cognitive psychologist that studies the brain and how technology can aid learning, describes the effectiveness and success of any online learning program as

requiring emphasis on student effort, students feeling connected, students quickly and regularly receiving informative feedback, and teachers basing instruction on students' current knowledge and understanding.¹ If we make these concepts foundational, then online rehearsals can be both effective and enjoyable. The purpose of this article is to provide ensemble directors with the necessary information and confidence to rehearse their ensembles online.

This summer, I rehearsed a symphony orchestra and a jazz ensemble completely online. Through this process, I learned that although it does require substantial lesson planning, it is not very difficult to do and does not require much new software or hardware. The big advantage was that the students really enjoyed getting together with their friends again to make music.

Planning Online Rehearsals

Before rehearsals begin, directors must select repertoire for which professional recordings of those exact arrangements can be accessed. This is imperative. Much of the time spent in full-ensemble rehearsals will involve the students listening to and playing along with recordings. For example, if the recordings are not in the same key, then this becomes an issue. Directors must also determine the time stamps on the recordings for the rehearsal markings on each score to ensure efficient rehearsals.

Each instrument's part in your warm-up chorales can be recorded and mixed with Pro Tools.² Playing along with our

chorale recording became part of our daily warm-up routine. We also hired local jazz musicians to individually record their parts to our big band charts, which we mixed with Pro Tools to create rhythm-section-only play-alongs.

We uploaded the ensemble recordings to YouTube³ along with instructional videos for each instrument. YouTube videos can be organized into playlists for easy access, and students who subscribe to your YouTube channel will receive notifications when you upload a new video. Best of all, YouTube accounts are free. Be sure to get permission from the publisher for any recordings you upload for your classes.

For our teaching platform, we used Zoom.⁴ Zoom allows for bringing in outside instructors and has a *breakout rooms* feature for sectionals. When using Zoom, it is necessary for all participants to adjust their audio settings for *original sound*.⁵

Rehearsing Ensembles Online

When rehearsing ensembles online, I recommend using both prerecorded videos and live rehearsing to keep the students engaged. To share video or audio recordings, click the *share screen* button at the bottom of the Zoom screen; then click the picture of the page or file that is already open on your desktop or browser. Remember to also check the two boxes at the bottom of the screen share window to *enable computer sound* and *optimize for video sharing*.

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I like to begin rehearsals by allowing the students to warm up unmuted. This gives the students the feeling of walking into the band or orchestra room when they log on and a sense of normalcy. For warm-ups, directors can share recordings, use call-and-response with the students on mute, or have students play along while on mute.

During rehearsals, it is not possible to have entire sections or the ensemble play together unmuted due to the delay. For this reason, you must rely on the students to assess their own progress. Check in with them frequently. Sectionals in the breakout rooms are an excellent way to listen to each student play individually and offer feedback. Zoom allows the host to rotate from room to room to check in with each section. Online sectionals are also a great way to keep your staff or local freelance teachers employed.

Much of the full-ensemble rehearsal involves students playing along with professional recordings while on mute. I believe this is excellent for the students because they are listening to recordings of professionals playing with great style, and they strive to imitate them. Also, the sound of the ensemble in both ears gives them the feeling of playing in an ensemble and a return to normalcy. Rehearsing in this way, though, requires

directors to anticipate issues in advance and teach toward those issues because they do not have the luxury of listening to the ensemble and diagnosing issues as they go.

Creating Virtual Concerts

When the time comes to put together a virtual concert, have each student record his or her own personal performance videos using their cell phone while listening to the recorded track via earbuds connected to a separate device. Have them upload their tracks to their personal Google Drives, then have them share the link with you or whoever you hire to compile the video. Many audio/visual companies are willing to do this now for reasonable prices.⁶ You are also welcome to download videos and other online resources from www.shawngoodmanjazz.com/educational-resources.

In the spring of 2020, we commissioned a piece written specifically for virtual instrumental ensemble. The piece, “Snitchin’ in the Kitchen,”⁷ is highly choreographed and involves students playing their instruments in their kitchens, improvisation, and use of kitchen utensils as percussive instruments. Putting this piece together was a lot of fun, and I highly recommend the piece to any groups that are rehearsing online.

NOTES

1. See chapter two, “Online Learning: Does It Work?,” in Michelle D. Miller, *Minds Online: Teaching Effectively with Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdsqd.5.
2. Pro Tools offers reduced educator pricing. The free version, Pro Tools First, works well for a few small projects. https://shop.avid.com/ccrz__ProductDetails?viewState=DetailView&isCSRFlow=true&sku=DYNA20000.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuINkKWNSGkP3KeR5IFsiVA/playlists>.
4. A Zoom Pro account is \$15/month; students do not have to purchase anything. <https://zoom.us/pricing>.
5. Instructions for how to adjust the audio settings to enable original sound on Zoom can be found on <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115003279466-Enabling-option-to-preserve-original-sound>.
6. We compiled the performance videos together ourselves using Pro Tools for the audio and Adobe Premiere Pro for the video. Both programs offer special educator pricing.
7. Benjamin Taylor, “Snitchin’ in the Kitchen” (Bloomington, IN: Benjamin Taylor Music LLC, 2020). Commission made possible by a grant from the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.