

Creative Practicing and Play-Along Solutions

By JOHN KUZMICH, JR.

Play-along recordings have been motivating student practice since the 1950s with everything from simple piano accompaniments to full orchestras. In their originally produced analog format, students could only rigidly follow along, much like practicing with a metronome. Thanks to new technology, those days are long gone.

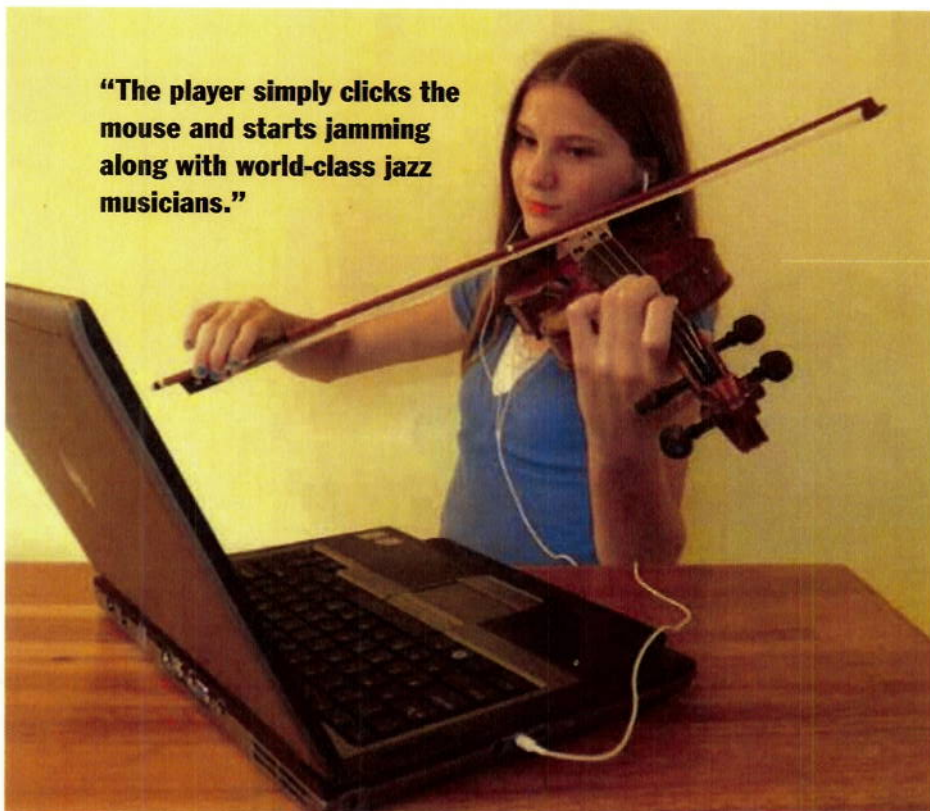
How would you like to be able to customize the tempo? Create practice loops of specific measures? Change the key? Or best of all, have a completely interactive accompaniment? All this is now available to students, teachers and professional performers alike with the latest digital play-along technology. Sherie Aguirre, principal oboist with the Virginia Symphony, used this software to prepare for a performance of the Strauss Oboe Concerto. She relates, "I was thrilled to be able to 'rehearse' with the virtual orchestra accompaniment. Its unique ability to follow me I while I play along is particularly important with the Strauss piece. The accompaniment software works beautifully." Mimi Zweig of the Jacobs School of Music agrees that this is a great learning tool and preparation for playing with a "real" orchestra. "It is the next best thing to the real thing making practice more productive!" she says.

Today, there are a number of interactive play-along software applications that are raising the bar and adding excitement to student rehearsals and performances. Creative music teachers can now blend this new technology for more productive student development without time-consuming teacher effort.

BAMtracks/Aebersold

BAMtracks is a brand new interactive play-along software company from Australia that incorporates the

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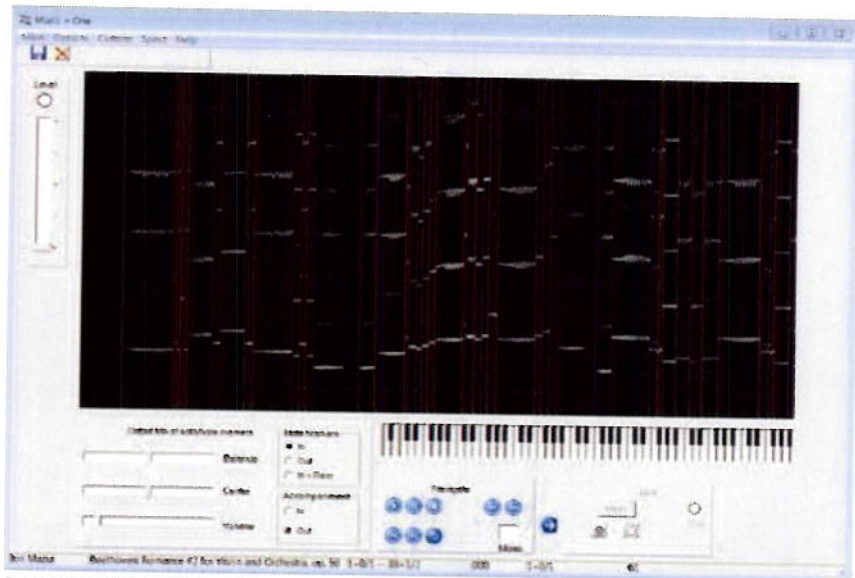


entire 132-album Jamey Aebersold library with tempo controls, key choices, looping, and interactive accompaniments, making the complete Aebersold library fully digital. It converts the Aebersold CDs and lead sheet books to a single downloadable digital song file that comes with synchronized sheet music display. Once converted into a BAMtracks file, a great number of valuable options become available. Some of those include a bouncing bar shadow, “one more time” switch, tempo control, one-click looping, dynamic chord info with guitar shapes, MIDI and audio recording, and real time transposition with synchronized displayed sheet music charts. BAMtracks also includes a Parts Reveal where B \flat and E \flat instruments parts are displayed in different colors from the concert-piano parts. BAMtracks is a perfect tool for vocalists as well as instrumentalists, as it has provisions available to include lyrics when they are unavailable by default. BAMtracks has other magic tools worth investigating designed for easy jamming and learning.

BAMtracks files can be viewed and played using the free BAMtracks Play application, which will soon be downloadable from BAMTracks.com, along with the also free BAMtracks demonstration jingle. For a sample embedded Aebersold play-along rack, go to www.bamtracks.com and register to receive the free demo of the BAMtracks jingle, which highlights all of the incorporated features that the product offers. The publisher will only send users a demo because BAMtracks isn't going to be fully released until March 2012. Once downloaded, the player simply clicks the mouse and starts jamming along with world-class jazz musicians. Live players may mute their respective parts to join in as the missing instrument or vocalist. To view the depth of repertoire in the Aebersold library, go to: www.kuzmich.com/Aebersold.pdf.

SmartMusic

SmartMusic was the first software application to provide musical interaction between a soloist and an accompaniment, along with the added ability to record for assessment. This started



A screenshot from Music + One.

a new era of play-along recordings. With SmartMusic, users can change the tempo without changing the key, loop a section, and record while playing along with the music. Students can get instant feedback as they see which notes they played right or wrong and hear recordings of their performance. Instead of practicing alone, students can practice with background accompaniment and hear how their part fits within the whole. An educator subscription to SmartMusic allows teachers to individualize instruction and document the progress for every student. A new feature allows any onscreen notation to be made into a timed sight reading exercise.

There are five categories of SmartMusic repertoire and the library is updated regularly as part of a \$36 SmartMusic student subscription. SmartMusic features over 40 method books for band, strings, and vocalists – include sight-singing – as well as over 1,900 concert band titles, 700 string titles and 200 jazz titles. It also offers over 50,000 combinations of exercises including scales, technical exercises, play-by-ear, vocals, and rhythm. In addition, there are over 7,000 solo accompaniments on all levels for voice and instruments. Some solos have onscreen notation. Music from popular titles like *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and Broadway musicals are also available.

SmartMusic has several books that focus on improvisation, and you can

adjust tempo and keys without distorting the sound. Transcriptions of the piano, bass, and drums can be selected. You'll be able to display note patterns that fit into the chord structure. The rhythm section parts can be isolated.

SmartMusic accompaniments can be adjusted from strict metronome for jazz or Baroque work clear over to rich rubato in Romantic and modern music. SmartMusic also allows performance assessment with e-mail connectivity to the teacher for comments and evaluation. Its open-end architecture means that any MP3 audio file can be imported into SmartMusic; plus any Finale file can be imported as a SmartMusic file. Any imported Finale score has the same functionality as any music in the SmartMusic library. This comprehensive library and open-ended architecture ensures incredible possibilities for everyone from beginners through college and professional level users.

Music + One

Another great interactive play-along newcomer is Music + One. This company debuted in 2011 and is aligning with the Music Minus One (MMO) repertoire, a formidable play-along library. They presently have 34 master works for flute, oboe, bassoon, clarinet, horn and trumpet, violin and cello, and are in the process of expanding that number to 59. What

makes Music + One so unique is its special speech-recognition component that seamlessly follows the soloist – even if the student jumps a beat or two – without hesitation or time-delay. Try that with a symphony orchestra and conductor! Jacobs School of Music

Music + One

instructor Mimi Zweig says, “With its ability to follow the nuances of the performer, Music + One is a great learning tool and preparation for playing with a real orchestra.”

This software application is a masterpiece because the accompaniment can be customized and the accompaniment is incredibly interactive. For a good introduction to the product, go to tinyurl.com/dyp4mzd. Another good link with examples of Music + One in action is: tinyurl.com/d8155ue.

Elevation

Elevation by Superscope Technologies is a particularly user-friendly piece of music practice and recording software. While it doesn't offer a library of play-along tracks, it does offer many desirable features to customize any and all play-along recordings. Just insert a CD into the computer and immediately start modifying the playback to fit your needs. It can play a file in a different key while preserving the original tempo, or slow-down/speed-up the music without affecting the key or pitch, loop any section of audio, save loops and key-tempo settings as a “snapshot,” and export files or create an audio CD. Recording capabilities of Elevation are equally impressive for concerts, rehearsals or song ideas at 16 or 24 bit audio resolution. You can use any USB microphone or USB interface to record. Elevation's ability to save audio recordings in WAV, AIFF, MP3, WMA, and CD Audio file formats is particularly useful for sharing recordings to smartphones, MP3 players and other portable devices.

Play-Alongs Save the Day

Last spring, a private student of mine, Josh, was learning the “Concertino for Clarinet” by Karl Maria von Weber for a school concert. He practiced with three different play-along applications. It was a challenge customizing the play-along recording of this concerto because it has so many different tempos. Nevertheless with this new technology, I was able to prepare a practice recording with every tempo change exactly like the Stanley Drucker recording with the New York Philharmonic. The master recording was exported from a Music Minus One recording into separate snapshots in Elevation, and each variation was extracted into a single audio file. In only one or two steps, I adjusted the play-along as Josh got his chops up to tempo over time. Individual variations were electronically copied into a single master file to customize the entire work to his preferred tempos. This practice recording was perfect for

both Josh and his accompanist so they could separately prepare for his concert performance.

Josh has recently begun experimenting with piano accompaniments in SmartMusic and Music + One using his clarinet concerto and the original MMO recording. Recordings of Josh's experiences can be found at www.kuzmich.com/SBO122011.html.

Closing Comments

Today's play-along products are revolutionary in helping students practice with real-time self-assessment and musical enjoyment. Jazz students will certainly appreciate that the entire Jamey Aebersold library is now digitally available from BAMtracks, along with a host of customizing features.

The progress that my student, Josh, made in just seven short months by using the three applications cited in this article was nothing short of amazing. And these tools have made his practice more fun and productive. Surprisingly, the \$20 microphone from SmartMusic proved to be impressively accurate for student recordings. The cost of the software is modest considering the sophistication of the technology. Join the ranks and incorporate play-along recordings in your practice curriculum.

Dr. John Kuzmich Jr. is a veteran music educator, jazz educator and music technologist with more than 41 years of public



school teaching experience. He is a TI:ME-certified training instructor and has a Ph.D. in comprehensive musicianship. As a freelance author, Dr. Kuzmich has more than 400 articles and five textbooks published. As a clinician, Dr. Kuzmich frequently participates in workshops throughout the U.S., Europe, Australia, and South America.

For more information, visit www.kuzmich.com.