

## Chapter 7

# PRACTICAL SKILLS – AUDIO DRAMA AND MUSIC

### Introduction

This is the last of the four chapters on practical skills in the development and production of audio for distance and open learning. It looks at two main topics:

- Audio drama and simulation
- Recording and using music for educational audio

### Audio drama and simulation

Throughout this handbook, it has been argued that radio, audio cassettes and audio-vision can be used to provide distance and open learning students (both formal and non-formal) with a range of learning materials and experiences that are difficult or impossible to communicate using other media, and to which – without the use of audio – students would have very little chance of gaining access.

So far, in discussing such materials, we have concentrated mainly on the development and production of scripted talks, interviews and discussions, and on the combination of these and other techniques in documentary, feature and magazine formats. However, not all subjects will lend themselves to these types of audio treatment. And even when the techniques are appropriate in principle, it may not always be practically possible to use them. For instance:

- For social and cultural reasons, there may be some sensitive subjects (e.g. relating to religion, politics, family life or health) that people will be reluctant or unwilling to be interviewed about or to discuss openly and frankly in public.
- Some subjects, by their very nature, may not be directly accessible to the distance teacher or producer with a microphone – e.g. people or events in the past, or situations in an imagined or projected future.
- In some situations, it may be very difficult to capture in audio certain types of event or behaviour – e.g. particular kinds of

classroom interaction or inter-personal relationships, needed to illustrate a general principle or as raw material for student analysis.

- Often, for purely practical reasons (e.g. lack of resources or time), some subject matter may not be immediately accessible to the microphone and recorder – e.g. subjects involving people and situations in places which are distant and practically inaccessible.

In all these circumstances, the techniques of audio drama and simulation offer an alternative approach, which can be used to reconstruct otherwise inaccessible past and present realities. In this way, audio drama can be used effectively for the teaching of knowledge and skills in a wide range of subjects. In addition, dramatisation can also be used to create fictional accounts, set in realistic contexts, which can serve as a stimulus to discussion and debate, and a vehicle for the exploration of attitudes and value systems.

Perhaps most important, students generally enjoy listening to good audio drama. It is a highly interactive medium. It attracts their interest, holds their attention and engages their imagination. Audio drama and simulation are therefore extremely useful tools for distance and open learning. However, like any other format, audio drama will only work well if it is carefully crafted and professionally produced.

## **Some essential characteristics**

To be effective in distance and open learning, audio drama needs to have the following main ingredients:

- A strong theme: It needs to deal with questions and issues that are clearly relevant and important to the subject the students are studying
- A credible situation: Audio drama needs to be set in realistic and believable contexts, with which the students are familiar and can identify
- Compelling characters: The characters in the drama need to be clearly and convincingly drawn, with well defined and credible personalities
- A good story-line (narrative, plot): The characters need to be involved in a series of actions and events, which are relevant to your main theme and will hold the interest and attention of your audience

Audio drama tends to work best:

- If it is clearly structured – e.g. in a series of linked ‘scenes’, each located in a particular setting and each carrying the story-line forward
- If it involves some sort of conflict (e.g. of people or ideas), which is first developed, creating a sense of tension and suspense, and then resolved
- If the resolution is not immediately obvious and predictable, but contains an element of surprise, highlighting and reinforcing the main theme of the drama

## **Developing and producing audio drama**

As a starting point, you need to be clear about why you are using audio drama.

- What are your aims and objectives?
- What sort of learning experience do you want to offer to the students?
- What do you want them to do with the dramatic material?
- What do you expect them to learn from the drama?

Once you are clear about why you are using audio drama, then (as with other audio forms) there is an identifiable series of stages that you need to go through in developing it.

### **Establishing the theme**

The first thing to do is to establish the basic theme of your drama. What is it essentially about? What is the central question or issue it’s dealing with? It’s important that you’re clear about your basic theme and that you keep it firmly in mind as you develop the drama.

### **Providing the setting**

Depending on the theme, you need to locate your drama in a particular situation or context.

Where will the action take place? Is it rural or urban? What sort of place is it? Can you imagine it? Can you see it in your mind’s eye? Within this general environment, what specific locations will you need to use – home, school, government office, clinic, factory, market place? Can you imagine and describe these places?

You may find it useful to make notes on the locations you will use. The clearer the picture you have in your mind, the more realistic the setting for your drama will be. Later, when you come to brief a dramatist or write the dialogue yourself, all of these details will become important. They will determine where people meet, what they do, how they talk to each other, what their major concerns are. They will provide a realistic and convincing setting within which the action takes place.

## **Identifying the main characters**

Once you have established the setting, you need to identify or create the main characters who will bring it to life. For most drama, you will not need more than four or five major characters. But it is important that they are clearly and convincingly drawn. For your drama to work well, your audience needs to believe in the characters, to be able to imagine them as real people.

If you are using drama or simulation to reconstruct real events or situations, then your main characters will be fairly obvious and self-selecting. However, if your purpose is to create a fictional drama – e.g. to explore a sensitive social issue or examine a major socio-economic theme – you will need to be more imaginative in identifying your characters. Here, the key question will be – What range of characters do I need to explore this theme?

### **An illustration from Ghana**

The type of thinking needed for developing characters is illustrated by a discussion of possible characters for an audio drama series for a village-based non-formal education project in Ghana. (The extract is taken from a draft audio manual for the Ghana Functional Literacy Project in the early 1990s.)

In drama for education and development, it is often useful to have some characters who represent forward-looking and progressive ideas, while others reflect a more conservative and traditional outlook. In this way, the characters themselves present the potential for conflict of ideas, attitudes and values, which lies at the heart of good drama.

For instance, you might have a young couple with small children who favour modernising ideas and are keen to bring about change in the village; and their

parents, parents-in-law or neighbours who argue that traditional ways are best, and are resistant to social and economic change. The interaction between these two groups can offer an interesting way of exploring a wide range of development issues.

You may also find it useful to introduce a 'comic' character – perhaps an old man or woman, who has a good sense of humour, wide experience of the world and is generally regarded with affection and respect. In this way you can bring wit and wisdom into your drama, which the audience will appreciate and enjoy. You can also use this character in the resolution of the conflict. He or she can be acceptable to both sides, explaining each to the other, and coming up with constructive solutions.

In addition, you will probably need a number of minor characters, perhaps from outside the village, who can introduce new ideas and innovations – for example, a nurse, a teacher, a government official or extension worker. They can start the action of the drama, provide specialist information and advice, and suggest a way forward once the conflicts have been resolved.

This example is not intended as a model for you to follow; but rather as an indication of the type of thought-process you need to go through to establish the central characters through which you can explore a particular theme. Different themes will require different settings and different sets of characters. The important thing is to be clear about what you want to say; and to create settings and characters to enable you to say it effectively.

## **Developing the story-line**

Now you can start thinking about the 'action' of the drama.

- What is going to happen to the characters you have identified or created?
- What are they going to say and do?
- How are they going to interact with each other and with the plot?
- What is the source of conflict, through which you will explore the main theme?
- How will this give rise to the tension that will hold the interest of your students?

- How will the conflict be developed and resolved?
- How will the situation have changed by the end of the drama?

If you are reconstructing real events in the past or present, your story-line will largely be given. Your main task will be to research the event(s) and translate them into a narrative form that will fit the timeframe available. This will often involve difficult choices and decisions about what to include and what to exclude. These questions have to be resolved so that you convey the essential elements of the story in the time available to you.

Developing fictional drama is more difficult and demanding. Thinking up a good story-line – often called the ‘narrative’ or ‘plot’ – is a creative act, for which there is no simple formula.

If you can, it’s often a good idea to work with an experienced audio dramatist. You should be able to contact such a person through your local or national radio station. Explain the audience you are aiming at, the main theme you want to explore, and suggest the sort of setting and characters that you think might be appropriate. A good dramatist should be able to respond with a suitable story-line, which will interest and involve your audience.

However, if you do not have access to an experienced drama writer – or if you cannot afford to hire one – the following general suggestions may be useful:

- First, you need to establish the setting and introduce the main characters in their normal situation.
- Next, introduce the problem, issue or event that gives rise to the conflict (of people or ideas) through which you are going to explore your main theme.
- Then develop this conflict – and the tensions to which it gives rise – so that you can explore the main aspects of your theme. Here you can also introduce an element of suspense; so that your audience will begin to wonder what will happen next and start thinking about possible outcomes of the situation.
- Finally, you move towards the resolution of the conflict. Sometimes, however, you may decide to leave the conflict unresolved, so that the students have to work out a resolution for themselves. In this way, you can encourage students to think about the issues involved, and to come to their own independent conclusions.

This is of course a rather theoretical way of thinking about audio drama. In practice, what you are doing is developing a good story-line, which your students will (hopefully) find interesting, involving and

instructive, which will make them better informed and also help them think more deeply and critically about the main theme.

At this stage, some people find it useful to write out the story-line as though it were a short story, before going on to develop the structure of the narrative in more audio-dramatic terms. Whether or not you find this useful, you will only discover through experiment and experience.

## **Structuring the narrative**

Once you have developed the story-line, the next stage is to structure it in terms of a number of 'scenes'. Each scene should be set in a particular location, at a particular time, and should represent a specific step forward in the development of the narrative. These scenes can either flow directly from one to the next; or they can be linked by a 'narrator'. The narrator can tell the listener what has happened between scenes, and can also provide descriptive scene-setting and commentary on the action of the drama.

It is also possible to combine the role of narrator with that of the audio tutor. In this way, in addition to introducing and linking the various scenes, the narrator/audio tutor can also:

- Indicate the main purposes of listening to the drama
- Draw out and highlight the key questions it raises
- Recapitulate and reinforce the main theme and teaching points of the drama
- Remind students of follow-up activities linked to the dramatised material

If you decide **not** to have a linking narrator or narrator/audio tutor – i.e. to let the scenes flow from one to the next – then the dialogue at the beginning of each scene, supported by appropriate sound effects (FX), needs to establish the time and place of the scene. Also, at the end of each scene, you can signal the time and place of the next scene.

For instance, at the end of a scene, a character might say:

"Good. It's agreed then. We'll meet on Thursday morning at the market. I'll see you there. And be careful not to be late."

A second character replies:

"OK. I'll see you on Thursday. And don't worry, I'll be there on time."

The scene fades. The next scene fades up on the sound effects of a market. The same two characters greet each other. The audience knows that time has passed. It is now Thursday morning, and the scene has changed to the local market.

Alternatively, you might decide to use a narrator. At the end of the first scene, the narrator might say:

“At the end of the meeting, the two men agreed that they would meet again two days later, on Thursday morning, at the local market. They both arrive at the market in good time.”

Fade up the market sound effects; the two men greet each other; and the audience knows that time and place have changed.

The narrator is particularly useful in linking scenes when the story-line is fairly complex and you want the drama to be fairly short. The narrator can usually summarise a complicated series of events more quickly and economically than can be done through dialogue – which allows you to focus your dramatic scenes on the key episodes of the story.

However, your decision on whether or not to use a narrator may also depend on the tradition of drama and story-telling in the culture of your audience. Also, for audiences which are unfamiliar with the conventions of audio drama, the use of the narrator may make the story-line easier to follow. And as suggested earlier, the narrator can also be used to bring out the main theme and messages of the drama and make explicit the questions it is posing to the audience.

## **Scripted versus improvised drama**

The main advantage of scripted drama is that it gives you a high level of control over the detailed content and duration of the audio drama. It also allows you to plan ahead more effectively – e.g. in terms of rehearsals, technical facilities, sound effects, etc.

However, for scripted drama to work well, it requires not only skilled audio-dramatic writing, but also the services of talented and experienced actors, preferably with experience of working in radio or audio. Unfortunately, these skills are not always readily available or affordable to distance education course teams and producers.

Unscripted or improvised audio drama and simulations have the advantage of relying less on professional writing and acting skills, and more on the improvising talents of actors, and the skills of audio producers in managing and directing them. The producer loses some degree of control over the detailed content of the drama; but often

gains in terms of the liveliness, spontaneity and authenticity of the dramatic performance.

If you are working with literate actors, the compromise of semi-scripted drama often works well. This involves the preparation of a basic script outline; but gives the actors a good deal of freedom to improvise around it. In this way, you can retain a good deal of control over the content and structure of the drama, but at the same time take advantage of the freshness and credibility of skilled improvisation.

Usually, your decision will depend on the resources and skills to which you have access. If you have good radio drama writers and actors – and you can afford to pay them – then you will probably go for scripted drama. If you don't have access to professional dramatists, and if most of your local acting talent is semi- or non-literate, then it would probably be best to go for unscripted or semi-scripted improvised drama. Again, your decision may also depend on local cultural traditions, and on the approach to audio drama adopted by your local radio station.

### **Scripted audio drama**

It is difficult in a brief set of notes to outline the skills needed by a good audio dramatist. Certainly, a lively imagination, a good storytelling sense and an appreciation of the medium are important. But perhaps most important are a keen ear for language and dialogue and an ability to use it effectively.

Radio/audio has been called a 'blind medium' and the 'medium of the imagination'. Radio drama has been called the 'theatre of the mind'. Audio drama relies for its effect on the use of words and on the economic use of sounds; and also on the use of silence, which gives context and meaning to words and sounds. Words, sounds and silence together have to create pictures in the mind and imagination of the listener.

All of this has to be achieved through the words which the writer puts into the mouths of his or her characters. The words – with some support from sound effects – must establish locations, convey personality, bring to life relationships, carry forward dramatic action, and do so with authenticity and economy. They must provide the actors with the means to attract and hold an audience; to engage and involve them in the action of the drama; and to evoke a thoughtful and reflective response to the theme the drama is exploring.

In short, writing good audio drama is not an easy task. It requires a creative talent, a high level of skill and a good deal of practice. However, when it is done well, and when it is backed up by skilled acting and technical support, it can create compelling listening

experiences and unique learning opportunities for formal and non-formal distance and open learning students.

### **Improvised audio drama**

Successful improvisation in audio drama depends on two main factors:

- Careful and detailed planning by the producer
- The creation of a good working relationship between the producer and the actors, and between the actors themselves

The settings, characters and narrative structure for improvisation need to be planned just as carefully as for scripted drama. But the producer also needs to be able to communicate these plans effectively to the actors. The actors need to develop a clear sense of the settings in which the drama takes place. They need to have a real understanding of the characters they are playing and the relationships between them. They also need to be aware of the structure of the drama and the unfolding of the action. Perhaps most important, the producer has to convey to the actors an understanding and appreciation of the underlying theme of the drama.

All of this requires close working relationships, characterised by mutual respect and trust, between the producer and the actors, and between the actors themselves. For this reason, many producers working on improvised drama like to build up around themselves a regular group of talented and experienced actors. The more they work together, the closer the working relationship becomes. In this way, the producer and the actors develop a sensitive and intuitive grasp for each other's work, which enables them to produce a high standard of professional performance.

### **Preparing the script**

The drama script follows most of the conventions of normal script layout (see Chapters 4 and 6) – double-spacing, wide margins, using one side of good quality paper, numbering pages, etc. For drama, you will probably find the following additional conventions useful:

- Add a 'cover page' to the script, containing the following information:
  - the institution or project and course for which the script is being recorded
  - The title of the drama, and the names of the author, producer and technician(s)
  - A list of characters and (if known) the names of the actors playing them

- A list of scenes, and the sound effects (FX) that will be needed for each
- Details of any music that will be required for the production
- Day, date, time and location/studio for rehearsal and recording
- Scenes should be numbered, given a specific location and start on a new page
- The names of characters should be typed or written in full in the margin using CAPITALS
- The words that actors **say** should be typed or written in normal upper- and lower-case letters
- All other information – e.g. directions to the actors or technician(s), details of sound effects (FX), music etc. – should be in CAPITALS, UNDERLINED, AND (IN BRACKETS). This makes it easy for actors to distinguish their lines from technical directions.
- For ease of reference, in addition to numbering the pages of the script, actors' speeches should be numbered on each page – with the numbers starting again from '1' on each page. This makes it possible for producers and actors to identify individual speeches clearly and economically – e.g. 'Let's start again from page 16, speech 4'.

## Read-through, rehearsal and recording

Once the script is ready, the next stage is to have what is usually called a 'read-through' – where the producer sits with the actors while they read through their parts. This gives the actors a chance to familiarise themselves with the characters and the plot. It also gives the producer an opportunity to explain the main theme and ideas underlying the drama, to shape the characterisation as it is emerging, and also to deal with any questions of interpretation that may arise. This stage usually takes place **outside** the studio, in order to save studio time.

There are then two main ways in which you can handle rehearsal and recording:

- If the drama is fairly short and not too complicated, you can rehearse the whole piece from beginning to end, and then go on to record it.
- If the drama is longer and/or more complex, it usually makes sense to rehearse and record scene-by-scene. This is usually called the 'rehearse-record' method. First, rehearse a scene, then record it; then go on to the next scene, rehearse and record; and so on to the end of the drama.

For improvised or semi-improvised drama, you can follow the same general pattern. But instead of the 'read-through', you will normally have a briefing session, in which the producer goes through the drama with the actors, outlining the characters and the plot, and agreeing on how the improvisation will be handled.

Depending on the length and complexity of the drama, you can decide whether to rehearse and record the piece as a whole or scene-by-scene. Rehearsals are very important in improvisation – especially to get the duration of the drama right. But as a general rule, it is a good idea to **record** the initial rehearsal, since the first run-through often has a lively and fresh quality which the actors may not be able to recapture when they go through it a second time.

## **Working with actors and technicians**

It was suggested earlier that producers need to develop a close working relationship with actors and technicians. The point was made specifically in relation to improvised drama; but it applies equally to scripted drama. In both cases, the producer's task is to manage the available resources (script, actors, technical facilities) in such a way that the drama achieves its educational objectives – i.e. provides the students with the intended learning experience. To do so, it's important for the producer:

- To have a clear idea of what he or she is trying to achieve through the drama
- To communicate this effectively to actors and technicians, and to create a shared understanding of how it will be achieved
- To develop this consensus during the read-through, and to sustain it through the rehearsal and recording, by providing leadership, direction, professional support and supervision

What this means in practical terms is that:

- Scripts should be circulated to actors and technicians well in advance of the recording session, so that they have an adequate opportunity to prepare themselves.
- Producers also need to prepare themselves – by studying the text, paying careful attention to casting, and clarifying their ideas about what they want to achieve through the drama and how they aim to achieve it.
- In the course of the read-through and rehearsal, producers need to be open to ideas and suggestions from the cast and technicians. They should encourage discussion and debate. But at the same time, once the various views have been discussed, they must be willing and able to take decisions.

- As a general rule, producers should tell technicians what type of sound they want, rather than how (in technical terms) to achieve it.
- Similarly, actors should be helped to understand the characters they are portraying, rather than be asked to copy and mimic a voice or interpretation offered by the producer.
- In providing advice and guidance to actors and technicians, critical comments are more likely to be accepted and responded to, if they are presented constructively and preceded by positive feedback and encouragement. Appreciation first; then constructive critical comment.
- In drama, as in other areas of production, it is important to establish and maintain an atmosphere of mutual professional respect and collaboration. But at the same time, the producer must also be willing and able to take on the responsibility of directing and managing the enterprise – a task which often requires a high level of tact, sensitivity and inter-personal management skills.

## **Using sound effects**

This is an area in which many new producers seem to have problems. They tend to over-use sound effects. They use them in too literal a way, trying to create a 'realistic' sound context for dramatic action. The result is often over-intrusive, distracting the listener's attention from the words and dialogue which carry the drama forward.

In fact, sound effects need to be used very sparingly. They are essentially sound-symbols, which are intended to suggest a particular sound context, rather than attempt to reconstruct it literally. Thus, bird-song or animal sounds suggest the countryside; traffic noise implies a town or city; a typewriter, computer keyboard or the ringing of a telephone suggest an office – and so on.

Sound effects are rarely unambiguous. Usually they need to be interpreted and reinforced by dialogue or narration. Thus, the sound of running water might mean a mountain stream or a kitchen tap; the sound of chattering voices might mean a market or a public meeting. The exact meaning of the sound-symbol becomes apparent from the dialogue or narration.

Once the words and sounds have been tied together, the meaning becomes clear. And at that point, the listener's imagination takes over and completes the sound-picture. The symbolic sound, interpreted by the words, allows the listeners to imagine the scene – to create their own image of the context within which the dramatic events are taking place.

Therefore, in practical terms:

- Use sound effects sparingly. Don't try to create literal soundscapes; but rather suggest the context symbolically.
- Always interpret and reinforce sound effects in the text of the drama – either through a reference in the dialogue or in the narration.
- Once the context has been established, the sound effects can usually be faded down to a lower level without loss of atmosphere, allowing the listeners to concentrate on the dialogue and action of the drama.
- Don't rely exclusively on readily available sound effects if they are not suitable. Record your own sound effects, or use 'spot effects' – i.e. sounds created in the studio or on location during recording;
- Be creative and imaginative in your use of sound effects, but don't be self-indulgent. And above all, be sparing – use the minimum amount of sound you need to stimulate the listeners' imagination.

## **Studio versus location recording**

There are a number of advantages in using a studio for drama recording:

- The studio acoustic is usually free from unwanted background noise.
- You have the services of one or more experienced audio technician(s).
- You can easily introduce pre-recorded sound effects (FX) and music into the drama.
- You can monitor the quality of the final recording in good listening conditions.
- You can record in any weather conditions – hot and humid, wet and windy.

The main disadvantage is that in some studios, particularly if they are not specifically designed for audio drama, it is difficult to create a convincing range of indoor and outdoor acoustics.

For this reason, some producers prefer to record their drama on location, using portable recording equipment. Provided there is not too much **unwanted** background noise – e.g. heavy traffic or frequent jet planes in a rural scene – you can use the natural sounds of the environment to enhance the sense of reality in your audio drama and to add to its authenticity.

However, recording good quality drama on location requires a high level of technical skill and confidence in the use of the portable equipment. For this reason, make sure that your technical staff are happy to undertake drama recording on location. And also check out the locations in advance (with your technicians) to make certain that they are suitable for your recordings – e.g. in terms of appropriate acoustics, level of background noise, agreement from local people/authorities, etc.

And finally, a word of warning: weather conditions can create major problems for location recording. It is very difficult to record good audio drama in outdoor locations when the weather is wet and windy. And actors do not give of their best when the sun is hot and there is too little shade!

Nevertheless, if the conditions are right, and the technicians are competent, location recording of audio drama can be very effective. In addition, it is always possible to combine location and studio recording. For instance, you can record some scenes on location and others in the studio. You can then put the final programme together in the studio – combining the pre-recorded scenes, adding sound effects and music as required, and incorporating the narrator/audio tutor's voice to complete the presentation.

### **An example from Tanzania**

In the HESAWA project in the Lake Regions of western Tanzania (see Chapter 1) audio drama was used as stimulus material for a village-based water and health education programme.

Four series of audio cassette programmes were produced. Each consisted of ten half-hour drama episodes, with tutorial linking and commentary. The series dealt with subjects such as digging wells, providing latrines, maternal and child health.

The audio and supporting print materials were produced in four-week workshops. The audio drama was semi-scripted. The script outlines were prepared by workshop participants – local health, water, education and community development officers – who also acted in the dramas.

Because no studio was available, all the drama was recorded on location, using a Uher open-reel portable

recorder and an omni-directional microphone with a boom stand. Indoor scenes (clinic, office, meeting hall) were recorded in a local house. Outdoor scenes (farm, market, well) were recorded in the garden, where trees provided shade.

Spot effects were produced by the participants. For instance, the sounds of people drawing water from the well were produced using plastic buckets and a large plastic bath full of water. The sound of a wheelbarrow carrying stones was produced by a wheelbarrow carrying stones.

The programmes were edited (by cutting) on the Uher. Cassette copies were made by a local music store. They were listened to by about 200 village study groups, who dug wells, planted vegetable gardens, built latrines and weighed babies – and seemed to enjoy the programmes.

## **Post-production editing**

In an ideal world, your final script should produce a piece of drama that is of exactly the right length for the time-slot available. However, the world is seldom ideal and it is very difficult to predict the final duration accurately. This is generally true for scripted drama. It is even more true if the drama is improvised. For this reason, post-production editing will often be necessary to reduce the drama to the required length. However, this process also gives you an opportunity to tidy-up and polish the final production through the judicious use of fine-editing.

### **A checklist on audio drama**

- Why do you want to use drama? What do you want to achieve through it?
- What will be the main theme of the drama? What is it essentially about?
- Where will the drama take place? Who are the main characters?
- What will happen in the drama? What is the story-line? How will you structure it?
- What are the sources of conflict and tension? How will it be resolved?

- Will the drama be scripted or improvised?
- If scripted, who will write the script?
- Do you have access to experienced audio drama writers and actors?
- If unscripted, who will prepare the outline? Who will brief and direct the actors?
- Will the drama be recorded in a studio or on location?
- What facilities will you need? Are they available? Can they be obtained?

## **Using music in educational audio**

As we discussed in Chapter 2, there are several ways in which you can use music in audio materials for distance and open learning:

- As a 'signature tune' – to identify and mark the beginning and end of a radio or audio cassette presentation
- As a 'marker' – to indicate and reinforce the structure of a radio or audio cassette programme, to show that you are moving from one section to the next
- As a 'signal' to your students – e.g. to stop the cassette to do an exercise or activity
- As a way of reinforcing the main content of a programme – e.g. using a song to remind listeners of the main message(s) of a non-formal distance education programme
- As a way of creating atmosphere or increasing the impact of educational audio, similar to the use of incidental music in theatre and films

In addition, of course, music will form an integral part of audio materials for courses on specifically musical and cultural themes – usually for purposes of illustration, demonstration and analysis.

### **Types of music**

We can think of music in audio for distance and open learning as being of two main types – instrumental and vocal.

### **Instrumental music**

This is widely used for signature tunes; for marking the structure of programmes; for signaling student activity; and for adding to the emotional impact and appeal of feature and dramatic materials.

When choosing instrumental music, you should bear in mind:

- Its social and cultural appropriateness and its likely appeal to the audience
- Its suitability to the subject matter and its role in the programme
- Its capacity to be smoothly faded in and out, and be held under speech

### **Vocal music**

This is generally less useful for signature tunes, indicating structure, signaling student activity, and enhancing the impact of audio material. This is because the words that are being sung can distract from the content of the programme.

However, vocal music can play a very positive role – particularly in non-formal education – in capturing and communicating the essential message(s) of an audio programme – and doing so in a memorable and educationally effective way.

Vocal music generally has to be played for longer in programmes than instrumental music, since it usually needs more time to establish and convey its message. Also, as a general rule, vocal music does not usually lend itself well to being faded and held under speech. There tends to be a tension between the words that are being sung and those that are being spoken, which the listeners usually find disturbing and distracting. If vocal music is used for a signature tune, it should normally be faded after the words have finished.

Whatever type of music you decide to use, provided it's used well, it is likely to add to the tone and texture of your audio materials, to their attractiveness and appeal to the audience, and to the enjoyment and satisfaction which your students are likely to derive from the material.

### **Sources of music**

We can divide the sources of music used for audio into two main types:

- Existing pre-recorded music, usually commercially available
- Music recorded specially for a particular audio programme or series

### **Commercial music**

Clearly this is the easiest and most convenient to use. However, there are some drawbacks in using commercially available music on CDs or cassettes:

- First, it may be difficult to find music which exactly fits the subject matter of your programme and/or the purposes for which you want to use it.
- Secondly, even if you can find suitable commercial music, its use may involve substantial copyright and performing rights payments. (Exactly what this involves will depend on the legal situation in your own country. But it is important that producers do not expose themselves and their institutions to legal action in this area.)

### **Specially commissioned and recorded music**

As an alternative to using commercial CDs and music cassettes, it is also possible for producers to commission and record music for their programmes. Musicians – both instrumentalists and singers – should be commissioned, contracted, briefed, rehearsed and produced in a similar way to scriptwriters and other contributors to audio material.

The producer's role includes the following main tasks:

- To decide what style of music is required and what role it will play in the programme
- To communicate this information clearly and effectively to the musicians
- To contract them to perform a specified amount of music on a particular day
- To arrange for studio or location recording and to liaise with technical staff
- To direct and manage the recording session and be responsible for quality
- To select and edit the music that will be used in the audio programme(s)

Some general suggestions on the practical techniques involved in recording music, both in studios and on location, are included below.

### **Recording music for audio**

Music recording is a specialist area, the details of which are beyond the scope of this handbook - and beyond the knowledge of the author. What is offered here is a brief and general introduction to the subject. The aim is to help distance educators and producers

appreciate some of the basic questions involved in music recording, and also to assist them in liaising with the technical staff on whose knowledge, skills and experience they will need to draw.

The basic questions that need to be asked are the following:

- Whether to record in a studio or on location
- What type of recording equipment and facilities to use
- How to use the equipment to get a good quality recording
- How to organise and manage the recording session most effectively

## **Studio recording**

Using a studio for recording music has a number of obvious advantages:

- The studio will normally be isolated from unwanted outside noise and interference.
- It will usually offer a range of microphones, and sophisticated mixing, balancing, equalisation (sound modification), recording and monitoring facilities.
- The studio will also generally provide the services of one or more knowledgeable, skilled and experienced audio technicians.
- For the musicians, coming into a studio can also create a sense of occasion, which may well be reflected in the quality of the musicians' performance and music making.

However, there is one possible disadvantage of studio recording that producers need to be aware of. Many audio studios, particularly in educational institutions, are intended primarily for recording speech. They are therefore designed to have a fairly 'dead' acoustic – i.e. an acoustic with a short reverberation time. This is not necessarily the best acoustic in which to record music. Music recording generally benefits from a longer (though not too long!) reverberation time – i.e. a more 'live' acoustic.

In most modern studios, it should be possible to overcome this problem by using 'artificial' or electronic reverberation. This can be introduced from the mixing desk and will add reverberation to the sound emerging from the studio. However, if this facility is not available (e.g. in an older or less well equipped studio), there may be a case for moving out of the studio and recording in a location with suitably 'live' acoustics – e.g. in a larger bare room with plenty of flat sound-reflecting surfaces.

It was suggested above that one of the advantages of the recording studio is the technical sophistication of the equipment and facilities it offers – i.e. the capacity to mix, modify and balance sounds from a number of different sources. This capacity makes possible three basic ways of recording music:

- **Ensemble recording:** You can record a group of instrumentalists and/or singers as a whole ('ensemble'), using one or more microphones, and achieving an appropriate 'balance' between the different sounds by adjusting the position of the various instruments/singers in relation to the microphone(s); or to put it another way, by adjusting the position of the microphone in relation to the instruments/singers.
- **Differentiated recording:** Alternatively, you can place individual instruments/singers (or groups of instruments/singers) on particular microphones (ideally separated from each other by some sort of partition), each connected to a specific 'channel' on the mixing desk, which allows you to achieve a suitable 'balance' by adjusting the 'level' and 'equalisation' on each of the channels.
- **Multi-track recording:** If your studio is equipped with multi-track recording equipment, it is possible to record individual instruments and/or voices on different 'tracks'. This allows you to record each sound source separately; and to compile your final version (or 'mix') of the music by combining the various tracks, each of which can be individually modified and controlled on a particular 'channel' of the audio mixing desk.

The decision on which of these three methods to use for studio-based music recording will depend on the type of music you are recording and the technical facilities available to you. This is a decision on which you should take the advice of experienced technicians. These technicians should also take responsibility for the setting up of the studio, the arrangement of the musicians and the choice and positioning of microphones.

But whichever approach is adopted, it is still the responsibility of the producer to manage the recording session. As with drama or any other audio production, this will normally involve:

- A period for setting up and arranging the studio – a task which, as indicated above, will usually be delegated to the technical staff
- A period for checking sound levels, balance and equalisation – again, mainly a task for the technicians, but the producer needs to be satisfied that the quality of the sound is acceptable
- A period of warm-up and rehearsal – which, as suggested earlier for improvised drama, should normally be recorded, since the first performance will sometimes be the best

- A period for the recording itself – since you will not know until you have done the final recording whether or not it represents an improvement on the earlier rehearsal version
- A period for post-production editing – though be warned, whereas ‘rough’ editing of music is straightforward, ‘fine’ editing is generally more difficult than for speech – therefore, as far as possible, aim to record complete music items, rather than planning to put them together following the session

In most music recording sessions, several recordings (‘takes’) of each piece of music are made and the best version is selected for use in the programme. Sometimes, it will be immediately clear during the recording which version is the best. However, on occasions, this will not be self-evident; and it is therefore important to allocate time for listening to the different versions – perhaps with colleagues – before making a final judgement on which one to use.

## **Location recording**

Although studio-based music recording has a number of advantages, there will also be occasions when you want to record on location. This may be to take advantage of a particularly good acoustic; or to add variety to the sound texture of your programmes; or for purely practical reasons – e.g. you don’t have access to, or simply can’t afford, studio facilities.

In addition, for non-formal programmes, you may want to use location recording – of both speech and music – as a way of involving your listeners in the process of programme making. Location recording can both promote and provide opportunities for participation in non-formal education programmes.

## **Choosing a good acoustic**

The starting point for successful location recording of music – apart from good musicians – is to find a good acoustic. This can be indoors or outdoors: but clearly it should be in a place without too much unwanted background noise.

If you are working indoors, look for a room that has enough space and a fairly ‘live’ acoustic – e.g. a classroom or hall. But be careful not to choose somewhere that is too reverberant.

If you are recording in the open air, try to position your musicians with a hard reflective surface behind them – e.g. on a veranda or against a wall. This will act as a ‘sounding-board’ and usually produces a better result.

### **Recording equipment**

It is possible to obtain most of the equipment and facilities available in a studio in portable form for location recording. If you have access to such equipment, then you can mix, modify and balance sound on location very much as you would in the studio.

However, good quality equipment of this kind tends to be expensive and is not usually available in educational institutions. You are more likely to find yourself on location with a portable recorder (open-reel or cassette) and a single microphone. It is therefore on this situation that we concentrate.

- In general, 'cardioid' microphones (see Chapter 5) will give you better results than 'omni-directional' microphones. This is because they will cut out more of the unwanted background noise and focus the recording more directly on the music.
- You will also find it useful to have a tall microphone stand, ideally with an extending arm. This will give you much more flexibility in terms of positioning the microphone in relation to the musicians.
- If you are using a cassette recorder equipped with a Dolby NR (Noise Reduction) system, it is usually best to leave this control in the 'off' position when recording music. Although Dolby NR is very useful for speech recording, it tends to remove too many of the high frequencies for good music recording.
- A good quality pair of headphones are essential for location recording. They will allow you to monitor the sound as you record it and as it will be heard by listeners.

### **Positioning the microphone**

As a general rule, avoid placing your microphone too close to the musical sounds you are recording. Here are some general guidelines:

- If you are recording a single voice or instrumentalist, the microphone should usually be located about two to three feet (60-90 cms) from the source of the sound.
- For a medium-sized group – say four to six singers and/or instrumentalists – you should group them together – e.g. in a half-circle – and move the microphone back to a distance of perhaps six to ten feet (2-3 m).
- With larger groups – e.g. perhaps ten to 20 singers and/or musicians – you should move the microphone further back to say between ten and 15 feet (about 3-5 m).
- Please note, however, that these distances are intended only as a rough guide. The most important thing is to do a test recording with the musicians, and to experiment with the microphone position to see where you get the best results.

### **Balancing sounds**

Getting the balance right in music recording is very important – e.g. the balance between a soloist and a group of singers and/or instrumentalists, or between the different instruments within a musical group.

- When recording a soloist with an accompanying group of singers or instruments, if you only have one microphone, it usually makes sense to position this for the soloist – i.e. at a distance of two to three feet (60-90 cms) – and to arrange the other performers behind the soloist and further away – e.g. six to ten feet (2-3 m) for a medium-sized group, ten to 15 feet (3-5 m) for a larger group.
- For recording individual singers who are accompanying themselves on an instrument, it is usually best to position the microphone for the singer's voice rather than for the instrument.
- If you are recording fairly close to a small group of instruments in which one seems to dominate, move the microphone towards the weaker instruments, as you would for the weaker voice in an interview or discussion.
- But again, these are only guidelines. What is important is that you get to know your equipment and its capabilities. Try it out in different situations and listen carefully and critically to the results. In this way, you will gradually build up a repertoire of responses to a wide range of different recording situations. As a result, you will increase your chances of getting a good recording every time.

**A checklist on music**

- What uses of music are you likely to make?
- What type of music will you use? And for what purposes?
- Will you be using commercially produced music?
- If so, what is the situation regarding copyright/performing rights in your country?
- Are you planning to record any of your own music?
- If so, will you record it in a studio or on location?
- Do you have access to a studio suitable for recording music?
- Do you have access to location recording facilities and technical support?

So far, we have concentrated on the theory and practice of planning, development and production of audio materials for distance and open learning. In the next two chapters, we turn to the questions of how these materials are used and how we can measure their effectiveness.