

Using Audio Loops in Virtual Rehearsals

Over the course of 2020 many of us have entered into the world of virtual choir rehearsals. Whilst we have become more familiar with 'break out rooms' and 'mute all' buttons it can still be a challenge leading rehearsals which feel fun and engaging. Early on I encountered two key issues:

- Teaching multiple parts / harmonies for the same section of music without having people sit around not doing anything
- Keeping the 'flow' of the rehearsal moving
- Providing a satisfying experience of singing 'with' the rest of the choir.

In order to fix this, I started using Garage Band on my iPad (a simple piece of music software which contains a looping function) and found that this could support my rehearsal process in a number of ways.

The Features

Whilst there are a number of different looping softwares out there I have been using Garage Band and so this webinar will focus on that however here is a picture of the screen of both Garage Band (IOS) and N-track (IOS & Android).



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Garage Band:



Play

Song Sections - sections which can be looped over and over again.

Add new section or select specific section

Mute track

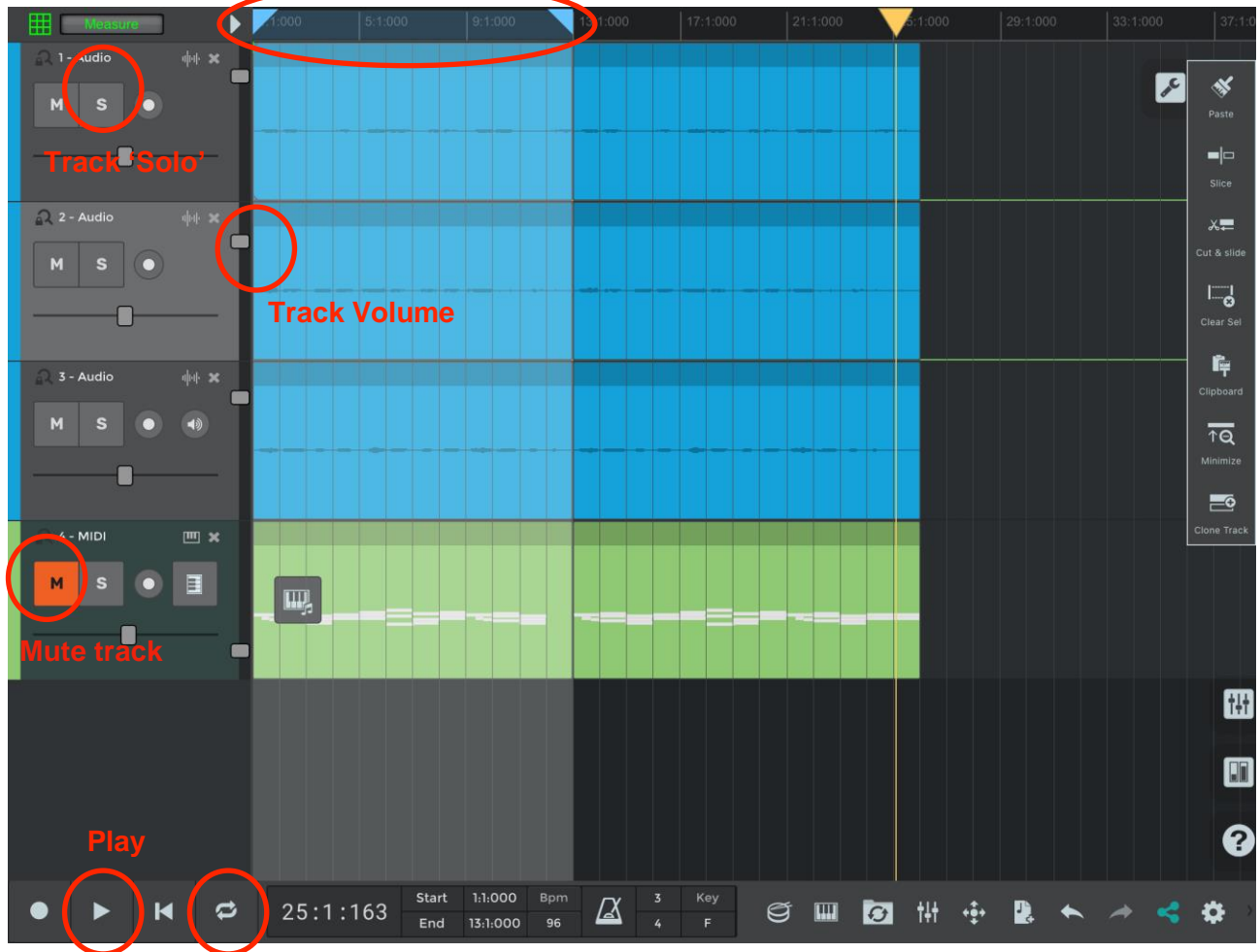
Track Volume

Track 'Solo'

The screenshot shows the GarageBand interface with several annotations. A red circle highlights the 'Play' button at the top. Another red circle highlights a section of the 'Lead Vocals' track, with a text box explaining that song sections can be looped. A third red circle highlights the '+' button at the top right, with a text box explaining it is used to add new sections or select specific ones. On the left, a red circle highlights the mute icon for the 'Alto' track, with the text 'Mute track'. Another red circle highlights the volume knob for the 'Tenor' track, with the text 'Track Volume'. A final red circle highlights the solo icon for the 'Horn' track, with the text 'Track 'Solo''.

N-Track:

Section which will be 'looped'



Looping on/off

Learning to operate the apps 'on the fly' takes practice but these are generally the only buttons that I use during a rehearsal.

- Mute - Start with all track on mute except your basic backing track. Then unmute as needed
- 'Solo' - If you want to focus on a specific part this is a quick way to isolate it
- Looping (n-track) - Plays the highlighted section on loop when on and will move past it when this is off.
- + (on GB) - Brings up the sections tab which allows you to focus (and loop) specific sections of the piece. To move on select 'all sections'

Ways to Use to Loops

Warming Up

Call and response warm ups work really well over a simple backing track. Simply set up these give that first You go I go exercises a little bit of pace and structure. You can even pre record some vocal exercises (slides, scatting etc) which can layer into a kind of warm up piece.

If you choose a backing track which is also the accompaniment to a simple song or round, this can link very nicely into teaching that round

Rounds

Rounds work very well to loop as they commonly have 2 or 4 chords repeating themselves. This backing then its perfectly with the SfP teaching structure (ABCD,A,B,AB ect). I takes some practice as your really can't miss a beat AND you won't necessarily be able to go back over things easily. However, its very good practice and if you follow the SfP way you should find but the end of your teaching a simple round it taught ok.



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Once you've taught a round you can do various things with it.

- Loop the melody round a round
- Multitrack for multiple entries
- Pre-record your ending which will finish your piece.

Part Songs/Layer Songs

This feature is also really useful for any songs which are based upon small (8 bar) sections which naturally repeat well (for example African songs, gospel, world music). The best way to do this is to teach part by part and 'layer in' the next part encouraging your singers to keep singing along.

One of the benefits of this is that you keep your singers singing and the flow of the rehearsal moving. Sometimes you may have to stop to go over a specific track but this can be done by 'muting' the other tracks and then 'unmuting' them when you are ready.

If this is a section of a larger song you can then select 'all sections' (if using an iPad) and move onto the next section of the piece. Again it takes practice to get use to muting and un muting but it does get easier!

Other Uses

Improvisation

Keep the backing track going and encourage your singers to make up their own melody. They have the security of using the melody they have already learnt but also the space to explore improvisation which is fun.

Linking sections

A bit like a 'vamp' in musical theatre I'll often leave the loop going and explain what we are going to do next (eg 'now we will singing it in a four part round') to keep the flow going. **THIS CAN BE TRICKY.** The hard thing is timing your talking to the end of a loop so you don't have a long awkward silence, exactly how a musical theatre director end the vamp with the action on stage!



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How to Prepare

1. Record all the parts you are going to need. It's good to have a simple backing track (keys, rhythm, bass) but with some musical styles bit of extra flare is fun as the song develops
2. Plan out the piece in sections. If it is a standard song (verse/chorus/tag etc) then this can just be the normal song structure and the 'looping' will work mainly in rehearsal of specific sections. If it is a round then plan out your actives into sections (eg. song melody/song in 4 part round/improvisation/final time through)
3. Practice running through the whole rehearsal bringing in different parts and moving between sections. In the moment it can get a bit confusing and it's good to have a solid plan before the rehearsal starts.
4. Don't run before you can walk. At first simply trying to teach along to the loop may be best and not trying to roll into all the different sections. Once you feel more comfortable you can be more experimental.

Also note that if you get stuck then looking online. There are loads of tutorials and I've found that most things get fixed with a quick search.

Stuart Overington, September 2020



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