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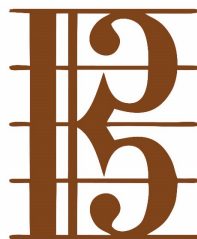
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**The Brave New World of Online Teaching:
Strategies for Violin and Viola Teachers**

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What a storm it is in which we find ourselves, and thus how fitting to think of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which the bard uses Miranda to coin the phrase "brave new world". The sudden move to full online teaching for many of us is Shakespeare's maelstrom; however, it also brings everyone together to share best practices, connecting us to new networks just as Miranda embarked upon her new adventure.

This article shares strategies under three themes: reshaping the studio, equipment and setup, and changes in teaching strategies.

Theme 1: Reshaping the Studio

Whether it is one's home studio or those in music schools or tertiary institutions, resetting furniture and equipment for use in online teaching will be useful both for longer-term application as well as for the effectiveness of lessons. Here are several things to consider:

1. The view of the computer is limited

Even when the computer camera is placed at a position that can capture a large space like a living room, your 5-foot presence in person has been reduced to a 15-inch screen in your student's room. This means that you have to use the available screen space effectively: being close enough to capture the student's attention, but with enough distance or flexibility to demonstrate different parts of playing, whether it be a close up on the left hand for vibrato, or the torso as a whole for posture.

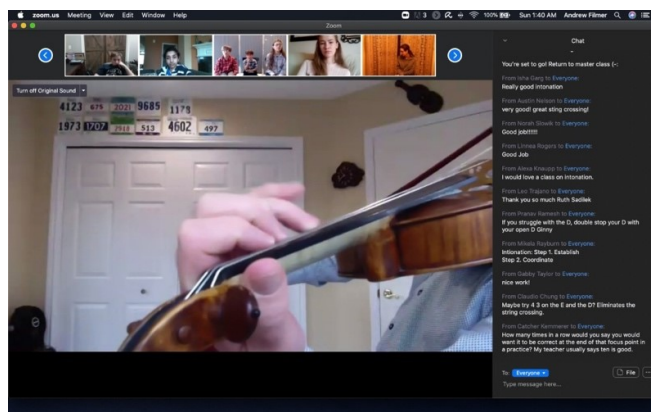


Illus. 1: A home setup using a living room

In Illus. 1, I take you to my living room. There is an advantage of space, being able to move in closer to the camera or stepping back when necessary. Two out of

the three music stands are being used for other purposes, most importantly for positioning the computer at the appropriate height and right angle. (One needs to ensure the stand is secure and that any dangling cables do not endanger the computer.) The big-screen TV is used as a second monitor, an external microphone is positioned with a camera tripod, and there are various lighting options for night-time teaching. There are several options for sound output, including the headset and the surround-sound speaker system.

Despite the advantages of space, the location of the music stands does not make it easy to demonstrate things like close-ups of the left hand. Some teachers set up more technology, with a second camera in the form of a mobile phone. Seattle-based pedagogue Kevin LeFohn (who formerly taught at the University of Otago) uses a smaller space with more efficiency, by keeping his computer in one place but knowing exactly how much to move the monitor and how far to step back from the screen. Additionally, space has been cleared for him to focus on the left hand, as seen in Illus. 2, below.



Illus. 2. Adjusting to a sole, static camera by Kevin LeFohn

Teachers engaging with this for the first time may require time to adjust – especially when they are used to constantly monitoring themselves when on a conference call, which one cannot do when having close-up of your left hand. Illus. 2 is useful for the student but takes away the self-monitoring aspect; the teacher has to be experienced to know where to stand, and reliably predict what the camera is transmitting.

2. The default angle of the computer camera is usually too low

One important issue to accept: where a laptop has been placed is likely the most comfortable position for you to type but not the best position from which to teach. The upwards panning angle of a laptop camera can lower the effectiveness of communication. In many cases, one needs to now have a new space where the computer can

reside for lessons, or at least be ready to adjust the angle of the camera quickly and efficiently.

3. Adjusting to the use of space

An extension of this is that your home setup will not always allow you to have teaching materials where you usually have them. If you don't have a boom stand for your microphone, chances are that either your microphone or your sheet music will have to be in a less-than-ideal position, or you will have to be comfortable taking your eyes away from the screen when playing excerpts for students. In Illus. 1, the microphone is in the optimal position (with the available equipment), but this requires the sheet music to be off to one side.

A smaller setup is seen in Illus. 3, below.



Illus. 3: Small room setup

In this example, as with Illus. 1, the music stand is set permanently at the height necessary, and easily moved to the side when lessons are over. This setup does not allow room for manoeuvre, so all materials – including the mouse for the use of the secondary monitor, and the instrument on the sofa, has to be prepared in advance. The advantage of this setup is lower utility costs and allowing the use of the wall as a professional backdrop. Some prefer more ease and the use of a “virtual background”, but I think a real backdrop tends to be less distracting.

4. The student's setup

All of these factors impact what you transmit to the student, but a considerable improvement to the effectiveness of a lesson can be attributed to the student having the best setup possible. Lighting can be an issue when being processed by a computer camera, especially when a student is near a window with bright sunlight. A student may be able to use a TV as the main display – this has the disadvantage of the student not looking into the camera but can be more effective in getting the clearest information from the teacher.

The overall takeaway for a studio setup is that you may need to sacrifice some comfort of movement and use of space in order to provide the most benefit for a student. The more you craft the room for delivery, the more

effective a lesson may be. It is important to have flexibility between your regular use of a room and your computer with the alternative setup for online teaching purposes, unless you have the option of a dedicated space and equipment.

Theme 2: Equipment and Setup

Equipment and setup constitute a quickly evolving arena. I have explored Google Duo, Hangouts/Google Meet, Skype, Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate, Facetime and WhatsApp video calls, with Facebook Video and Microsoft Teams being other options. At time of writing, stock for Zoom has gone up 140% despite initial security issues, WhatsApp has expanded its capabilities to accommodate eight participants, and Facebook Messenger Rooms accommodate 50. It is entirely possible that by the time this article goes to print an entirely new platform may have emerged. Thus, while I am specifically using Zoom, the following is crafted along the lines of issues to consider in using any technological platform.

1. Audio quality and options

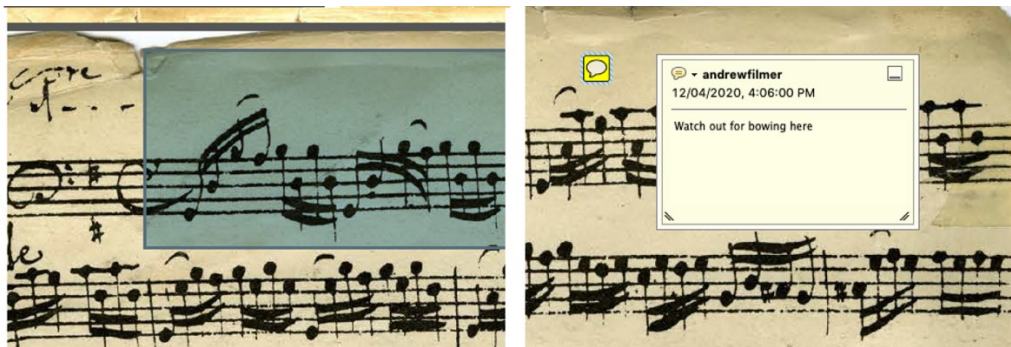
That one would pick the best audio quality is a no-brainer, but consider also that some platforms have different audio settings from which you can choose and adjust. In Zoom, the basic audio settings automatically control the volume of both input and output, but on certain occasions you may need to manually adjust this depending on the feedback given by your student. In Zoom's advanced settings, it is best to enable “original sound” and deactivate both the background noise suppression options, because our instruments get treated like background noise. If not, the instruments sound unnaturally suppressed, and the sound of the playing versus the speaking is not balanced.

As other video conferencing platforms develop – one of the few burgeoning markets in an otherwise sinking global economy – advanced features like these may be incorporated, and we will need to see how it affects music instruments and react accordingly. Also: it's just as important to get your students' audio settings set to the optimal levels.

To increase the quality of audio for a student, one has to invest in microphones, and understand how they work – for example, a Zoom H4n has two different sampling settings (at 44.1kHz or 48kHz) and choosing the wrong one may make you sound a semitone higher or lower on your student's end. Other microphones and DACs (digital to analog conversion units) would function differently.

2. The Share Screen function

Lessons can seem complicated with the Share Screen function, but this is usually due to the physical setup than the technology. If you position yourself in a way that you have easy access to the mouse (and a convenient place to rest the instrument), one may find that the Share Screen function can help clarify a lesson.



Illus. 4. Use of PDFs in instrumental lessons

Singaporean violinist Gabriel Lee gets students to send him videos in between live lessons and uses this function to watch these videos with them, which is an ingenious way of getting students to be more self-aware. I use PDFs, and the functions available depend on one's software. Using Adobe Acrobat Pro, I can do two things in particular: I can highlight an area during a class (Illus. 4, left) or add a comment (Illus. 4, right). The advantage of the latter is that it can be saved into the PDF, then sent off to the student via email, just as a teacher might normally attach a Post-It note on a student's sheet music.

3. Recording

Recording a lesson has always been a useful pedagogical option, and more so now. The recording can help us review how we sounded to a student, and for the student to understand how he or she sounded to us. This in turn means that we might be cautious in assessing some aspects of playing during a live session. I tend to say things like: "I don't hear enough dynamic contrast, but that might be the technology. Have a listen to the recording later to see if what you were playing came across accurately."

Teachers can choose to allow students to record the entire session, but I find that retention of information is often difficult from an hour-long recording. My approach is to allow the student to record the entire session, but I will record two short segments in the middle and end of the lesson. In these sessions, I will either provide a summary, or ask the student to provide a summary, or even have a role-playing session where I intentionally make the mistakes the student has made, and the student corrects me. This last option allows for some fun, while testing the ability of the student not only to state errors but to recognise them. It also in a sense tests the audio quality, making sure that your examples are clearly heard. This ties into this article's final issue: changes in teaching strategies.

Theme 3: Changes in Teaching Strategies

Some aspects of altered teaching strategies have already been covered: how to use both live and asynchronous recordings, the use of PDFs, and being careful to confirm what you heard and what your student heard in a live session. Here are some additional areas to consider:

- The back-and-forth of conversations with a student changes significantly when in an online setting. It is not surprising that some students become much quieter and the teacher ends up filling the empty space – but students can learn to adapt, and we can help them. One approach can be to role-

play and get a student to interrupt when they hear a mistake, thus getting them to learn to interject where necessary.

- Submission of asynchronous videos can be useful for a student to be self-critical, and the student can send such a video with notes on where they did well and where they hope to continue to improve.
- A student's posture may be affected by catering to a screen – it's important to realise that this may not be just laziness from a student but a side effect of online teaching.
- There is a tendency for screens to make us feel constantly monitored (no pun intended). If there is a negative impact of feeling continuously stared at, the Share Screen function can be useful to place the attention on the sheet music instead.

In conclusion: we often say, "we're all in the same boat" or "we're all in this together". The first adage allows us to realise that everyone faces some challenges in adapting to the new pedagogical landscape, and to recognise the stresses that come from seeing your own reflection every time you teach. You are not alone in feeling this. The second saying reminds us of the opportunities to connect and share best practices, and even turn these into new opportunities for growth. Tempests are challenging, but at the end, it is a brave new world that we face... we just need to be brave and innovative enough to face it.

Recommended resources:

Southeast Asian Strings Community, founded by Gabriel Lee

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/560489598148271/>

Virtuosity Online, founded by Kevin LeFohn

<https://www.virtuosity.online>

Adjusting settings for Zoom lessons:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME1x8o4ElpY&t=10s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuhaXXv7xXE>

