



TECHNOLOGY

Looper Pedals for Fun and Profit

by Levi Comstock

It was the dark winter of distance learning, and I was going crazier every day. My lesson plans included wigs, sock puppets, gameshows, Mr. Rogers musicals, Yoga Thursdays, and days when I just told my students to go outside and take a walk so we could come back a little more ready to learn. There were probably more cats watching my orchestra class than humans, and I'm pretty sure no one was playing C# in tune. For all the effort I was expending, the best compliment I got was, "at least your class isn't as awful as some of my others." I was so proud I think I did a Newsies-style heel click in the air right then and there when my student said that.

More than anything, we all missed harmony. We missed the groove. We missed hearing all the parts blending together. We missed having friends.

So I bought a looper pedal. It's a little box (think guitar pedal) that plugs in between your instrument and an amplifier. It records what you play and plays it back, so that you can create accompaniments for yourself in real time as you are performing. Watch Joe Deninzon on YouTube for some great demonstrations. I'll wait here.

You're back from YouTube already? I'm impressed.

I'm cheap, so I wanted to do this for under \$100. I got a \$40 LEKATO looper

pedal off of Amazon. I plugged it into my \$25 whatever-kind-of-used-practice-guitar-amplifier-I-found-on-craigslist on one side and my \$7 Cherub pickup (also from Amazon) clipped onto my viola.

I stomped on the pedal and started playing some long, sad notes. Then I stomped on it again, and it sang them back to me, over and over. I added some higher ones on top, and when I started to feel like it was working, I tapped the pedal and recorded layer after layer, until there was a bowl of musical noodles heaping higher than my crumbly amp could hold. Then I double tapped that magic box and the house was instantly silent. I was hooked.

Since that moment, I have used my looper pedal to lay down funky grooves under scales in rehearsal, layer parts so students can hear how they are supposed to interact, work out and store my ideas for compositions and arrangements, hear what I actually sound like so I can fix it, and create solo performances that sound like a whole orchestra. I bought better gear, and now I busk in the hallways and serenade my grandma and her friends outside her nursing home window. It's like having friends again, but way less complicated.

In rehearsal, it is a quick way to demonstrate and to add harmonic and rhythmic context when you don't play the piano very

well. When students learn to loop, it opens up new ways of thinking about how music fits together and forces them to listen and adjust in new ways. While master loopers achieve levels of looping magic that require advanced degrees from YouTube University, we mere mortals can pretty quickly get a surprising amount of music out of these little boxes with a little courage and perseverance.

I recommend starting out with the simplest and cheapest setup, then upgrading once you learn what else you are looking for. It is easiest to learn on something with just one button. The cheap gear can then become your sample package for students to try, because they will also have quick success on it, and you won't care as much if they stomp too hard on it.

Happy looping!

Levi Comstock teaches orchestra at Champlin Park High School. He graduated from St. Olaf College in 2008 and received his Masters in Differentiated Instruction from Concordia University in 2018. He spent three years in Boston helping to launch an El Sistema music program at Conservatory Lab Charter School, and now lives in Minneapolis with his wife and two children. ♪