STUDIO TECHNOLOGY
What I Love About Teaching Online

Ryan Worswick
Studio Technology Chair

I'll be the first to admit that the transition to teaching online has been anything but easy. I sauntered into March with lots of big plans that had next to nothing to do with technology of any kind. I certainly didn't aspire to take on the herculean task of building my own best practices for teaching music online. Now, sussing out plans for 2021, feeling as though a decade has passed, I must confess I'm a full convert.

Yes, the learning, the product research, the organization, the troubleshooting, and the general suite of adjustment and optimization work that goes into building an online studio can feel endless. But the summed result has yielded a connection with my students and their parents that surpasses in depth and quality what I've often gotten in person. Prior to the online era, my time with my students was limited to the lesson. My relationship with their parents was mostly composed of the brief moments at pickup, pleasant but rarely substantial. Group classes and recitals presented opportunities to deepen things somewhat, but for the most part there was still a divide between how things happened in lessons and how things happened at home.

Now we have regular conversations about how well their current setup works, how it could be improved, and what the effects will be on the learning experience. In turn, this has nurtured a burgeoning sense of responsibility for the growth and care of their context in students and parents alike. Further still, the flexibility of being online has allowed me to try things like offering office hours to help with

practice technique, something that wouldn't have happened in a million years prior to our transition online.

Likewise there are infrastructural changes that I adore, not least of which is no driving. As a continuing student myself, I love my lessons about as much as I hate the commute; a great deal. Depending on proximity, dispensing with that travel means there's as much time as the lesson itself recuperated per student, for them and their parents. Inverting that, for those times when the lesson is forgotten until the last minute? That's fine, you're already there.

Another happy consequence is that recitals have become global affairs, to the delight of aunts, uncles, and grandparents nationwide. In my experience, recitals had included a delicate balance of tasks to ensure decent recordings, respectful distribution, and so on to provide access to the fruits of our endeavors. Now they can attend themselves, see it all happen in real time, and celebrate with the rest of us, latency not withstanding.

Finally, I am an unrepentant sentimentalist. I relish the opportunity to capture moments that students

and family can treasure for years to come, snapshots of how they became who they'll become. Pursuing that I've adopted the habit of encouraging my students to maintain a short list of pieces, updating as we go, and taking monthly recordings of those pieces. At least we get an audible record of our progress, and for the best of them we get some really special recordings. With the powers of Zoom and Google Drive combined this has become a snap, all the trouble of an afterthought.

I don't blame anyone for continuing to rue the arrival of this new normal, but I hope this has helped convince you that there are lights at the end of the tunnel, there's grass that's green on the other side, and there's still a lot of joy and good fortune to be found in our work, even if we must sometimes grapple with the unknown between here and there. Take care, keep trying, we can turn surviving into thriving yet.

MORE STUDIO TECHNOLOGY
Alternatives to Zoom: Strengths and Weaknesses

Allow me if you will, dear reader, to begin with a bit of heresy; I like Zoom. I know it's not built for teaching music online. I know it can be a big hassle getting used to it's dual interface (app vs. website settings), and that its default configuration for sound settings are diametrically opposed to what we, as music teachers, require. Most of all I know the time and energy it can take to overcome those obstacles.

But having done so, I love the whiteboard, I love the way screen sharing works, and I love that it's universally accessible. I love the breakout rooms and the polls, and the general steadiness of the software. I love that every bit of third-party 'please just make this work' software I have to use for cameras or sound explicitly makes sure that their thing works well with Zoom.

However, I know for many it remains a nightmare with each update more confounding than the last. Wherever you lay on the spectrum from confusion to comfort, the good news is there are other options worth exploring! More than I have space to detail in fact, so below is the beginning of a short series I'll be writing looking at different alternatives emerging to serve our rather niche (but ever so vital) needs.

RockOutLoud
(a browser/app based option)
https://rockoutloud.live

We begin with a Chrome based teaching platform born from the foundation laid by Jitsi Meet, an open-source (read: free but relies on crowd-sourced tech support) video meeting platform. As a teacher you'll need to log in through a computer, but they've built an app for iOS/android devices that your students can use to join. Built by a music teacher (Mike Grande) for music teachers, as with Zoom there is a simple hierarchy of features available for free, and those that attend only the paid version.

The free user experience is straightforward and intuitive, assuming you enjoy working with chrome.

You can highlight this or that video feed, share YouTube videos in a clean and convenient way, and share PDFs for immediate use or download with ease. Selecting different video sources for multiple angles is easy enough, and in terms of audio tech a ~$50 USB mic and headphones will leave you feeling well set.

You can have multiple attendees, but the video quality drops precipitously, and in general it seems to excel much more at one-on-one meetings than anything group based. I also couldn't find a way to remove my video feed short of highlighting some other person's feed, in the way you can tell Zoom to ignore non-video participants in gallery view. Past that they have a low-bandwidth mode, which so far as I can tell basically turns off video if your connection speeds drop.

For the $10/month paid membership you unlock features like a musician's whiteboard replete with stamps for tablature, spans of the keyboard, chords laid across the same, and more, as well as access to their burgeoning music library. You both get and can name a personal meeting room (as opposed to having a new meeting ID every time you begin a meeting, or something that's strictly numeric), and they have a waiting room and password setup available for security.

The crown jewel of the whole endeavor is the E.A.R. Mode (short for Enhanced Audio Recognition), which takes advantage of a custom audio processing system to code and decode sound information. Along with a more direct connection between participants than Zoom, the two combine to offer something approximating simultaneous play. It requires both parties (you and your student) be logged in with a computer or chromebook, and both of you must be wearing headphones.

Although the audio quality is certainly improved with E.A.R. mode, it makes explicit the 'meant for two' quality of the service at large, and I've yet to successfully play a duet with somebody. My efforts to do so have been between two people in the same city, with each of us on a hardwired ethernet connection, and working through audio interfaces. Considering that's more or less the gold standard for tech setups these days, I find it hard to believe that it's worked all that well for others, but there are plenty who claim it has so perhaps you'll have better luck than I.

Rock Out Loud is a great option for anyone who's working from a minimal equipment base, and it has plenty to offer to anyone at their wits' end with Zoom. I don't love Chrome, and if you find yourself using multiple services that interact with your computer's sound settings then you may run into trouble when you initially open RockOutLoud, including but not limited to oddball effects that make one end sound out of tune with the other by about half a step. That stuff aside, it's an evolving service built for us in particular and, if you need, the founder makes himself very available to help people get acquainted.

I hope this helps spark some optimism as we carry on with our novel path, and that you'll be sure to tune in next issue when we visit a brand new platform called *Musicology* that should debut in March of this year, another exciting service being built by musicians and music teachers for the same.

Get a preview of *Musicology* here:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD6eJaFKdXwwItZR8ULQ9Qw/about

Cheers!

Ryan Worswick, WSMTA Studio Technology Chair