Going Virtual: Surprise, Your Music Lessons Are Now Online
A (not too) Brief Guide for Students/Parents/Teachers
–Dr. Lynn McGrath

Well, here we are. Your face-to-face lessons will now be screen-to-screen.

It might seem a little scary at first but let me assure you that it can be pretty darned awesome with a little preparation, knowledge, a plan, and a lot of positivity!

I have a lot of info here. Probably way more than you need…but hey, feel free to skim and jump to whatever you consider to be the juicy parts. I will also have a **Resource Links** follow-up document for useful online resources on many of the topics covered below.

All that being said, this is also not exhaustive…but chances are that if a topic really tickles you, it probably ticked someone else, and perhaps a google search can lead you to a pot of internet information gold.

LOGISTICS: Getting connected/seeing/hearing!

1) You need a decent internet connection. Really, trust me, this is important.

 Do what you can to free up bandwidth, if needed. You can disconnect the WiFi to other devices to improve your speed, plug your computer into your modem directly, set up a hotspot on your phone, or even use your phone service if that works better (that will have its own disadvantages, but the number one priority is internet connection). If you are really stuck, you can even see if you can temporarily upgrade your internet speed if getting lessons online will be a temporary situation. *(If you don't know what "decent" means in respect to bandwidth, I hope to have some great links for you about that on the **Resource Links** document).

2) You need a good video conferencing platform (usually decided by the teacher/institution)!

As of the writing of this info sheet, the clear platform of choice for educators is Zoom for its features and options. While I had used Skype for many years and was used to it, I've found that Zoom outshines Skype especially for its extra features and reliability, so it was well worth dealing with the learning curve. Both are actually quite intuitive once you know where to look for things.

Teachers moving from face-to-face to on-line lesson teaching should have up an info sheet/video with links and steps for getting platforms set-up for all of their students who are not familiar with these platforms.

3) Equipment needs: This can vary a lot, but here are some basics:

Computers, i-pads/tablets, and phones are all options. My feeling is that larger screens are usually better (within reason!). I currently have a student using a large TV screen…she can probably see my pores, but I know she can also really see my hand position, and that's so important! When the teacher shrinks too much, the modeling suffers. Also, i-pads, tablets, and phones can be tricky to place correctly especially for capturing video though they can work just fine in a pinch with the right distance and support (a flexible stand, for example, which is really especially effective for certain instruments that require more complicated video angles).

Your computer needs to work and have enough working memory to run well, and to be kept updated. Shutting down extra windows and applications can really help especially if you have a computer "of a certain age." Generally speaking, check for updates on your devices regularly!

The microphone: Getting a great sound can be tricky for some instruments. In many cases, the built-in microphone can be quite effective for both student and teacher, but an external mic can offer a more authentic sound and can cut down on ambient noise. The external mic can be set up on a mic stand, a flex stand, music stand, or even on the table next to the computer. Louder instruments might create issues with distortion. There are ways to tweak the input to reduce this effect (more on mic options and placement to be found in the Resource Link document).

Tip from a colleague: If you are getting a lot of distortion or feedback, especially with louder instruments, having the student direct the sound at an angle (or turning the microphone) can help.

Audio: Using headphones can really improve the experience for both student and teacher. They can eliminate the distracting echo effect that sometimes occurs in calls, and really helps with focus especially if there is a lot of sound going in the home. I prefer over the ear, good old fashioned headphones, but I also have noise cancelling earbuds that I use if I'm feeling fussy…or just if the neighbor is using the leaf blower.

Camera: Many newer devices have pretty stellar quality built-in front-facing cameras. Usually this will do just fine. However, if you needed, webcams are a fairly easy alternative…these days they are installed quite easily, and for some will be especially desirable because they can be positioned for a better view of the instrument. *Just remember that poor video quality is often the result of a poor connection, and not the quality of the camera.

4) Lesson Space/Set-up:

I've learned a lot by trial and error, and I really wish I had been clearer about this topic with my students from the very start of my online lesson teaching. A space conducive to playing will get your started, but it still might need further adaptation video lessons.

Of course, if you are jumping into this with little notice, just do what you need to, but tweaking things to find the best set up will be worth it, in the long run, and might have the added benefit of improving practice consistency.

Location: Typically, the student is in their residence, and the teacher may in in their residence or teaching studio. Every situation can be different, but generally it's best if the room is quiet (a room with little to no foot traffic from the rest of the family/roommates). Also, some high ceilings and lots of hard surfaces can create issues (an echo) if you are not using headphones.

Family: The family members/housemates, etc. should respect the lesson space and time to help the student focus on the material. For young children, just as with face-to-face, there are many advantages to having a parent present the room, and this might be necessary if you are first starting out with virtual lessons. For my younger and less experienced students, you might need the parent to help with the adjustment of the camera angle, the footstool height, or even the tuning. If parents of young students have been more "hands-off" this might be an opportunity to get more involved (silver linings!). As needed, teachers should consider compiling and sending a basic guide for instrument tuning/care/playing position, as applicable, as well as list of general curriculum items, if you have not already done so!

Seating: Speaking for guitarists, we need a chair without wheels, without arms, and at the appropriate height for the student. This might, of course, vary by instrument, but being very clear about these things can save a lot of issues down the line. (And sorry, though very comfortable, the couch is usually NOT the best place to be sitting for a lesson). Teachers: well, you need to do the same. I've taught too many times in my wheeling computer chair, and it has not been good for my back or is a real no-no for proper modeling. You need to take the same care that you expect your student to take. I will admit that I'm more inclined to use a guitar support for these lessons as I often have to get closer to the camera to for a close up of the fretboard or right hand, and a support allows for more mobility.

Camera Angle: We need to see each other! As a teacher, I want a clear view of my students' torsos. I sometimes have them change angles the lesson to check on things like thumb placement, or righthand follow-through by telling them to turn their chair to face a different wall. As mentioned before, sometimes teachers need to see things from other angles…there are ways to do this by moving the camera or device, but even easier is having the student change position. You can train this in pretty easily with practice…I might say "90 degrees right" and they know what to do!

TIPS FOR LESSON FLOW (Mostly for teachers, but helpful for students to read too!)

Honestly, there does not need to be much of a difference from an in-person lesson and a lesson held online, but there are some things that just don't work as well, so modifications will be necessary. I actually follow a lot of the protocols below even with my in-person lessons, but some really are that much more important when teaching on-line. I could write a whole book

on this topic, and it will vary greatly by comfort level for the teacher and students, but I will go through a chronology along with some pros/cons and do's/don't based on my experience:

1) As a teacher, I set alarms for each lesson.

Yes, every lesson, and set for 1-minute before the lesson's end. This can be set on your phone and or the device you are using. Once the alarm goes off, if I have my guitar in my hand, I put it down/onto a stand so that the student is clear that we are ending our lesson.

2) Calling protocol: There should be a clear policy/procedure for getting the lesson started and for missed calls.

I chose to call the student at lesson time and aim to call exactly at the start of lesson time. If the student doesn't answer, then they have a record of my attempted call. I will try again in 2 minutes increments for up to 10-15 minutes, and may also try using the messaging feature. I usually check my email/texts at this time to see if they have had some emergency.

Teachers should have clear studio policies about "no-shows" and communication. In my studio, an unanswered call for a scheduled lesson without ample notice of a need to cancel counts as a "no-show." Because my students are still charged for no-shows (that is their lesson time, every minute, even if they join for the last 15minutes), I will remain near the computer and they can call me at any time during their lesson time once I have exhausted my 10-15 minute window of calling.

This is just my policy…if you are a student, and your teacher does not have a policy, talk to them about this. It can save a lot of frustration and hurt feelings down the line.

*Some folks might have trouble understanding why a teacher might charge for a lesson they did not have to teach for a no-show, especially if the teacher is at home! Please realize that it's really hard to change gears/have quality time for practice or to accomplish other tasks in these small windows, and especially if we are calling/waiting to see if you call.

3) Technical difficulties: they happen, and again, you need a policy/procedure in place.

I've had fewer issues with technology in the last few years due to experience and technological advancements/improvements. However, even if you have everything planned just right, there can be internet issues, equipment issues, etc. Many of the issues I have had have been solved by exiting the program and logging on again (or even rebooting my device…the old "turn it off and on" trick).

You should aim to check for updates and reboot your computer/logoff and back on to the program regularly. If you are using the microphone or video camera, built-in or otherwise, for other programs, this is all the more important. Often you have to give "permission" to allow the program to access the mic and video (again, the Resource Links document will have more on

this). If you are having internet problems, consider connecting directly to the modem if applicable, or resetting the modem.

If technical issues prevent me from teaching a large portion of the lesson, I do have a policy in place, especially if this is not the fault of anyone involved.

4) Reading Music/Keeping organized: pdfs and folders make virtual lessons a lot better.

Yes, we need the teacher and the student to have access to the music being worked on. This can be brought to very high levels on Zoom, so I will just keep to the basics: both teacher and student need copies of the music. Students/Parents: make sure you have music with you, and if it is a score that the teacher does not have, you might need to take a photo/scan/send it as a pdf.

Teachers: make sure you have copies of everything that the students are working on. One of the easiest ways to deal with this is to set up folders for each student with pdfs of their music. This also allows for you to potentially mark up the score and send it to the student for printing with the annotations if you are so inclined. There are so many options for using annotations, and exchanging documents, and I won't go over all of those here.

5) Lesson notes/assignments:

In face-to-face lessons, I often use lesson notebooks to document what the student should be working on. For online classes, this can be done during the lesson in a document, or even recorded in an audio list at the end of the lesson and sent. I like to type up my notes and send them at the end of the lesson…and if you are tech-savvy, this can be done also with google docs so that you can keep track of every entry. Calendars could also be used…there are so many options…this is becoming a theme!

Oh, and get this: you can RECORD portions of the lesson, or all of the lesson, in most of the common platforms. This is fantastic for students' practice sessions! You can also record just lesson summaries/homework lists/etc. in a video format. Yes, there is a button for that!

6) Speaking/playing etiquette:

Students cannot noodle/play while the teacher is speaking. If there are slight delays due to a slower internet connection, speaking slowly and clearly is important, and please try not to interrupt! If the connection in not very strong, video quality is the first to suffer. If the screen freezes, often audio is still there, so I just try to keep going with the lesson as often this issue will subside. I have asked to hang up and retry the call for some lessons, and that has had a positive impact but often those issues have occurred most with students in remote parts of Missouri, or as far away as China.

7) Other lesson enhancements to consider:

One thing lost in this teaching format is playing along with the student. These platforms do not do well with two sounds happening at the same time! There are a lot of work arounds for this if you are a teacher that often accompanies…this can be accomplished with pre-recorded tracks that the student performs along with, for example. Some teachers like to have students submit recordings (video or just audio) ahead of the lesson to be discussed/reviewed during lesson time. This is especially effective for motivation and a way for students to more clearly hear their progress.

There are just so many great things that you can do in these lessons outside of playing. Listening exercises, recording and listening back, etc. Also, because we are online, I feel even more comfortable about incorporating other digital tools such as online practice charts, etc. You don't need to delve into any of these to have really great instruction, but for some students, these enhancements can have a really positive impact on motivation and achievement.

Some ideas: Consider having students around the same level/age submit recordings or videos for a YouTube channel to have a virtual performance class. Maybe you can set up a musical pen-pal project that has them exchanging clips and even working with click-tracks to put together ensemble music. There are just so many possibilities that can really enhance the experience.

IN CONCLUSION:

I could keep going and going…and will likely add to this document over time, but I wanted to get something out asap. The bottom line: online teaching can be incredibly effective and once you get used to the routine of set up and more, the rest will follow. Some students with issues with focus are much more focused when you are on a screen in front of them.

My philosophy is that good teachers will continue to find ways to be good teachers, and will adapt to the environment. Good students will become better and will often thrive in this environment. You can do it!

Resource Links document to follow…on the way…