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Virtual Ensemble Rehearsal Techniques and Listening Exercises

Introduction:

With it being so difficult to play together in a live setting and, therefore, so little class time spent on making music, the next best thing, or perhaps an even more useful thing, is to actively listen as an ensemble.

Of course, most directors play reference recordings for their ensembles from time to time in class but, in general, the bulk of rehearsal time is spent playing. Now, the bulk of our class time should be spent listening.

Listening has become more and more important to me as an educator as I've slowly realized just how much more I, and other professional musicians, hear than other listeners do, especially relative to today's students with their dependence on visual stimulation (and, therefore, a lack of aural stimulation).

Being a great performer is valuable to an educator, but far more valuable is being a master listener and being able to convey how and what you hear.

Virtual classroom listening exercises and techniques include:

Listening to the reference recording with students' eyes closed. What do they hear with eyes closed that they didn't hear before?

Listening to reference recording but focused on instruments other than the students' instrument. i.e. rhythm section players listen to melody, horns listen to piano/bass/drums. What do they hear?

Listen to different versions of the tune being worked on and listen for differences. What are those differences?

Listen to the drummer of those different versions - how does their style differ? Differences in 8th note subdivision, differences in where they play the groove on the drum set, etc...?

Listen to improvised solos over the tune being worked on. Learn playable phrases of the solo by ear. Play the roots of chord progression along with the soloists. Lock in with the rhythm section.

Learn a song by ear. Listen to a simple tune like Stolen Moments and have horns learn the melody by ear and rhythm section learn their respective rhythm parts by ear. Next, have the horns learn the bass line by ear and rhythm section players learn the melody by ear. For more advanced listeners, have the horns learn the harmony parts on the melody by ear. Finally, work from the notated lead sheet and ask students what they got wrong and why?

Virtual recording with Soundtrap combined with ear-training exercises.

Call and response exercises. Teacher plays or sings a melody via Zoom and each student repeats. Or, a "telephone" type game with each student repeating the idea but adding a subtle variation as the idea passes around the virtual classroom.

With all students muted on Zoom, sing along with solos, play along with teacher playing bass lines, solos, etc... on instrument

"Show and tell" with students performing for each other with play along track or unaccompanied.