



The
Company of
Fifers & Drummers

Guide for Remote Collaboration

2020 COVID-19 Response

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Introduction – The Need for Remote Collaboration

With Social Distancing becoming public policy for the foreseeable future we need effective mechanisms to bring fife and drum corps together socially, facilitate the advancement of their musical goals, retain skills, and to provide positive activities for adults and kids without the ability to physically gather. Many groups are evaluating video conferencing options to support lessons and rehearsals, however there are a range of solutions that can support these goals.

While this document was prompted by the COVID-19 outbreak the principles can be applied to any scenario where the full group cannot gather (e.g. weather, remote members, etc.).

The tools available are imperfect for our purpose, but with some flexibility on our part can see us through until a time when we can be together again in person. The following guide has been assembled from various sources to assist members of our community to get started.

If you or your group finds innovative uses or solutions to some of the limitations, please let us know and we will update this guide.

Solutions generally fall into one of two categories:

- Synchronous Solutions
 - Two or more parties are connected by technology at the same time.
 - For example, a telephone call, a class in school, and an online meeting are all examples of synchronous communication
 - Other examples could include video conferencing
- Asynchronous Solutions
 - One party creates content, and other parties interact with that content independently when they choose
 - For example, a letter or a library is an example of an asynchronous communication

We will go through each so that you understand how they can each be used to meet your group's objective.

Synchronous Solutions – Web Video Conferencing

When real-time communication is needed, the simplest solution is to leverage one of the many video conferencing applications available on the market.

There are quite a few video conferencing platforms available. All have some level of merit and offer similar features.

- High quality video and audio conferencing
- Dial-in numbers and VOIP sound
- Calendar integration
- Chat capability
- Free and Paid versions with escalating features based on subscription level



Recommended Platform – Zoom

The Company of Fifers & Drummers has selected Zoom in March, 2020 as its recommended platform based on the following unique features (at the time of this publication) that we feel specifically benefit fife and drum organizations:

- Simple user interface
- “Raise hand” capability to facilitate orderly discussions if desired
- Polling can be turned on to enable voting during corps meetings
- Breakout rooms – the ability to divide a group into multiple rooms and bring them back together
- Audio configurations that allow music to be heard with higher quality – this application lets you turn off compression and noise reduction features that are designed to improve business user experience but cause issues with music

The instructions contained in this guide are centered around the Zoom interface but could be conceptually followed with other tools on the market.

Limitations

There is no perfect alternative to rehearsing in person, it cannot be beat. To utilize video conferencing tools is to accept a level of compromise. Some of the most common challenges are:

- **Audio lag** - The single greatest compromise you will see is that the audio lag issues (in all platforms) prevent more than one party from playing at a time.
- **Adjustments to rehearsal content** - As feedback is minimal, the instructor’s ability to “adjust on the fly” is very limited. The instructor cannot hear something in a section or ensemble run through that they wish to work and must implement compensating strategies.
- **Sound quality** – Even on Zoom, out-of-the-box the sound settings are not configured for music and tend to cut out or “clip” the sound.
- **Lack of technical knowledge of the Platform** - No matter how hard you prepare your group, there will be those within the group that have a harder time than others, especially when technology issues occur.

We will discuss compensating strategies, alternate rehearsal methods, organizational practices, and technical settings that will attempt to mitigate these challenges.

Introducing a Web Conferencing Solution to Your Group

When introducing a video conferencing solution to your group we recommend a graduated approach. New technology can be overwhelming to some, and it is best to start simply and add complexity:

1. Introduce the technology with a simple meet-up online – Use the first session to introduce the technology, let the members and instructors get comfortable with the technology, deal with technical and connectivity issues without the pressure of a rehearsal goal, and talk about how you will interact. After 15 mins most groups forget the technology and conversation is easier.
2. An initial play-through of repertoire – Conduct a session where everyone simply plays along with a leader. Keep it short, 25-30 mins is enough. This also gives you time to work out remaining technical problems/
3. A blended rehearsal with social time, breakout rooms (e.g. fifes in one breakout, drums in another), and an ensemble segment.
4. Short “drop in” sessions where a few pieces can be played through for fun or for additional repetitions (e.g. “come to the fife hang on Tuesday at 8”).



Hosting a Meeting

Zoom Setup

Getting started with Zoom is pretty easy:

1. You should download the Zoom application from <https://www.zoom.us/>. Follow the installation instructions for your platform.
2. Create a Zoom account, as this will allow you to host a meeting. You can go with a free or paid account based on your needs.
3. Adjust the Zoom settings
 - a. Sign into the Zoom web portal as an administrator with the privilege to edit account settings
 - b. In the settings, enable key features that you will find helpful:
 - i. Chat – Allows attendees to exchange instant messages, useful if there are audio issues
 - ii. Private Chat – Useful if you need to direct feedback privately to a specific attendee
 - iii. File Transfer – Useful if you need to share music files
 - iv. Polling – Useful if you have a question and want to poll the group easily
 - v. Screen Sharing – Useful if you want to share something on your computer
 - vi. Breakout Rooms – Useful for breaking a large group into sub-groups in separate “rooms”. Make sure to check “Allow host to assign participants to breakout rooms when scheduling”
 - vii. Group HD Video – Improves the quality of video

Now, time for your first meeting!

Scheduling a Meeting

Scheduling a meeting is as simple as creating a calendar entry, selecting the date, time, and title. You can either add the attendees within Zoom and let Zoom send them an invite or copy the meeting details and send it in an email. Suggest to your attendees that they download the free Zoom app, as it has greater functionality than the “Join from Web” version.

Meeting Preparation

Here are some tips to prepare for a successful rehearsal:

- Make sure you have a syllabus/plan for what you want to accomplish for every rehearsal
- Keep the syllabus/itinerary light. Your expectations shouldn't be low but realistic
- Print out the music you will be playing. Even though you may be very familiar with the music it can be disorienting to present it in this fashion when all the other players are on mute
- If you are aware of any attendees that may have specific technical challenges take the time *before* the meeting to do a 1:1 session with them to resolve issues so that frustration is minimized
- Conduct a test meeting, test the sound quality and experiment with different configurations and microphones until you get it right

Pro Tip: Add a Facilitator

An instructor should be focused on presenting his/her content and cannot devote time to technical support if the instruction is to be effective. We recommend that you allocate one technically savvy person, ideally a non-playing member, to act as the technical facilitator to support each meeting/rehearsal. The facilitator can be set up as host or passed host privileges at the start of the meeting.



That person can:

- Greet each attendee
- Assign attendees to breakout rooms and bring them back to the main room at the agreed upon time
- Chat with attendees that have issues
- Mute/unmute attendees if needed
- Follow up after a technically difficult call 1:1 with the attendee having issues to prevent impact to the next session

Starting the Meeting

If you have configured Zoom, scheduled your meeting, invited the attendees, and prepared for your session you are almost there. When it is time for your meeting:

- Get there early and ensure everything is working as you expect
- If you have a facilitator, have them meet you early and check your mic volume and ensure everything is working as it should.
- Important! Adjust the levels on the mic input on ZOOM.
 - See [Advanced Audio Settings for Music](#) in this document
 - You need this fixed in order to hear each player. Otherwise the mic levels are too sensitive to pick up more than one note of playing.
- While everybody is joining the meeting (via the link you sent them in an email) take the time to talk, joke and catch up.
- When it's time to practice, everybody should be on mute except the "Lead Player".
 - This can be a fifer or a snare drummer.
 - The player should have strong time and the ability to play through with little mistakes.
 - The Lead can be passed around to different people during the rehearsal if you like, but because of the audio lag only one player can have his/her mic live at a time (this is the not-perfect part)
- Start with something short and check the pulse on the group
 - Can everyone hear what they need to hear?
 - Are there mic adjustments that need to be made?
 - Who forgot to mute themselves?
- Continue to experiment to find out what works best for your setup, room acoustics, and group.

Techniques for Working Together

Ok, so you have this time with your group, but it is not like a "regular" rehearsal. How can you:

Use the time effectively? Here are a few approaches in increasing levels of complexity (save the later stuff for when everyone is comfortable with the tunes):

- "Follow the leader" sessions where the whole ensemble plays through tunes muted while an instructor plays with mic open
- 1:1 breakout rooms for one player to help another. In this case both players can take turns playing and listening to each other
- Small group breakout where each party takes turns playing or doing a "follow the leader" activity. These might take the form of sectionals where Fifes might be in one breakout room, Snares in another, and Bass in a third.



Attending a Meeting

Installing Zoom

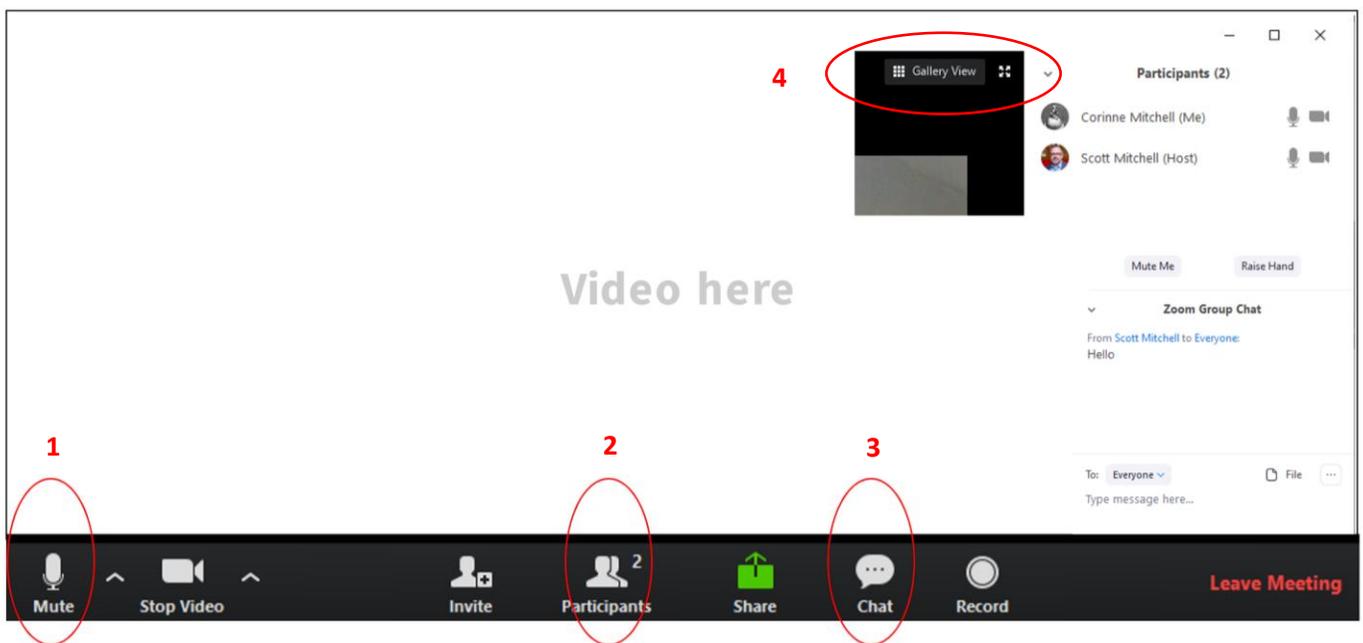
Getting started with Zoom is pretty easy:

1. You should download the Zoom application from <https://www.zoom.us/>. Follow the installation instructions for your platform.
2. You do not need to create a Zoom account to attend a meeting
3. At the time of your meeting click on the Zoom meeting address in the email provided by your event organizer and follow the instructions. You want to join with Computer Audio and Video if prompted.
4. You may have to grant access to Zoom for your Camera and Microphone on some platforms.

Getting to know Key Zoom Controls

Once you enter a Zoom meeting the user interface controls are relatively simple, but there are a few you need to know well:

1. The mute button – turns on/off your microphone
2. Participants – Shows/hides the Participants tab. On this tab you will see all the participants in the meeting and have the ability to “raise” and “lower” your hand.
3. Chat – Shows/hides the Chat tab, where you can Instant message with all participants or select a specific participant to message privately
4. View Toggle – In the upper right of the video area you will see either “Speaker View” or “Gallery View”. This toggles the view, play around with this to see what works best for you. Many users have agreed that the “Speaker View” is ideal for play along sessions so that you can see the person playing, and that “Gallery View” is most suitable for group discussions.





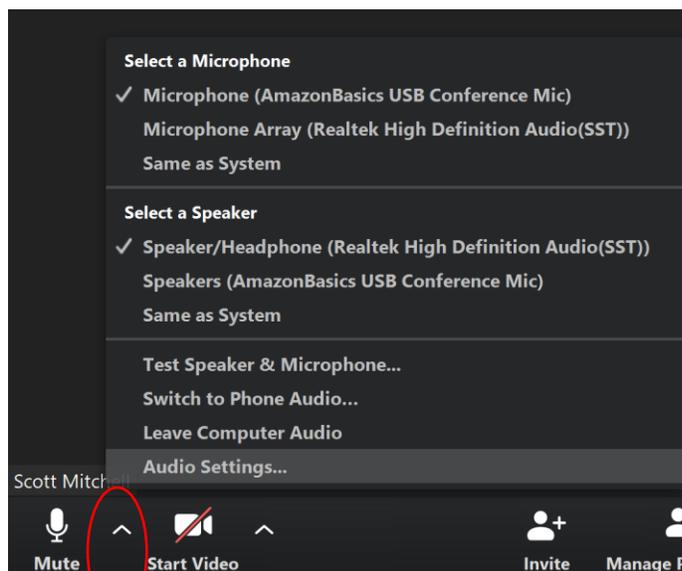
Advanced Audio Settings for Music

Zoom is configured out-of-the-box to best support business meetings. As such, the default configuration includes noise suppression, compression, and automatic mic levels based on the inputs it receives from the microphones of each user. As you might imagine, these settings are not friendly for music. Fortunately it is relatively simple to adjust the settings. You should change these settings if you want others to be able to hear the music you play correctly.

Here's how to change the settings:

Step 1 – Open the Audio controls

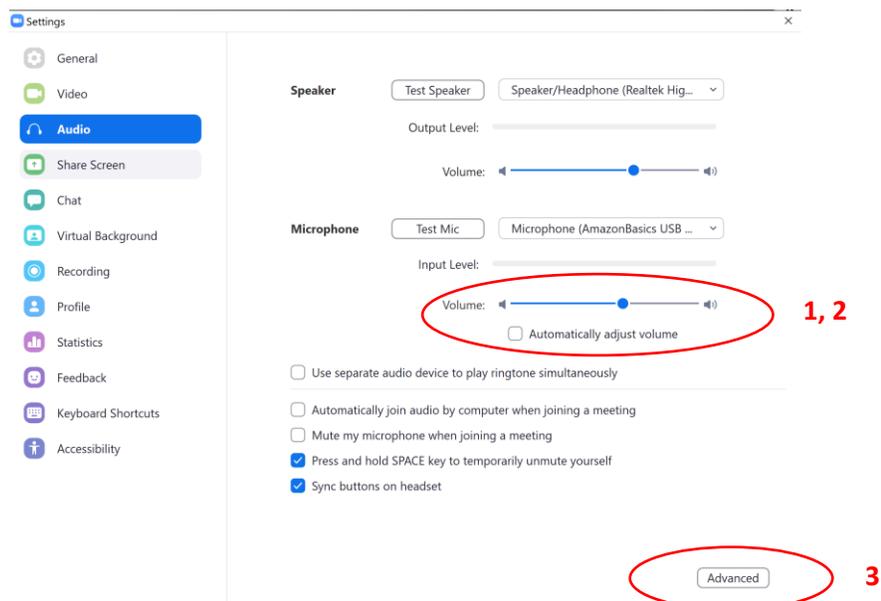
From within a Zoom meeting click on the up arrow next to the mute button and select “Audio Settings”



1

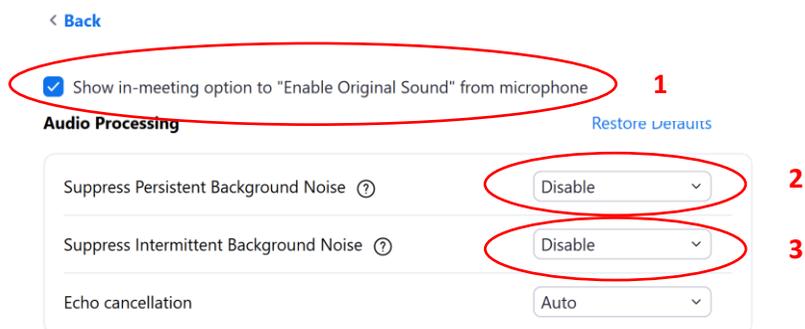
Step 2 – Update the settings on the “Audio” tab

1. Make sure to un-check “Automatically adjust microphone volume”
2. Adjust your microphone volume manually
3. Click on “advanced” at the bottom



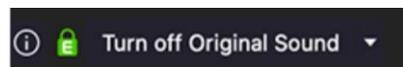
Step 3 – Advanced Settings

1. Make sure “Show in-meeting option to enable...” is checked
2. Set “Suppress Persistent Background Noise” to Disable
3. Set “Suppress Intermittent Background Noise” to Disable



During Your Rehearsal

Finally, when in your meeting you will see a toggle for “Original Sound”



- Turn ON original sound when playing your instrument
- Turn OFF original sound when speaking



Meeting Etiquette

The following points may help you to have a better experience if followed by all participants:

- Join the meeting with video - know that we are all a little uncomfortable at first
- Use a headset/mic if you have one (this reduces noise/feedback)
- Mute your mic when not speaking
- Put a light in front of you, not behind you
- Remember that the camera is on
- “Raise your hand” if you would like to speak in a larger group, you will be called on
- Be careful not to speak over others
- If there is a technical issue, be patient
- Allow yourself enough time to connect to the session so that the group can start on time
- Remove distractions – Better to have shorter sessions with increased focus

Privacy

There have been instances of zoom meetings being accessed by individuals who are not part of the group who have then harassed the meeting in progress. Recommendations to keep your meeting secure are:

- Use an automatically generated meeting code with a password instead of the personal address assigned to you
- Do not publish the meeting invitation on public sites, and instead send via email or a messenger service
- Disable “join before host”
- Disable screen sharing (this prevents anyone except for the host from sharing their screen)
- Know how to remove a participant from a meeting
- Know how to lock a room to prevent others from accessing it (However, this will prevent anyone, including those you want to be there from accessing it)

If You Have an Issue

In the *likely* scenario that you have an issue:

- Don’t panic!
- Please remember that the instructors may not be your best tech support, engage the Facilitator if you have one
- Use your best judgement on if now is the best time to resolve the issue or to allow the rest of the session to continue with a follow up later



Asynchronous Solutions

We have focused on the setup and configuration of Zoom for synchronous meetings/rehearsals. You may have individuals that either don't feel comfortable in this environment or are not available at the scheduled meeting times. You may want to consider ways in which you can support the "asynchronous" study of corps music. When communication, collaboration, and training does not need to be real-time there are quite a few options that provide elements of a flexible solution. Asynchronous solutions are great when there are technical limitations that need to be accommodated for.

Online Libraries

Some corps have found it effective to leverage members-only sections of their websites to publish materials that can be used by individual members to train:

- An online music library of sheet music for those that read music
- Audio files of the pieces performed by the group so that users can download and play along on the device of their choosing (make sure to count off the music clearly)
- Video instruction or performance videos of the group (e.g. YouTube or Vevo)

Rehearsal Syllabus

It can be extremely effective to communicate a schedule of the exercises and pieces that will be focused on at each rehearsal ahead of time. If members see a plan for the month they can compensate by focusing their personal practice on the material scheduled for a given rehearsal when they cannot attend. This also helps the members understand the overall direction they are receiving. This method is a real winner when combined with other solutions in this list.

Email

Email lists can be used to disseminate information outside of standard rehearsal time. Tools like MailChimp offer strong capabilities at no cost for small groups. You will be able to maintain a mailing list, develop and schedule messages, apply your groups branding, and track email opens at no charge.

Facebook Groups

The use of Facebook groups for information is very popular – you can set the group to "secret" and only invite the members of your group. Files can be saved on this platform, and it is the gold standard for social network interaction. Keep in mind that this is an unpaid service and that you are simply using the space and should not consider it a permanent home as a change in Facebook services/policy could interrupt your communications at any time.

Final Thoughts

Synchronous solutions certainly have a technology hurdle that must be overcome for some users, but the payoff is very high. Asynchronous solutions lack the human interaction qualities of the synchronous tools, but these alternative solutions may still be extremely effective for some of your members. It is recommended that you find a balance of both synchronous and asynchronous solutions to see your group through in these difficult times.