

Suggestions for audio and video recording

Audio

There are two excellent online sources for information about making your own audio recordings (such as for an audition or application). They should be read, not summarized. Both deal primarily with making a recording for an application to a music school, but the information presented is applicable for any type of recording of your solo playing that you need to make:

1. Martin Schuring's audio recording page:

<http://www.public.asu.edu/~schuring/Oboe/recordings.html>

He leans heavily in favor of hiring a professional to do the recording for you, however he offers many good suggestions and a lot of insight from the committee's perspective. If you choose to use a professional, he is absolutely correct in advising NOT to record in a recording studio. Have the recording done in a performance space that you choose (see below). Recording studios are intentionally "dead," and when artificial resonance (reverberation) is added later, the recorded tone of the oboe always suffers, becoming shallow, edgy, and/or glassy.

2. Eastman has a step-by-step guide here:

<https://www.esm.rochester.edu/blog/2016/03/ace-your-audiovideo-auditions-some-tips-and-techniques/>

As this page is two years old, some of the recommended equipment will have been superseded by the manufacturers' newer models. However, the type of equipment that is required for this type of recording remains current. All of the recommended microphones are still currently available.

SOME NOTES ON PICKING A RECORDING LOCATION:

There are three terms that are important to understand when picking a location for recording a solo oboe:

1. Early reflection
2. Slapback ("slap")
3. Reverberation ("reverb")

Working backwards, reverberation is when the sound you have produced from the instrument remains audible or "alive" after you stop playing. A massive stone cathedral in Europe will have a number of seconds of reverberation. A large concert hall, like where the Boston Symphony or Philadelphia Orchestra plays, will usually have between 1.5 and 2 seconds of reverberation. Your living room will have almost no measureable reverberation. The oboe will sound best in a location somewhere in between your living room and Boston Symphony Hall. It needs some reverberation to give the sound some "body," yet not so much that the instrument – and the nuances of your playing – get lost in the

environment of a giant auditorium. An orchestra rehearsal room, large classroom, or small church would likely be a good prospect, so long as there are no extraneous noises present (such as outside traffic, or heating/air conditioning sounds).

“Slapback” is an undesirable acoustical phenomenon that occurs when there are nearby parallel (or nearly parallel) walls flanking where you are playing. Multiple large objects with flat sides can also create the same effect. Sound bounces off these flat surfaces and instead of escaping out into the room or auditorium, a significant amount gets trapped and simply ricochets around from surface to surface. This creates an edgy, sibilant character to the sound that may still be heard for a fraction of a second after you stop playing. Rooms with low ceilings are especially prone to slapback. It sounds a little like reverberation, but whereas reverb sounds pleasant, and even warm, slapback is harsh. It also decays (goes away) faster than reverberation does, and so on an audio recording, the committee may not understand why the recording sounds the way it does. They just know it (you) sound bad.

Just like slapback, “early reflections” occur when the sound that comes out of the oboe bounces off nearby walls, objects (and the floor) and returns to your ears; this sound reaches you more quickly than the sound that has travelled out into the auditorium and then back to the stage. However, this is not sound that is trapped like slapback. It doesn’t sound unnaturally harsh, it just doesn’t sound as expansive as the reverb that you hear happening out in the hall. In most cases, you’ll place your microphones 10-20 feet in front of you, and if possible 8-10 above the floor (see Eastman) – this means that a lot of the sound that the mics capture will in fact be early reflections. Unlike slapback, early reflections are desirable. They let you immediately hear what you (and others, if you’re in an ensemble) sound like. On a large scale, tremendous effort is put into designing concert hall stages so that as many early reflections as possible make it back to the performers. For example, look at the curved walls on three sides of the stage of the Kansas City Symphony’s new concert hall:



¹ Miller, Bryan. “Kauffman Center Is a Reason to Visit Kansas City.” *Stltoday.com*, STLtoday.com, 23 Oct. 2011, www.stltoday.com/travel/kauffman-center-is-a-reason-to-visit-kansas-city/article_475bf742-5673-5608-b28f-8f7a75d42a59.html.

This is the kind of help you're looking for in a good, obnoxious acoustical space (just not on the same scale as the Kauffman Center in Kansas City). Once you've found your recording space, you can get to work applying the techniques and suggestions found on the Eastman and Schuring pages.

If you're interested in how sound behaves indoors, one of the best one-volume books on the subject is "Architectural Acoustics" by Marshall Long. Part of it is available on Google Books:

<https://books.google.com/books?id=XTYTAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=978-0124555518&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewifoa2JvoXfAhVqT98KHR2qCKUQ6AEILzAB#v=onepage&q&f=false>

If you find the excerpt interesting, you might want to consider purchasing the book. There is also a section at the back of this reference collection called "A Performer's Perspective." Multiple concert halls are discussed briefly. Many of the acoustic principles that apply to large spaces also apply to smaller ones, and may give insight into choosing the best locations to record.

Video

In many ways, video recording is easier than audio recording. The main things to remember are:

- Be framed in the recording image. Imagine that you were playing for someone in person. How close would that person be to you? Try to duplicate that.
- Make sure that the lighting is good. Modern cameras can compensate for a lot of lighting deficiencies, but at a minimum there shouldn't be any shadows on your face, and there should be no bright light directly behind you.
- Use a tripod or other device to hold/secure the camera.
- Consider what you're going to wear for the recording. It's important. "Business casual" should be the rule – if you don't know what that is, do a web search. Avoid logos, busy patterns, all white, and all black (all black can create a distracting "floating head" effect).
- If possible, use separate audio equipment to record the sound, then use software like Audacity (free) to mix the two together. It's best not to just plug a microphone into your camera and have the camera do the audio work. An external microphone always adds noise. There's currently no way around that, unless you have a professional camera with "XLR" inputs:



2

- If possible, play all of the required music through without stopping (this may be a requirement, check the recording guidelines). Doing this simulates a live audition, and tells the committee much more about you as a player. It doesn't matter if you get it right on the first take or the fiftieth one, the first day or the third – the committee won't know that.
- Finally, don't try to "tweak" the final audio product too much. Remember that oboe sound usually doesn't respond well to that.

Most importantly, keep in mind your timetable. Assume that making your recording will take three times longer than you think it will (because it will). You need to have your recording done and sent to the committee well ahead of the deadline. Often, committees will begin to review submissions days or even weeks ahead of time. If they receive a FedEx package on the afternoon of the deadline (or an email with a link to your online recording just before 5:00 pm on the last day), they may be annoyed and you'll already be at a disadvantage before they even listen to it. Or they may start to wonder about your time-management skills and ability to execute on a project. Just get it done – sooner is better than later.

² "Commercial XLR Connector ." *Neutrik NC3MX-Conn*, Allied Electronics, www.alliedelec.com/search/productview.aspx?SKU=70088516.