Exercising the Excerpts

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The Problem

Percussion students are responsible for an astounding number of excerpts which are commonly required for auditions for college, graduate school, and the professional world. With so many different instruments to play (timpani, snare drum, xylophone, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, tambourine, etc.) it’s quite a task to get a handle on all that repertoire. Everyone knows that in order to truly learn the repertoire, musicians need to know how their own part fits within the entire orchestration of the ensemble.

For example, it’s not enough for a student to just play the cymbal part to Tchaikovski’s Symphony No. 4. In order to perform the passage in a musical manner, the cymbal player must know the proper tempo, the proper style, the dynamics of the orchestra, and he or she must determine the length of each crash based upon the duration of the other instruments in the orchestra.

To be a fine musician in a chamber or large ensemble it’s vital to know the musical context. Even though this article deals primarily with percussion excerpts, keep in mind that the concepts and techniques outlined here are also valid for other orchestral and band instruments.

One of the best ways to train young instrumentalists for ensemble participation is to have them play along with recordings. By practicing in this manner, they can use the recording as a model for their own performance and at the same time, become very familiar with sound, balance, tempo, nuance, and style of the work.

Like most instrumentalists, percussionists have no problem getting their hands on the music. Method books often contain a chapter or two of excerpts and a student can even purchase entire collections of excerpts. The hard part is getting the recordings! Students often head up the music library only to find out that: a) the library doesn’t own the recording, or b) the recording is already checked out by a faculty member who has had it since November 18, 1967.

The Solution

In the percussion program at The University of Arizona, we’re using a Macintosh computer and off-the-shelf software to custom-build excerpt practice materials. We’re creating the “Excerpt Library” that will serve as a teaching tool for excerpt preparation. This project includes creating a digital recording the excerpts on the computer, editing them so that they contain just the material we want, and then transferring the recordings off the computer onto a cassette tape for student use.
We’re using a simple little software product called “DigiTrax”. DigiTrax is an older program that was published by Opcode Systems (Palo Alto, CA (800) 557-2633, http://www.opcode.com). It’s a six-channel hard-disk recorder that can accept input from a variety of sound sources: the computer’s built-in compact disk, the internal microphone, or any external sound sources that can be connected to the computer’s audio-in ports. Digital recording software is available for both the Mac and PC platforms and come with a variety of features, functions, and price points. The recording and editing required to build your own excerpt library is so simple, that any digital recording software should work.

The process is really very simple and not specific to DigiTrax. Using the controls on the program’s main screen, you program the software to make a digital recording of the sound off the CD (or other sound source) and store it onto the computer’s hard-disk. Once recorded, you can open a window that displays the musical waveforms on the screen. Now that you can “see” the sounds displayed on the screen, as well as hear the sound played back on the computer, it’s an easy step to edit the recording to fit your needs.

Percussionists spend a good deal of time counting rests instead of playing and when playing along with recordings, and time spent counting rests is time lost. The solution is to “slice and dice”—creating a recording that includes the meat and potatoes of the excerpted composition while jumping over the rests and other unimportant portions of the musical meal.

The Process

For illustration purposes, let’s create a timpani excerpt recording of the slow movement in Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 (all of the Beethoven symphonies contain important timpani excerpts that are often asked on orchestra auditions). The first step is to use your hard disk recording software to record and store the entire movement onto your hard drive. The next step for any recording or editing session is to determine which sections of the piece we want to have included in the final version of the excerpt tape. All digital hard-disk recorders allow you to select a section of the music with the mouse and erase it by using a menu command, command/key combination, or perhaps even by pressing the “delete” key. Instruct your software to begin playing the digital file and you will be able to hear (and see) where the various passages are.

This movement begins with 28 measures rest, so we certainly want to cut these bars out of the recording and begin the entire excerpt three measures before rehearsal letter A. After playing an eight-bar phrase, the timpanist again has a long rest of 40 measures. In order to save time (and our sanity), we’re going to cut from the ninth bar of A to three measures before rehearsal letter B. Following the eight bar phrase at letter B, there is another long rest which can be cut. In fact, there are a several long sections of rest which can be skipped when creating our excerpt recording.
Now that we’ve got the various sections identified and saved on the hard drive, we need some way to let the student know where he or she is in the recording. I’ve found that recording verbal cues is a foolproof method to keep the student in the right place. It’s also fast and easy to add these cues to your sound file.

By using your computer’s internal microphone (or an external microphone plugged into your computer’s sound input), you can record your own voice offering such cues as “three before A”, “after the fermata” or “Piu Moto”. If you wish, you can even offer the student some helpful words of advice right before the excerpt begins. Maybe a short statement like “two before letter D, remember to blend with the brass” or “six after E, take your dynamic from the woodwinds” is just what a student needs to improve listening skills and stay aware of the ensemble. In Example No. 1, we’ve set up the software to record the voice-over on channels three and four.

From this point, it’s a simple matter to organize the musical excerpts and the verbal cues to create a composite playlist that is clear, concise, and well presented. Example No. 2 shows how the voice-over and the musical excerpt are placed together for the final product.

Here are a few hints to make your excerpt library more useful:

1) Before starting a project like this, be sure that you’ve gathered all the necessary equipment: computer system with digital recording software, a microphone for voice-overs, a cassette recorder (with the proper cables to record sound from your computer), and your source recordings (CD, Cassette, or yes, even LPs).

2) As you make your digital recordings, pay close attention to the meters showing the recording level. Clipping—which may be shown on your software program by the meters going into the red—will cause digital distortion.

3) Again, watch your meters when recording from the computer back into the cassette recorder. Since your recording will be extremely clean, (especially when your source recording is a compact disk) it would be a shame to loose that quality with a recording that was too hot and ended up being distorted.

4) Experiment with the amount of time between sections of a composition. While you could easily hook each excerpt very close together, it’s often better off leaving a little space between each section. Keep the player in mind. They will need some time to finish playing one section to prepare for the next. Try leaving about five seconds of silence between the end of the music, the voice-over announcing the next section, and from the voice-over to the next musical section.

5) In addition to deleting passages you don’t need, you can also use the power of the computer to make multiple copies of a certain section. Simply copy and paste
the passage one after the other for a chance to play the excerpt two, five, ten, or even a hundred times without going back to the rewind button. Depending on your software, you may even be able to loop a passage and then record the looping excerpt on the cassette.

6) If you want to save a little time during the initial recording process, you can use the skip feature of your CD player to fast-forward through long areas of rests or less important passages.

7) Depending on the size of your excerpt library, you may want to consider some sort of off-line storage. With digital recordings taking up approximately ten megabytes per minute, one-hour of music can eat up 600 MB of storage. One option is to store your excerpts on removable drives. When you want to custom-built a tape for your students you can load the files back into your hard drive and organize them into any type of playlist.

8) Depending upon your own or your student’s individual needs, you can create a custom excerpt rehearsal recording based on a particular time period (Romantic, Classic, Contemporary), medium (chamber works, orchestral works, wind ensemble works), composer (Brahms, Mahler, Stravinsky) or difficulty level.

One last note: While the excerpt library is a wonderful tool for students, it is important for them to realize that these excerpts have been surgically removed from an entire composition. While it’s great for practice, it’s not quite the same experience as playing an entire work through from start to finish.

POSSIBLE PULL QUOTES

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