

The Click Track

by Richard Regent

Musicians are using a new tool for coordinating multimedia. Take church music for example, which becomes more jazzy and complex every Sunday. The musicians play and choirs sing to create an upbeat program while sensational video is shown on screens. The tool is a **click track**, an audible electronic metronome that uses the time signatures of the music to synchronize the video and the live performance.

Churches like Elmbrook Church and the Brookfield Assembly of God use click tracks to help musicians match their music with the video that is projected onto wall-mounted screens above the stage area. Another screen may be attached to the back wall for viewing by the conductor or performers. The click usually comes from one of the stereo audio channels of a DVD playing the video and is particularly useful when the video shows people singing the song.

The click track is amplified and distributed to the conductor, pianist and percussionist who wear earphones. After hearing a vocal three-beat countdown, they start the performance, which ensures that everyone starts exactly with the video. Clicks continue to help the conductor to direct and follow the video, especially where time signatures get very complicated or when long instrumental tacet passages occur. Choir members watch the conductor while singing. Other musicians watch the conductor, listen to the pianist and percussionist to assist with their tempo, and listen to the choir for word cues. The audience enjoys as everyone else must listen, watch and work to create music.

Combinations of computers and software programs are being installed to modernize many church service production control rooms and sound booths. However, in some systems, clicks can be created on a synthesizer that has the appropriate sounds, like a General MIDI drum bank or on a sampler using included sounds. The click usually has a standard *kick* and *sidestick* sound. A recent improvement has the downbeat of each measure characterized by a *cowbell* sound, and all the other beats use a *snare drum* sound. These new sounds were chosen because they are different from what the live percussionist is playing, and are more easily discerned by the conductor. The click track can be modified by using other sounds or by changing the notes in the track itself. It is possible to delete sections where the click might be superfluous or confusing; or adjust its volume, using MIDI velocities or the MIDI volume control, for different sections of the piece. Audio experts faithfully make a copy of the original click track and modify the copy, then mute the original track and play the copy. Despite a few exceptions, song measures with quarter-note time signatures use a quarter-note click and measures with eighth-note time signatures use an eighth-note click.

Another example of using this tool is in a recording studio, where musicians are acoustically separated into individual studios to allow for post-editing and mixing. Here the click track has the musicians play music at a consistent meter or revisit a part and be able to pick up the beat quickly. Advanced features may have a track shifted earlier in time to compensate for an instruments response delay, as with a piano. Other usual timing variations include the guitarist who is a little ahead of the bass player, who is a little behind the drummer. Tiny click adjustments can even help in live music situations where everyone can be in contact with each other.

Some musicians find the click annoying because it complicates their creativity to play music, change tempo or embellish the notes. Also, unfortunately, many church music arrangements are transposed to difficult keys which then must be played at unreasonably fast tempos of a locked in click track. Musicians new to this tool may be rather embarrassed, no matter how good their internal metronome is, because the machine generated click never fails. They must practice with a recording of the song or a loud metronome and make adjustments at the rehearsals and performance.

Behind-the-scenes activities of productions include controlling lights, adjusting audio levels for countless microphones, playing the videos, recording video or audio, and coordinating the activity of human videos, all while the music is on beat to the click. As music technology evolves and performance showmanship advances, click tracks may make it all automatically possible. Amen.