

# 4 Tips to Keep On Going Virtually with Your Ensemble

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As we all scramble to create Covid-curriculum for musical performance groups, many school districts are now at a loss for how to help their music educators transition to online teaching. No need to fear, online music education is here and the good news is you can do it! I currently teach middle and high school music classes online through a virtual summer school program. In addition to teaching general music, I direct individuals and small groups in this program as well.

I believe the main tools for directing performance ensembles are Zoom and SmartMusic. Zoom is a web conferencing app that has a free option for meetings up for 40 minutes and 100 participants. As of June 2020 Zoom has even waived the time limit for those in the education profession allowing for unlimited meeting time. SmartMusic is a practice tool for instrumentalists and vocalists. SmartMusic is offering free accounts to those affected by schools closing through summer 2020 as well.

## **BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE: DETERMINE WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS**

I know directors who are lucky enough to know that all their students will have access to a computer, printer, and internet (my school district is in the process of helping provide for students with a demonstrated need). Even if you teach at a one-to-one school, don't assume that all kids will have access to the internet. If possible, take a private survey so you can get a better idea of what your students will be able to do at home. If students only have access to a phone, they would still be able to call into Zoom.

## **1. CREATE STEP BY STEP INSTRUCTIONS**

In my non-virtual (traditional) classroom I believe in the GPS (guidelines, procedures, and systems) for success. If you plan on doing anything online, you absolutely will need to create step-by-step instructions like you are explaining technology to your not so tech savvy grandparents....which by the way some of my "band-grands" as I call them know more than I do when it comes to technology. lol It

is best if you can provide written instructions as well as a screencast of you walking through your instructions when possible. For Screencasting, I recommend using QuickTime (on Mac only), Zoom, or [Screencast-O-Matic](#). I know for some that are savvy this may seem like an over-kill and may not approve but I promise, this will save YOU a lot of time answering emails later on.

If you're planning to use SmartMusic, check out their [Youtube channel](#) for some helpful videos to get you started.

## **2. GIVE STUDENTS WARM UP VIDEOS**

If I had to choose one thing students aren't as likely to do on their own, it's a full warm up before diving into practicing their music. My son has just started lessons with my colleague Kyle Cook, who is the assistant band director at the school I teach. During Covid, Mr. Cook compiled a warm up series to help students warm up intentionally and consistently virtually. Check out his [Youtube Warm up](#) for some ideas as to how you too can get started. If you have regular warm ups in your traditional non-virtual setting, record a video of you conducting and saying the phrases you typically say before, during, or after warm ups. This extra guidance can be helpful for students who may not feel motivated to warm up on their own.

You can also upload your warm ups right into SmartMusic. Instead of assigning a warm up every day. Some of my colleagues like to create one warm up students can use for the entire semester. It can be set to be "due" on the last day of the semester and put in the title/directions **DO NOT SUBMIT - FOR PRACTICE ONLY**. Students can still get somewhat of a "full ensemble" feeling by practicing with the accompaniment on.

As I tell my students, it's important that we all make sure we are getting our daily dose of musical vegetables (breathing exercises, long tones, ect...).

## **3. ASSIGN SLICES**

I love making the correlation of trying to eat an entire pizza in one sitting to practicing "everything" at one time. I explain to kids that whoever invented the pizza slice maybe greater than the person who invented the pizza itself because being able to handle it, manage it, and consume it slice by slice is what makes the pizza such a wildly popular and easy to eat treat. The same is true of practice. Don't try to get students to practice an entire piece-of (pizza) music every day. I learned this the hard

way early in my career. Assigning an entire piece overwhelms students and often makes them less likely to stick with and submit the practice. Pick small sections "slices" of music for students to work on. The more exact you can be, the easier it will be for students to practice on their own. One other great feature from SmartMusic is that you can customize assignments for each part. If you're playing a piece of music that is already in SmartMusic, many of those pieces already come with these customized pre-defined assignments built right in!

#### **4. LISTEN TO YOUR FULL ENSEMBLE**

If you are like me you want to hear how your ensemble sounds together. For my virtual ensembles, I aim to put together a full ensemble recording about every 2 weeks by combining individual student parts.

First, I will assign parts of a piece in SmartMusic (if you want to hear the entire piece together, I still suggest breaking it down into at least 3 slices). It is important when you are setting up the assignment to check the "allow metronome" and then set the tempo to **EXACTLY**" so that all students are playing at the same tempo

Before students press "submit" on their SmartMusic Assignment, ask them to press "save." This will download their current take. Have them label their file with their last name and part. Then have them upload their part to a Google Drive folder.

At this point you can put all of their parts together in Garageband. If you don't have access to Garageband, Audacity is another great, free resource you can use to combine parts. Once all of the parts are combined send the final piece out to students and allow them the opportunity to discuss together how they all can improve. This also helps you as a director give students more specific instruction in what they need to practice.

This process is a little time consuming so it might not be worth doing. But if you are like me in this Covid school year you understand that this year is an opportunity as we all are being given a certain grace period for learning. The fact is that we are all learning and **NO** one has all the answers so I am committing myself to professional and personal development. This is a great way to develop myself technologically and my students musically without having students in the same physical space!

## **KEEP ON GOING!**

Transitioning to online teaching is hard until it isn't and honestly it can be a little bit overwhelming to embrace. But we are now in an age of innovation and innovation by definition is change. We must adapt or be doomed like the dinosaurs. With a little study and creativity, students as well as their teachers can still thrive in a post-Covid, online world....we just have to commit and keep on going!

More available at [mickeysmithjr.com](http://mickeysmithjr.com)

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