

# Recordings

## How Much is Too Much?

by Ginger Zingara

Recordings - professional and amateur are of great use in music education, but are they always appropriate?

Addressing recording our own ensemble first, ask yourself how often to do you record your own band? Are you just making that quick recording for the colorguard to learn their routines or do you listen to your group on a regular basis? If you are not stepping off the podium to listen to your group, your "ear" may be skewed to always hearing the wrong notes in the 3rd clarinets, and you could be missing the opportunity to fix the incorrect partials in the horns. It was always great to have guest clinicians work my middle or high school bands before big events and it was shocking to hear some of the things I had missed by being so occupied with a particular problem section or person. Your tape recorder can be an objective "ear" to hear the entire ensemble. And like most musicians, you spend enough time traveling in your car to put that stereo to good use listening to your latest rehearsal as you travel to your next gig.

Should students listen to professional recordings? Recordings can be a great teaching tool for both individual musicians and ensemble training. Students need to know the characteristic sound of their instrument - hard to describe; easy to identify in a recording. If I am rehearsing a transcribed or arranged piece, I always play a recording of the original for the students. It is important in their music education to hear the original composition as it was intended and it also speaks volume on stylist issues. Also, try having an inspired piece on the stereo as your students enter the bandroom - it will create a particular mood as well get them focused on producing quality music. In addition, jazz, an important American art form, is based on careful listening and the aural passing of style from generation to generation. But caution must be exercised on the overuse of recordings so that student does not use listening as a crutch - learning music by "ear" instead being able to read notation and losing the ability to interpret music on their own.

Do you use professional recordings in your score study? This is a tenuous question because recordings can be a great ally or a great hindrance in preparing your scores and rehearsals.

My personal procedures for score study and performance preparation after doing some study on the history of the piece and composer is to:

1. Study the score without listening to any recordings; noting the melodic and harmonic progressions, important entrances or solos for cueing, possible problems that may occur for my ensemble. At this point, I start marking conducting and rehearsal points in the score. This first step is important to interpret the score

without hearing anyone else's analysis of the piece so I do not discount my own style and tendencies.

2. Listen to at least two recordings of the piece (if possible) while looking at the score. I usually hear something I missed in my own preliminary study that I need to look at more deeply. Listening to two recordings allows me to compare and contrast two conductors' style, and thus, find the way to my own voice. Remember conducting an ensemble may be the only place that you can put your own unique musical thumbprint on a piece of music. Why would you give up that tremendous opportunity to try to sound like a second-rate version of the Marine Band? Do not give your right to interpret your music within the context of standard accepted practices.
3. Next, I distribute the music to the ensemble, and not only put my own interpretation on the piece, but also listen for musical tendencies of this particular group. Each ensemble has its own "personality", strengths and weaknesses which make each performance of a piece distinctively different; a characteristic that fortunately keeps "old warhorses" fresh and interesting.
4. After we have worked on the music for a few weeks, I go back to the professional recordings to see if there is anything that I would like to add or subtract to our own performance. I use the rehearsal tapes of my ensemble to compare and contrast to the professional recordings. Overall, professional recordings are a tool for score study and rehearsal, but are not the blueprint for my ensemble.

What about those CDs that come with method books? Again, these recordings can be effectively used or unproductively abused. The CDs should be used as a motivational tool for student to practice on their own, not as a way to baby-sit a beginner band. There is no substitute for a teacher's instruction or ear for making corrections during those formative years; a CD cannot do this. These recordings should be used sparingly in the classroom; mainly utilized for home practice.

Where can you get quality professional recordings? Most large publishing houses have recordings, but great sources for free CDs are the military bands. Try these web sites:

- Army - [www.army.mil/armyband](http://www.army.mil/armyband)
- Marines - [www.marineband.usmc.mil/](http://www.marineband.usmc.mil/)
- Navy - [www.navyband.navy.mil/](http://www.navyband.navy.mil/)
- Air Force - [www.af.mil/band/](http://www.af.mil/band/)
- Coast Guard - [www.uscg.mil/band/](http://www.uscg.mil/band/)

Quality recordings are a great tool for both the instructor and the student when they are utilized as a learning device, but not at the expense of forsaking personal interpretation. Moderation in using recordings, like all things in life, is the key to balanced educational experience.