

Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience
by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Arthur C. Clarke

Welcome and welcome back! By popular request (well, one person) I am re-presenting some of the material presented at last year's International Honor Band and Choir Festival and in a previous column. It once again is recording time for auditions for Honor Band, Choir, Orchestra and Middle School Honor Band. Jon Hodge has shared a guide for recording which is linked from the News page on the AMIS web site. My previous article is in the HeinSite archive on the AMIS web site - I've used the same quote to make it easier to find. This is a "variation on a theme" so apologies if you have heard the melody before. These same techniques may also be used to record your whole group in rehearsal or performance.

A brief philosophical diversion. One goal of the audition recording process is to present an accurate view of the performers capabilities and abilities through performing prescribed literature at controlled tempi and using common articulations. It is therefore possible for like to be judged against like. The tempo guidelines in the vocal audition for the song are the acceptable range for performance. Whether or not you artistically agree with that choice, it is what is given for the audition. The audition committee has made mistakes and is, indeed, flexible, but if everyone uses that range of tempos it is possible to compare how a variety of singers handle articulation, phrasing, diction, and rhythmic accuracy. To make an analogy; everyone is driving their individual cars on the same racetrack, with the same bends, straights and curves.

We, as artists and educators celebrating music, wish to minimise the intrusion of the recording process on our performers. They are nervous enough, and a teacher flapping about pushing buttons, setting levels, adjusting stands does little to calm the nervous performer. It also does little to calm the nervous teacher who may not have an advanced degree in audio engineering or years of experience gigging in lounges and bars, setting up and taking down increasingly intricate sound systems. There is an easy solution.

Practise. You always try to have your performing group rehearse in the performance space under simulated performance conditions, don't you? When you are working with your students, record them from their first efforts. Let the students hear their performances and make decisions about performance adaptations (breathing, tone, articulation) based not just on your feedback, but their own - based on listening and evaluating their performance.

By using a microphone and audio interface for your iPod you can carry your recording studio with you in a briefcase or book bag. You may have to carry the stand as well - a perfect task for helping the student take ownership in the recording process. Although the audio interfaces are available for the iPod nano, I would still recommend the iPod video - the small iPod video has four times the recording time as the largest iPod nano. Ten megabytes (MB) per minute of uncompressed audio, so one hundred megabytes is ten minutes, one gigabyte is approximately one hundred minutes of music.

You will have to experiment. Unlike more professional solutions, there is no level control. You'll have to move the student backwards and forwards to find the "sweet spot". You'll also have to experiment with microphone placement so the student, accompanist and microphone can all hear its important message.

I tend to place the iPod on the piano and set the microphone up so it is facing away from the piano. I also place the metronome on a music stand at 90° to the microphone. The singer (in my case), then stands facing the piano anywhere from two to three feet away from the microphone. Incredibly large and colourful voices will have to retreat to avoid creating distortion. This uses the microphone's natural rejection of sound coming from directly behind to minimise the piano sound going to the recorder and maximise the singer's sounds.

I then start the recorder and record the entire half hour session. I keep a sheet numbered 1 to 50 and have the student say a number before each trial - I then put a quick + - or √ as a rough guide to my impression of the performance. I'll listen to the first recorded track and readjust the microphone position if necessary, but after that it is hands off the technology and all attention is on the performer and their performance. If there is time, I'll link the iPod back to my laptop, pull the recording into iTunes. It tells me that there are new voice recordings available and asks if I would like to import them now. This also gives me a backup recording automatically as it remains on the iPod until I delete it. Once it is in iTunes, I can rename it with the singer's name. The date is automatically entered. I can then drag it into a playlist and burn it straight to CD so the singer can take it home and listen to their performance and reflect on what they can do to change it.

Since we are already used to recording rehearsals, there is less tension when it is time to record the final performances. Beforehand, I'll have read through the audition instructions to see how my students should be announcing themselves and if I am supposed to be making one track for each candidate or four tracks for each candidate, one for each exercise and announcement. I stick to the plan, repeat the process, and will eventually ask the student which of the "takes" is their final performance. I remind them that only complete "takes" of an exercise can be used. If a student is still making pitch errors, note errors and rhythm errors I will continue with their evaluation and reflection process, but we will probably come to a mutual decision at the end of their recording session that perhaps this audition still isn't ready to submit. This means that the performer and I have decided not to submit the audition and that their advances from early attempts have been acknowledged, but that the singer has come to a greater understanding about what is meant by membership in an honor group and probably has new goals for their musical studies for the year.

If the audition process for that student continues, I then take the student's requests, compare them with my track sheet, and edit the long session file and find the versions they wish to use using an audio editor. Both the editors mentioned below have wave shape editors so you can see the conversation, singing and the metronome. I then export the final tracks as .wav or .aiff files and place them in a folder with that student's name. I'll also name the tracks, for Soprano 1 in this case; s1announce, s1ex1, s1ex2, s1song.

The final tracks are then dropped back into your CD burning application of choice - I still use iTunes as it creates yet another backup of my edited files and makes it easy to create a second CD as my insurance copy. There are numerous available for every platform: Roxio Toast, EasyMediaCreator and Nero come immediately to mind. Then, the dreary part; I go to the Lower School music room when no one is there and listen to the entire recording. This is my check. Is each audition complete? Are the tracks for each candidate in the correct order? Does it play on that stereo? How does it really sound? Any problems and it's back to the audio files. Hopefully recording problems like distortion will have been discovered earlier in the process. Then I'll take the CD(s) home and try the, on my stereo. If I have time, I'll listen to the whole thing again. If not, I'll listen to the beginning of the CD, the middle, and the last track. Then it's time to fill in the paperwork that accompanies the CD(s), the online form that accompanies the audition, and get the package ready for mailing.

So there it is in a nutshell. Practise. Demystify. Involve the student in the evaluation. Read instructions and follow them. Celebrate success at every stage of the audition process and remember that you are the first member of the audition panel.

Resources:

Audacity - Free - (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>)

Audacity is a free, easy-to-use audio editor and recorder for Windows, Mac OS X, GNU/Linux, and other operating systems. You can use Audacity to:

- * Record live audio.
- * Convert tapes and records into digital recordings or CDs.
- * Edit Ogg Vorbis, MP3, and WAV sound files.
- * Cut, copy, splice, and mix sounds together.

SoundStudio - \$79.95 - (<http://www.freeverse.com/apps/app/?id=5012>)

Sound Studio 3 is an easy-to-use Mac OS X application for recording and editing digital audio on your computer. Digitize tapes and vinyl records, record live performances, create your own mixes with cross-fades, tweak the levels and EQ, apply digital effects and save in all major file formats with Sound Studio 3!

xtrememac micromemo - \$59.95 - (<http://www.xtrememac.com/>)

- high-fidelity digital audio recorder
- Turn your iPod into a portable recording studio. No tapes, no batteries, no cables. MicroMemo™ plugs into your iPod to record interviews, meetings, lectures, a new guitar riff, or any audio content directly to your iPod nano or iPod video.

Sony ECMMS907 Digital Recording Microphone - \$99.99 - (<http://tinyurl.com/2flrab>)

- Electret Condensor Stereo Microphone with Mid-side stereo system
- Wide Dynamic range for capturing high-quality sound through digital recording
- Directive angle can be set to between 90 and 120 degrees depending on environment and source
- Triangular shape design, fits comfortably in your hand

ROXIO - Toast & EasyMediaCreator - (<http://www.roxio.com>)

Nero - (<http://www.nero.com/>)

Garageband and iTunes (\$79 - free with new Apple computers) can also be used to import voice memos from your iPod using iTunes, drag them to the desktop, drag the desktop file into Garageband, trim out talking and excess metronome run, and then send back to iTunes, where it can be burned as a CD.

Rick Hein
rahein@mac.coms