



Teaching with Backing Tracks

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Learn to enhance technique, timing, and creativity all at the same time by teaching with backing tracks, a catchall name for pre-recorded or automated instrumental accompaniments that simulate a virtual band.

What are backing tracks?

Backing tracks refer to any pre-recorded or automated instrumental accompaniments that simulate a virtual band. Also known as beats, drum machines, MIDI tracks, playalongs, styles, music minus one, and more. The makers of these learning aids are not consistent in their naming.

Why teach with backing tracks?

- Automated accompaniments are inherently motivational because playing with a snazzy drum groove is simply more compelling than practicing with a metronome.
- By enhancing technique, timing, and creativity all at the same time, practicing with backing tracks benefits all instrumentalists.
- Adds an invigorating element to lessons for teacher and student alike.

Why are backing tracks particularly helpful for pianists?

- Most young musicians learn by playing their instruments with peers in a student orchestra, concert band or group class.
- Student pianists, on the other hand, because they typically practice and perform alone for many years often miss out on learning essential ensemble skills.
- To compensate for reduced opportunities to play with others, it's especially helpful for piano teachers to play along with students and/or use backing tracks in the lesson.
- In addition, to reinforce the experience of playing with others at home, it's helpful to assign specific home practice strategies with backing tracks.

Piano skills enhanced by backing tracks:

- **Steady beat** – Realize the necessity of keeping a steady pulse and avoiding pauses to fix notes.
- **Listening** – Understand aurally how piano parts fit into an ensemble.
- **Form** – Become skilled at keeping their place in the structure of a tune.
- **Rhythm section** – Learn to provide essential chords and style-specific beats in contemporary ensembles in conjunction with a drummer and bassist.



What to teach with backing tracks

- **Technique** – Hanon type exercises are more engaging with a beat.
- **Scales** – You are assigning a scale with every lesson, right?
- **Chord drills** – Reading and improvising pianists alike benefit by increasing their chord fluency through drills.
- **Repertory** – You'll be amazed at what practicing even classical music with a rock beat does for timing.
- **Play by ear** – Pick out the melody to a pop tune, folk song, or holiday favorite by ear trial and error while listening to playback of the correct chords. [This Old Man with IRP]
- **Improvisation** – Ask students to improvise a right-hand melody in various keys and styles over a left-hand chord progression appropriate to their level.
- **Performances** – Some teachers hire professional musicians to accompany their recitals. To prepare, students can practice with backing tracks. No musicians available for the recital? Simulate a virtual band by playing backing tracks to accompany your students.

Audio Sources

Here are devices, software, and apps for integrating backing tracks into your teaching listed more or less by ease of use.

Options for rhythm only (no chords)

Source	Pros	Cons	Format
Actual metronome or app such as Tempo .	Easily available	Clicks are uninspiring.	Physical metronome or virtual app
Teacher improvises accompaniment with mouth sounds, a small hand drum or foot percussion .	Accessible way to model musicality that easily adjusts to variations.	Many teachers unfamiliar with easy-to-play patterns.	Homemade or purchased percussion instruments, human hands and/or feet.
Digital pianos with built-in accompaniments.	Easy to change groove, adjust tempos, etc.	Not available to all students.	Proprietary
Enhanced metronome apps such as Super Metronome Groove Box .	Customizable grooves.	Requires purchase and some knowledge of drum grooves.	App
Garageband drum loops	Sound great	Limited styles	Software
Downloadable MIDI drum loops such as Groove Monkee (some are free.)	Easy to adjust tempos	MIDI format is unfamiliar to many students.	Computer software and MIDI- equipped digital pianos



Options that simulate a band

Source	Pros	Cons	Format
Teacher improvises piano accompaniment or plays written duets.	Accessible way to model musicality that easily adjusts.	Requires knowledge of stock accompaniments.	Piano(s) with optional foot percussion.
Audio tracks that come with some published books.	Designed to directly support the tune at hand.	Many lack practice tempos.	Downloadable mp3s, CDS, and/or MIDI files
Publisher proprietary software such as Interactive Practice System .	Helpful features such as tempo adjustment, recording, and digital access to books.	Publisher specific requiring other options for tunes from other publishers.	App or computer software
MusiClock	Quick setup and easy to use	Tempos, chords and drum grooves not adjustable.	App - iPhone, iPad
Tin Pan Rhythm	Easy to use and somewhat customizable.	Limited number of chords and measures.	App - iPad
Piano Maestro	Combines rudimentary notation with backing tracks and “listens” to player.	Not customizable. Juvenile graphics have limited appeal for older students.	App - iPad
SuperScore app and software	Clean and easily resized notation with backing tracks.	Limited to pre-existing repertory.	App, tablet only
iRealPro app and software	Create custom backing tracks in adjustable styles, tempos, or keys.	Requires modest technical know-how.	App or computer software
Band in a Box software	The ultimate for creating realistic backing tracks short of composing.	Expensive	Computer software

If I had to pick just one from this list, it would be iRealPro, hands down. I require my students to own this app and I use it every day in my own practice. In fact, it’s the main reason I bought an iPad.



Audio Playback

Having chosen one or more devices, software, or apps to play backing tracks. The next step is to decide which audio output works best for your particular situation. Here are some options listed more or less by accessibility.

Audio output	Pros	Cons
Teacher provides live accompaniment.	Instantly available.	Teacher not available for home practice.
Smart phone or tablet with built-in speakers.	Readily available.	Not loud enough to compete with the volume of a piano.
Headphones or ear buds with one ear open to hear the piano.	Readily available.	Teacher cannot hear playback in lessons.
Ear buds playing backing tracks worn under headphones playing digital piano.	Good for solo practice.	Does not work with acoustic pianos.
Wired compact speaker connected to computer, tablet or smart phone.	Easy to setup.	More wires to contend with.
Wireless compact speaker connected to computer, tablet or smart phone.	Portable and convenient.	Requires modest technical know-how.
Playback device plugged into audio input of digital keyboard with built-in speakers.	Easy to mix backing tracks with piano	Some keyboards lack an audio input.
Old fashioned stereo tuner and speakers.	You may already own this equipment.	Requires adaptors for older inputs.
Small instrument amplifier.	Inexpensive option with big sound.	Requires adaptors from mini plugs to 1/4-inch jacks.
Large amplifier or PA with multiple inputs for mixing playback device with digital pianos.	Ideal for group lessons.	Requires modest technical know-how.

In closing, please don't feel like you have to have understood or test out all of the many options I've presented today. Like any other new teaching strategy you learn about in your professional development, pick just one option to try out as a small part of your teaching to see what works for you.

Until next time, enjoy your creative music-making journey,

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