

Pandemic Forces Digital Forum For Classical Music Education

The Challenges and Benefits of Online Teaching

Quei-lih Chen¹

¹*School of Music, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, China*
Kly_22@163.com

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the novel Corona-virus, known to us all as "Covid-19," has completely changed the world as we know it. It caused a screeching halt of everything familiar and routine, of our personal and professional lives. Specifically, for the classical music students whose development of their skills and artistry depend on the years of learning from the great teachers and masters in the forums of private lessons, master classes, music festivals, and participating in prestigious competitions - this pandemic created a dramatic shift to complete virtual settings for all of the above. This article will examine the history of online education, the pros and cons of the online teaching for the classical musicians, with perspectives from both students and teachers. We will also touch on thoughts from festival directors, competition jurors, and even the general public or audience, who would otherwise be providing plaudits for the festival artists and competitors from the seats of the concert halls, instead of their living rooms through an electronic device. The latest apps for virtual connections have not only become part of our daily language and lives, but also became essential and imperative for the classical world to function and continue in this climate of the current pandemic.

Keywords: *Classical music students, Digital Forum, History of Online Learning, Pros and Cons of Online Format, Apps for Virtual Connections.*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, the world was unfortunately introduced to Covid-19, a highly contagious virus that would essentially change the course of our daily lives. For the classical musician students and teachers, the outbreak caused the sudden and complete shutdown of in person schools and private instructions. This greatly disrupted the familiar format of learning and teaching one on one, which is deemed imperative for the details and intricacies of music and its art form. There was a sudden loss of the close, intimate setting of lessons, for both student and teacher, to explore the abstract form of music and the infinite ways of creating and producing sound, and expressing the art. There were also other aspects of music education that were simply impossible to recreate, such as ensembles - both chamber and orchestral. Music festivals that provide opportunity for students to work with master teachers, and competitions

around the world that provide young, budding artists an opportunity to be discovered, were all abruptly placed on hold. The professional performing artists lost the forum of the stage with its audiences in attendance in the concert halls, as all public performances were immediately and thoroughly cancelled globally. This dramatic pause sweeping through the classical world forced the shift to depend entirely on the digital forum in order to retain continuity of teaching and learning, competing and concertizing. The education system was put through a proverbial ringer, and the transition to 100% virtual learning has not been smooth for any teacher, student, or subject. During this past year and a half of the global pandemic, there have been challenges met and conquered along the way, and new challenges faced, but more importantly - the great opportunity arose amidst this crisis, for new insights on the possibilities of developing and evolutionizing the classical music industry.

2. HISTORY OF ONLINE LEARNING

The concept of online education is nothing new or avant-garde. The history of distance learning goes back to the early 1900's. The Calvert School of Baltimore (Maryland) was the first primary school in the United States to offer correspondence course in 1906, and in the same year, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, began sending course materials and lectures on phonograph records to distance learners. This was the beginning of embracing new technology as a means of distance education and setting the stage for online learning. Throughout the early part of the 19th century, computers were beginning to be invented and developed - albeit for military and war purposes. Then in 1950, the first, non-experimental educationally owned television station provided a forum for Iowa State University to go on air, which kicked off other universities to begin offering course credit for television correspondence courses.

The years between 1960 and 1979, would be labeled The Space Age, and the internet would begin to take its first wobbly steps in the beginning of the 1960's. The Computer age would then follow, along with the modern internet, between the years of 1980-1989. Prior to this era, the internet - and online education with it - were just research experiments. During this Computer Age, the first email was sent from the United States to Germany, the first accredited online graduate program was offered, and the first US research and education network was developed. 1990-1999 was The Information Age and the time of the internet boom, where the first accredited fully-online college began, the first website was created, and the World Wide Web (www) opened to the public, allowing for internet use and online education as we know them today.

3. DEVELOPING ARTISTS IN THE DIGITAL FORUM: PROS AND CONS OF PRIVATE LESSONS ONLINE

In the contemporary postmodern world, there were already ongoing, ample discussions on "how to prepare or educate artists for a digital age." Highlighting 'digital age' implies a special attention to what might be needed for artists to function and respond to a technologically oriented world. [1] The communications technology that emerged in the 1960's along with the impact of the communications revolution on the society at large, opened a full program development of investigation into the transformative process occurring in art. [2] The rise of technologies leading to the development of online music education is well-documented, and such studies have become particularly popular in the United States in recent years. [3]

Although the concept of education and development of artists in the digital forum may have been well been

underway over the previous decades, it is undisputed that the current global pandemic opened the floodgates to enormous changes. During the first phase of lockdowns in Spring 2020, 1.2 billion young students globally were learning at home instead of their classrooms. In the wake of the corona-virus crisis, a new study was conducted in the UK, led by the Associated Boards of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), which revealed that music lessons also greatly transformed. The research indicated that 87 percent of teachers were reaching their students virtually, as the school doors remained closed. The music conservatories and universities all over the United States, also announced and made their transitions to online instruction beginning in March 2020.

3.1. Challenges

With the paradigm of the educational forums shifting so quickly as a result, there had to be a dramatic change for the educators in a manner of days - a feat that would not be without many unfamiliar challenges. Music teachers and professors were faced with adjusting their teaching pedagogy, such as demonstrating on the instrument in more broken-down steps, and repeating these steps numerous to fully convey the methods that would otherwise be much easier to be observed and understood by the students in person. They also found themselves needing to over-explain even the simplest of concepts - such as fingerings or basic hand positions - since there was no longer the option to simply move their hand or make these small adjustments in person. The sounds of instruments, through the digital format, cannot match the in person quality. This alone greatly hindered the learning and teaching process of mastering control of the instrument, and developing and exploring the infinite layers of sound, tone quality and all of their complex, abstract manners of expression.

With social-distancing mandate and measures firmly in place in all public places, it became an impossibility to continue any type of ensemble education, such as choral, chamber or orchestral music. This was a loss of a huge and vital means of development of a young musician. Ensemble work pushes their ability to listen more broadly, to hear the totality beyond their own voice through their sole instrument. To be in rehearsals with other musicians allows for new or different ideas of music that could broaden their understanding, bring new inspiration, and more compelling, comprehensive understanding of the works. For musicians, it is an opportunity for a shared journey to develop intellectually, musically, emotionally, and socially. No doubt, this was a crushing loss as a result of the pandemic to music students around the globe.

Another major challenge of online teaching would be the obvious factor of telecommunicating at the mercy of the internet, as its quality would depend on many

variables, including the hardware device used, locations of student or teacher and their individual signal range, and even time of day. Any internet issues could further distort the sound, and make real-time feedback incredibly difficult, as the students and teachers would not be able to hear each other when one is playing, and the other, talking. Many teachers found themselves testing out different devices, trying various apps, purchasing and connecting external microphones - all in efforts to find ways to deliver instruction in a way nearly equal to in-person sound and teaching. These efforts led to some teachers sharing their experiences or tips to colleagues and students through YouTube videos or other online methods.

Some important tools of online teaching that have been found to be successful are as follows:

1. Choosing the correct hardware: Laptops or desktop PC or Mac were found to be most preferable, with the benefit from a larger screen or monitor. These also allow the use of the ethernet cable, which can offer a more stable internet connection than WiFi.
2. Microphones and speakers will need to work together, and will need to be adjusted and positioned strategically to avoid feedback.
3. Headphones will also eliminate feedback - more preferably Bluetooth, to avoid being tethered by a cable.
4. Software: Zoom and Skype have been widely used, tried and true, that offer a good picture and sound, with ability to adjust with advanced settings. Other options that have been met with success include WhatsApp video, Facebook messenger, Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect, Discord, Google's Hangout and Duo, Slack, and Viber.
5. Downloadable scores were found to be a necessity to many teachers so that the music scores can be read and referenced on the tablet during lessons.

To note a direct positive of using the softwares that have the function of recording - Florin Parvulescu, violinist of San Francisco Symphony and Director of Tateuchi Institute of Music, stated - "My favorite aspect is that students can record the video lessons and watch them afterward in real-time, which helps them see exactly when and how the teacher commented on their performance, and how the comments relate to the students' performance/playing at that exact moment."

3.2. Silver-linings and Unexpected Successes

As we have so far examined some of the bigger challenges of being forced in a pandemic lockdown, exclusively using virtual teaching and learning methods - there is also much room for the pros and benefits of this shift as well. As noted by international concert

pianist and pedagogue, Ory Shihor (co-founder of the Los Angeles based Ory Shihor Institute) - "The pros far outweigh the cons. Anytime you have a seismic shift of such magnitude, it will shake things up - sometimes for the good. Humans are resistant to change, particularly in an antiquated field as ours, so we will see where the chips fall." Through his videos, Mr. Shihor is one of the elite pedagogues that have offered assistance to elevate and maximize the quality of the online teaching process in this digital world. To Mr. Shihor's point of changes being for the good - it is worth noting the enormous lesson that this need for adaptation to meet the challenges can be for the students. This circumstance can be used as a tool to train students to exercise and maintain their maximum flexibility to adjust to environment - which, as a successful performing artist especially, is essential, for the ever-changing settings of each concert venue, its acoustics, lighting, different instrument (for pianists), and all the logistics that come with management and travel around the globe to handle their music career. To continue on the point of the positive lessons for students on adapting to the challenges and change of losing the in-person instruction, the young music students have benefited by needing to become more accountable, starting with the need to write notes themselves, marking on the scores the fingerings, dynamics, and whatever musical notes were necessary for reminders in their scores for practice between each lesson.

It has been found that online teaching has more positives for the younger music students, since the simpler, more basic music instruction is not hindered by the digital delivery, that affects the intricate level and quality of sound of the instruments. However, at the highest artistic level of teaching, the benefits have been found to be unexpectedly priceless. Dr. Steven Spooner, concert pianist and recording artist (faculty at Peabody Conservatory, co-director of the Chicago International Music Competition and Festival) states - "I can tell you, my students have never heard themselves play so much, and we now have easy access to some of the world's great artists since we don't have to get them all physically in one place."

For students of the highest level or any student with goals of becoming a professional performing artist, it is essential in their artistic development to work with the great masters, often located in all corners of the seven continents. As duly noted by international music festival or competition directors, this virtual access to the great master teachers for master classes or as competition jurors sans travel and all its costs, has become one of the biggest silver-linings this pandemic has unexpectedly gifted. Festivals and competitions have found that online events not only cut down on costs, time and manpower, but also opened the doors to diversity of events without loss of quality of the presented material. This forum also allowed for an

incomparably larger audience access from all over the globe for any of these events that would otherwise be exclusive to a limited number of patrons, pre-pandemic.

Lastly, another positive of online teaching that has been noted, is frankly the convenience of saving time without the hassle of many of life's functions, such as travel time to the schools, conservatories, or wherever the teachers and students met for their lessons pre-pandemic. It may not be something many teachers would perhaps admit to, but in the everyday bustle of life, when busy, productive, successful professionals never feel there are enough hours in the day - the concept of efficiency and saving time are simply, in all reality - purely gold.

4. CONCLUSION

As we know from history, all tragic events very often trigger new possibilities and open new horizons. This is how human being's psychology works. We tend to work most productively when pressed for time or even survival. Covid-19 pandemic, as horrifying as it is, did exactly that to our society. It opened the world to the sea of innovations and opportunities. As the entire world began witnessing its shutdown, the classical music world was left to scramble to find ways to offer, receive, and maintain the highest form of their art. After over a year and a half now since the deadly virus first surfaced in December 2020, classical musicians appear to have discovered effective ways to sustain their profession and livelihood in what has become all of our 'new normal,' in this virtual world. But perhaps, this global pandemic has additionally allowed the music educators to discover new ways to further enhance their profession. The discovery alone, in that there is no more boundary because of distance, and one can be as effective reaching out to the student that is thousands of miles away as sitting next to him/her. Social media has brought a notable change in the communication pattern of society in terms of different types of communication like interpersonal, intrapersonal, group, and mass communication. [4] Artists have been using social media platforms to promote upcoming concerts or events, with links for official websites, YouTube links, performance photos/videos, and program notices. [5] The massive growth of the usage of social media by the entire globe has already been, in essence, conditioning and preparing the world to be able to adapt to the current climate of the coronavirus pandemic. As we universally and scientifically strive to ride out this virus and its threats, and continue to manage the inevitable challenges that come with any face of change, we are also universally given the opportunity to push the envelope, and develop a more progressive means of creating and sharing our art as classical musicians. There is hope to continue gathering diverse approaches to online instruction that will facilitate meaningful

engagement with students, by sharing best practices, alternative assignments, radical re-imaginings, lessons-learned, and ideas that might spark solutions for continuing education in the virtual space. It will be a new, exciting chapter to witness the music industry as it continues this journey of development and evolution, as we hope to see the end of the pandemic and blast open a new door into 2022.

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