

## 9 Suggestions for Improving Sequences

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When I evaluate students' sequences, I often find that the students could have profited by utilizing one or more of the suggestions listed below. These suggestions are designed to make the process of sequencing more efficient and more musical.

### **Suggestion #1: Be familiar with the music to be sequenced.**

A great deal of recording time and editing time can be saved by familiarizing yourself with the score and by slowly practicing each part before beginning to record. If possible, listen to a recorded version of the composition. Examine the frequency range, the dynamic range, and the timbral range of the score. Know where musical climaxes occur so that you will be able to adjust volume levels and sound combinations appropriately. Be aware of the articulation idiosyncrasies of each instrument you will be emulating. In other words, try to overcome the limitations of a keyboard and think like a violinist when recording a violin part; think like a clarinetist when recording a clarinet part.

### **Suggestion #2: Number the measures in the score.**

Using a score with all of the measures numbered will make it easy to locate specific measures for re-recording, for editing and for playback. Be sure to number repeated measures correctly. For example, if the first sixteen measures of a piece repeat, measure 1 will also be measure 17, measure 2 will also be measure 18, and so on.

### **Suggestion #3: Identify layered or doubled programs in your instruments in order to conserve voice allocations.**

Many of today's electronic instruments are programmed to produce thicker textures by using layered or doubled programs. In a layered or doubled program, two voices are used for each key played on the keyboard. This doubling technique produces a thicker texture, but it also halves the polyphonic resources of the instrument. For example, playing an eight-note chord using a doubled program would use 16 voices instead of eight voices.

By using doubled programs sparingly, you can increase the number of voices available for other sequencer tracks. On many instruments the only way to tell if a program is doubled is to go into program edit mode. You can make it easy to identify doubled programs by either adding an asterisk at the end of the names of doubled programs, or by putting the names of all doubled programs in upper case - for example, by changing the name "Layerpiano" to "LAYERPIANO".

### **Suggestion #4: Set the sequencer metronome at a comfortable tempo.**

If you can't play the music at the indicated tempo, choose a slower tempo for the recording process. For example, suppose that the tempo indication for a difficult melody is 120 *bpm* (*beats per minute*). If you feel more comfortable playing the melody at a metronome marking of 80 *bpm*, set the tempo indicator to 80 *bpm* and record the melody at this tempo. After you finish recording, change the tempo indicator to 120 *bpm*, and the sequencer will play back at the correct tempo.

### **Suggestion #5: If your sequencer doesn't have a multiple level "Undo" function, always save your work before editing.**

Some sequencers will only undo the most recent action performed. Always listen to any changes you make before you continue working. If you aren't satisfied with the change, you can restore the original data.

**Suggestion #6: When recording a punch-in, start playing along with the music before the punch-in point, and continue to play after the punch-out point.**

One of the audible signs of a punch-in is a sudden change in the phrasing of a musical line. Playing the part a little before the punch-in point and a little after the punch-out point will often make the punch-in less obvious by maintaining the flow of the musical line.

**Suggestion #7: Match the dynamics of the punch-in music with the rest of the musical line.**

Another audible sign of a punch-in is a sudden change in dynamics in the middle of a musical line. Be sure to match the dynamic level of the new musical material with the rest of the phrase.

**Suggestion #8: Use quantization correctly and sparingly.**

There are two points to consider before you use quantization. The first point to consider is that in quantizing a track, you might produce rhythms that sound unnatural or unmusical compared to unquantized parts of your music. It is important to understand that rhythmically perfect music is usually not a desired goal in musical performance. Sequences with every track quantized usually become rhythmically uninteresting; therefore, use quantization sparingly..

Second, quantization will work only if you have recorded your tracks by playing along with the sequencer's metronome. Quantizing a track that was not recorded with the metronome will produce unpredictable and, in most cases, disastrous musical results.

**Suggestion #9: Understand the difference between velocity and MIDI volume.**

It is important to understand the difference between controlling dynamics through velocity data and controlling dynamics through MIDI volume. When you lower the values of note velocities, in most cases you are lowering the volume level as well as making the tone quality darker. When you lower the MIDI volume, you are lowering only the volume level. This difference can be compared to a trumpet player who plays a melody very softly during a recording session, as opposed to a recording engineer who lowers the volume of a trumpet part after it has been recorded. When the trumpet player plays softly, the lower harmonics of the sound dominate, producing a darker tone quality. When the trumpet player plays loudly, the upper harmonics dominate, producing a brighter tone quality. Therefore, if the volume level of the recorded trumpet melody is lowered, the notes will be softer but the tone quality will not change. For this reason, the editing of dynamics through velocity values is usually used to control the dynamics of individual notes in a track; the editing of dynamics through MIDI volume is usually used to adjust the balance of one sequencer track with other tracks.