

ALEX SHAPIRO

PAPER CUT

For Concert Wind Band and Prerecorded Soundscape

Performance Time: 5:00

Instrumentation

| | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 – Conductor | 3 – B \flat Trumpet 1 | 1 – Vibraphone |
| 1 – Piccolo | 3 – B \flat Trumpet 2 | 1 – Drum set |
| 6 – Flute | 4 – F Horn | 1 – Crash Cymbals |
| 2 – Oboe | 3 – Trombone 1 | 1 – Snare Drum |
| 2 – Bassoon | 3 – Trombone 2 | 1 – Bass Drum |
| 9 – B \flat Clarinet | 2 – Euphonium/Baritone B.C. | |
| 1 – B \flat Bass Clarinet | 2 – Euphonium/Baritone T.C. | |
| 4 – E \flat Alto Saxophone | 2 – Tuba | |
| 2 – B \flat Tenor Saxophone | 1 – Electric Bass | |
| 1 – E \flat Baritone Saxophone | | |

1 - Audio Track with click, for conductor

1 - Audio Track without click, for performance

1 - Package of 8.5" x 11" printer paper, in any color

In addition to the instruments listed above, *PAPER CUT* requires an audio system capable of playing the audio tracks from a laptop computer via a small digital audio interface connected to an audio mixer.

***To download the necessary audio tracks,
please send a friendly email to: download@activistmusic.com.***

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Acknowledgements

PAPER CUT was commissioned by the American Composers Forum for its BandQuest® series. Special thanks to band director Janet Olsen and the students of the Friday Harbor Middle School Band for bringing this piece to life in May 2010 in Friday Harbor, on San Juan Island, Washington. Additional thanks to band director Peter Guenther, who came up with the idea to perform the piece using LEDs and black light, as first experienced in February 2011 at the Minnesota Music Educators Association Midwinter Convention at the Minneapolis Convention Center, performed by the Owatonna 9th Grade Band.

Program Note

What do teenagers like? Video games, TV, and movies.
What do all these media have in common? Music!

With a desire to compose something relevant to younger players, I decided to create a piece that sounds somewhat like a movie soundtrack, to which the musicians can imagine their own dramatic scene. I also thought it would be fun to make the musicians themselves part of the action, so *PAPER CUT* has the band members doing choreographed maneuvers that look as compelling as they sound. In fact, no one plays their instrument until halfway into the piece!

When I told the commissioners about my plans to include an audio track as well as turn the musicians into paper percussionist virtuosi, I apologetically noted that this very weird piece would probably sell three copies, and thanked them for being willing to take a chance with me on this silly exploration. None of us had any idea that the first multimedia electroacoustic piece for middle schoolers would soon become such a familiar offering in the repertoire.

Music isn't just melody; it's rhythm, texture, and sometimes optics as well. The unusual element of paper and the myriad sounds and visuals that can emerge from something so simple offer a fresh view of what music-making can be, and opens everyone's ears to the sonic possibilities found among everyday objects.

With a nod to environmentalism, *PAPER CUT* also serves as a reminder to avoid waste by recycling. Players are encouraged to collect paper that would have otherwise ended up in the trash, and bring it to rehearsals. The piece might even be therapeutic, as students can take out their aggression by ripping up bad grades and test scores!

Although *PAPER CUT* was composed with middle schoolers in mind, it's equally suited to more advanced musicians, since the paper techniques and the skill of playing against a prerecorded track are interesting for all ages. It's also well suited to ensembles with varying personnel, due to the significance of the audio track.

I was delighted in 2010 to introduce a new approach to wind band repertoire, and after thousands of performances of this piece by students and adults around the world, I'm grateful that conductors and band members appear to have as much fun with this music as I had creating it!

Alex Shapiro
San Juan Island, WA
December 2025

Rehearsal:

The rehearsal room will need a laptop connected to a basic PA system, ideally with stereo speakers that can play loudly, placed facing the band (see page v. for further info). Initial run-throughs will use the click-only audio file, and the audio track with the click, to keep the ensemble in sync with the audio.

Prior to rehearsal, it will be helpful to give the band members an overview of the piece and its three blended elements (audio track, paper, and instruments). Have the musicians listen to or watch a performance video of the piece, and then listen to some or all of the audio track with and without the click.

Consider beginning by rehearsing the various paper playing techniques and their rhythms, after which they can be practiced against the track. Once the musicians are comfortable with those two elements, rehearse the instrumental section without the paper or the track. In all rehearsals, pay special attention to maintaining an unwavering quarter = 96 tempo throughout the piece. Finally, bring all three elements together!

Performance notes:

PAPER CUT is an electroacoustic piece in which the band plays along with a pre-recorded audio track, with the goal of creating one seamless, sonic entity. Thus, the audio track volume in the hall should match that of the live ensemble. The downloadable audio files include the track in its stereo performance mix, another track for the conductor and rehearsal room that mixes the audio with a click track, and a click-only audio file that can be used to create a custom balance.

The textures of an audio soundscape can make live instrumentalists sound covered up and less "present." It's recommended that the musicians over-emphasize the dynamic and articulation markings in their parts, for the most musical and accurate result.

Although it's possible to conduct *PAPER CUT* from the podium only hearing the speakers that face the band, it will be far easier if the conductor uses the click track to keep the band and the audio track in sync. The entire piece is a steady quarter = 96, and it's vital to keep the musicians exactly with the track from start to finish.

Please refer to the additional helpful performance notes and tech setup .pdf found on the audio track download page on Ms. Shapiro's website.

Paper:

Each player will need 4 pieces of 8.5" x 11" printer paper. In rehearsals, use recycled paper that would otherwise have been thrown out: old homework, junk mail, etc. For performance, choose paper that's at least 20 lb. weight, ideally in two or more colors. Avoid using thin newspaper, ad insert paper, or thin magazine paper, as the sound will not be as loud. For a spectacular visual effect, consider performing in the dark with black light bulbs and/or colored LEDs. Any optical effects add drama, and creativity is encouraged!

Paper, cont'd:

Before the piece begins, a pre-crumpled ball of paper should be prepared by those players with "Crumpled Ball" indications. For all players, instruments may be placed in laps or on instrument stands when not in use.

VERY IMPORTANT: *PAPER CUT* was composed to be a visual piece as well as a sonic one. Apart from the opening that incorporates a natural crescendo from tapping slowly rising crumpled balls, it is imperative that the musicians hold the paper high above their heads every time they play it. Not only is the piece designed for the audience to SEE the paper, but the paper effects can only be HEARD well when held high above the music stands.

Bonus material available on the *PAPER CUT* page on www.alexshapiro.org:

Practice track:

Musicians can practice this piece at home by downloading the accompanying audio track with the click. Please email <download@activistmusic.com> to request file access.

Instruction:

The American Composers Forum filmed an interview with Alex Shapiro in 2010, during which she demonstrates the paper playing techniques. In addition to the text descriptions in the score, watching these excerpts can be helpful!

Curriculum:

The American Composers Forum created a thoughtful curriculum that can be downloaded and used as a customizable teaching tool.

Videos:

Find visual inspiration from the many different approaches seen in performance videos from around the world! Alex has posted some of her favorites on the webpage.

Cover photo credits, left to right downward:

"Crescendo rip" photo by Annemarie Bain; the Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Corp band, Kelly Watkins, conductor; New York, New York.

"Circular black light" screenshot; the Benton Junior High School, James Pianalto, conductor; Benton, Arkansas.

"Paper tap" screenshot; the Chesterton Middle School 8th Grade Band, Vince Arizzi, conductor; Chesterton, Indiana.

"Crumpled ball;" Midwest Clinic rehearsal; the VanderCook College of Music Symphonic Band, Charlie Menghini, conductor, Chicago, Illinois.

"Paper snap" screenshot; the Musica Viva Summer Wind Band, Armando Saldarini, conductor; Triuggio, Italy.

"Paper up" screenshot; the University of Alberta Concert Band with École Archbishop MacDonald High School Honour Band, Meijun Chen, conductor; Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

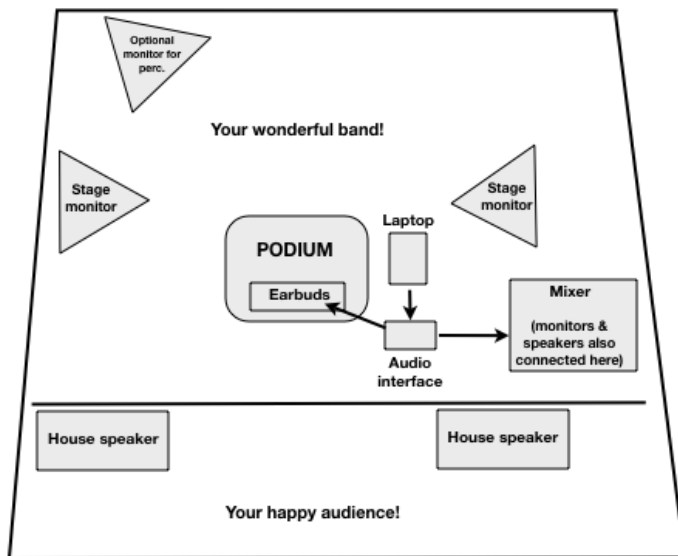
"Origami toss" screenshot; L'Orchestre d'Harmonie, Michael Hatstatt, conductor; Mulhouse, France.

"Paper ball toss" screenshot; the Delaware Hayes High School Band, Andy Doherty, conductor; Grove City, Ohio.

Technical setup:

Each audio file aligns from the beginning and includes 6 count-off beats. Connect a laptop computer to a small audio interface, which in turn connects to an audio mixer. Open a simple multitrack digital audio application, and load the audio track **with** the click into one stereo channel routed **solely** to the headphones or earbuds worn by the conductor (and the percussionists, if applicable). Next, load the track **without** the click into two more stereo channels: one pair routed to the stage floor monitors so the band and conductor can hear it, and another pair routed to the house speakers, for the audience. If desired, the conductor can leave one ear uncovered to better hear the live band against the track and click.

The audio track uses panning effects, so be sure that it's routed to the audience in stereo. Avoid converting the file to a lower quality MP3 file. An additional stereo channel may be used to route an optional pair of stereo microphones placed over the band. If the band is mic'ed (usually unnecessary), it's best to have an engineer reading a music score to ride the faders at the mixing board and control the balance.



Stage monitors, house speakers, a laptop, an audio interface, and optional microphones are connected by cables to the mixer, which is usually placed in the back of the auditorium or on the side of the stage or podium.

Detailed technical information and suggestions can be downloaded from the PAPER CUT page at www.alexshapiro.org.

For the band:

For the conductor:

For the audience:

| | | |
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| <p>1 stereo monitor pair facing the band, spread at a wide angle on the stage or in the rehearsal room. It may be helpful to move one monitor closer to the percussion section, thus playing from behind some of the wind players, but ensuring that the percussion section can hear the downbeats in the track. If available, in-ear monitors for one or more percussionists are ideal.</p> | <p>1 stereo pair of headphones or earbuds with the "monitor mix" (separate from the house mix, which the audience hears) from the mixing console, to offer the conductor a good balance of the audio track, the click track, and the band, in order to hear each element at the preferred level.</p> | <p>1 stereo pair of speakers on either side of the stage, facing the house. If the band is mic'ed, then that amplification will be incorporated into the house mix.</p> |
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