



## TECHNOLOGY

### Putting the Tech(no) in Technique: Using GarageBand to Rock your Warmups

by Levi Comstock

I love scales. I can spend an entire afternoon with my tattered, trusty Carl Flesch, just riding all twelve majors and minors up and down like so many roller coasters. Progressing through endless bowing variations and fingering permutations quiets my mind and makes my fingers feel powerful.

My students, on the other hand, tend to look at scales the way my one-year-old son looks at peas, before sweeping them unceremoniously onto the floor. At best, they are a chore to be gotten done before “going out to play” with the repertoire. Someday, I hope that my students will experience the blissful satisfaction that comes from whizzing, blindfolded, through a four-octave arpeggio, but for now they need coaxing.

Lately in rehearsals with my high school orchestras, I have been experimenting with background tracks to spice up our technique practice. It can be a far-out Indian Raga, with a tonic drone and laid-back hand drums, a driving blue-grass pickin’ party, a moody and intense string quartet chord progression, or a head-banging rock band. GarageBand has easy-to-use tools that can create these accompaniments and more, instantly. When I say instantly, I mean that I have been up on the podium and created a

new background track on my phone in the time it took my students to get their scale sheets on their music stands.

Available for \$4.99 on iTunes, GarageBand is compatible with all iOS platforms. That means you can use it on your iPhone, iPad or computer. I have been amazed at how easy it is to use on all three. For Android users, there is a program called StageLight that promises to do the same things. If you use it, I would love to know what you think. If you have five dollars and an Apple device and you want to have some fun, download it right now. I will wait here while you do.

Did you get it? Excellent. Click on “My Songs” and tap the plus sign in the corner. You will see a list of “Smart Instruments” each of which allows you to create a chord progression, drone, or melody in the key of your choice, with string orchestra, guitar, keyboard, drums, and/or electric bass accompaniment. As you play around with each instrument and find the sound you are looking for, you can record it and add it to your project. Multiple instruments can be layered on top of each other, and you can even record yourself playing or speaking on top of the accompaniment you create. You

are probably not even reading this right now—you are having too much fun playing DJ with the “Live Loops” feature.

If you are like me, you will now spend far too much time tweaking the background tracks when you really should be studying scores, doing chores, spending time with loved ones, and maybe even practicing your scales! So now is the time to outsource. If your students like practicing this way, have them make a background track for their least favorite warmup. It’s a great way to get them thinking about harmony and rhythm, and to make them a little more excited about practicing those forward extensions all ten thousand times that it takes to master them.

Do you have a question or a topic you would like covered about technology and string education? E-mail it to [AskViolatron@gmail.com](mailto:AskViolatron@gmail.com).

*Levi Comstock teaches orchestra at Champlin Park High School. He is a graduate of St. Olaf College ('08) and a founding member of the Lirica Chamber Orchestra. He spent three years in Boston helping launch an El Sistema music program at Conservatory Lab Charter School, and now lives in Minneapolis. ♪*