

Remote Learning Solutions for Big Band Drummers

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Challenges

The two main challenges my students and I have faced over the past year of remote learning were:

- 1) Creating a controlled drum set sound that doesn't overwhelm a computer or smart device in a Zoom session;
- 2) Staying engaged with lessons and assignments remotely within the limits of the internet.

Necessary Tools to Counter the Above Challenges

- Access to Wi-fi
- Computer or smart device with camera
- Drum Set: acoustic or electronic (monitored in the room or direct via interface)
- External USB microphone (direct to computer)
- Digital USB Interface (recommended option)
- Engaging Assignments: Prerecorded play-along tracks
- No Fear (especially of learning new technologies and teaching techniques)

I. Achieving a Controlled Drum Set Sound

The volume of an acoustic drum set will overwhelm most built-in microphones on a computer or smart device. Here are a few solutions to best minimize this effect:

Using a Built-in Microphone

- Choose low background noise suppression settings or disable if possible;
- Use commercial drum-dampening products on drum heads and cymbals or cover drums and cymbals with t-shirt or thin towel (may sound silly but it works);
- Use low-volume practice cymbals;
- Use an electronic drum set either with a small amp to be captured by the built-in mic or plug it directly into computer via USB interface;
- Yamaha EAD (Electronic Acoustic Drum) Module direct via USB interface.

USB Digital Interface

A USB Digital Interface is a convenient conduit between your computer and microphone as well as other instruments (electric guitar, bass, piano, etc.) or prerecorded audio tracks. Additional mics can be added by using a mixer to send all mic lines to the USB interface then to computer.

I use the reasonably-priced Scarlet 2i2 USB digital interface from Focusrite (about \$100). There may be cheaper options and there are definitely plenty of more expensive ones, but this one gets the job done.

USB Digital Interface cont.

Here are a few mic applications using an interface with an acoustic drum set:

- 1 room mic for overall coverage — drums and speaking;
- 2 mics: one for drums in the room and one bass drum or speaking (turn down speaking mic when playing);
- 3 mics: one overhead, one bass drum, one for speaking;
- 6 mics: one overhead, one bass drum, one snare, hi-tom, low-tom, one speaking;
- Yamaha EAD (Electronic Acoustic Drum) Module direct via USB interface;
- When using an electronic kit, plug directly into the interface.

Optimal Audio Settings for Acoustic Drum Set using External Mic in Zoom

Zoom has several advanced audio settings. I found this combination helpful.

- Turn on “Original Sound”
- Click drop down menu next to the microphone icon
- Under “Select a Mic”, select the name of your external mic or interface
- Under “Select a Speaker”, select the name of your external mic or interface to be able to monitor with headphones
- Click “Audio Settings”
- Under “Suppress Background Noise”, select “Low”
- Under “Music and Professional Audio”, select everything

It may take some experimentation with each student, depending on their setup and wi-fi connectivity. But once you break through the technical challenges of creating an acceptable sound, your ability to communicate, both verbally and musically, will be much easier and far less frustrating.

II. Engaging Assignments

With many student jazz ensembles unable to meet in person due to COVID restrictions, what can you offer your drummers to practice remotely? My recommendation is to utilize play-along tracks. Plain and simple, playing along with tracks is more fun than practicing to a metronome. It also puts the drummer’s contribution to the music in much clearer context when playing to music with phrases and an actual form, rather than just a click.

Additionally, due to the intrinsic challenges of the ever-buffering internet which makes real-time assessment very challenging, I’ve begun tasking my students with videotaping their performances and submitting them for critique. This has resulted in two major benefits:

- 1) An opportunity for a much more in-depth student/teacher lesson assessment.
- 2) The student’s greater understanding, retention and ultimately, better application of the lesson.

Pre-COVID, I would have thought assigning a video project to be too demanding for my students to replicate on a weekly basis. But I was surprised and truly inspired to discover that my students were not only eager to try it, they were much more capable of doing it than I thought and each one, to a person, rose to the occasion and their performances noticeably improved. Their ability to adapt to a new lesson format makes the previous method of simply practicing their lesson with the hopes of being able to perform it at their next lesson, seem old fashion.

My new instructional textbook, *Big Band Loops Volume 1*, is an extension of one of my most effective lessons I use to teach the function of a “fill.” The eBook and accompanying audio tracks provide a realistic play-along experience that keeps your student drummers fully engaged by satisfying their need to play with others. It also gives them the opportunity to experiment, practice and expand their “fill” vocabulary, away from precious class rehearsal time. Although it wasn’t intended solely as a remote learning solution, it is in fact, an excellent recourse for jazz drummers during this unprecedented era of remote learning. **Free Teacher Sample** and full eBook are available for download at www.drummermattjohnson.com/loops

My Remote Lesson Model Using *Big Band Loops Volume 1*

Above and beyond the fully-immersive performance experience this book provides, due to the unreliable stability of the internet, real-time performance and assessment in a Zoom session can still be challenging. Experimenting with alternative lesson models, I have found great success tasking my students with videotaping and edited each assignment. This challenge forces them to consider their knowledge of the lesson to a much greater degree during the video playback and editing process. The final videos can then be reviewed and discussed in a shared-screen student/teacher session.

Lesson Assignment

- Start at the beginning of the book and read all performance philosophy and instructional text to fully understand the function of a “fill” before playing.

What is a “fill”?

A “fill” can be described as:

A momentary rhythmic deviation from an otherwise repeating drum set pattern or groove typically signifying the end of one phrase and the beginning of the next. A fill can also act as a “set-up” to an ensemble or background figure in a big band or otherwise jazz setting.

- Read each song’s introductory instructional page before attempting play it and its supporting Loops;
- Play/practice/learn each song and its supporting Loops in chronological order;
- Practice Loops – Experiment with new *fill* ideas based on the excerpted ensemble figures in the Loops. Then reinforce them through repetition;
- Apply new *fills* to full song play-alongs.

Production

- Video yourself playing each Loop. Aim for 3 unique *fills* played 4xs each per Loop;
- Self-assess and choose only your best takes;
- Video yourself playing to the song;
- Self-assess and choose only your best take.

Post Production

- Drag video clips and original Loop/song audio track into an editing software program (iMovie, Final Cut, Adobe Premier);
- Sync audio and video tracks;
- Add titles (optional);
- Edit individual Loops and song into one movie (optional)
- Output video(s) to desktop;
- Upload video(s) to YouTube;
- Send link to instructor for assessment;
- Teleconference for a shared-screen video critique conversation;
- Based on their critique, either reassign a portion or all of the lesson with recommendations or, assign the next tune.

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