

Online resources for instrumental teachers

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned our lives upside down, professionally and personally. Without warning, we are having to completely adapt our teaching styles to accommodate remote teaching. While it might be crass to suggest that there could even be a sliver of a silver lining to a very dark cloud, the situation does at least give us a chance to reflect, respond and reset.

As instrumental teachers, we must stay positive and adapt to new challenges, for the sake of our students, as well as ourselves. If we have got into a rut, teaching in the same way year after year and maybe even unquestioningly using the very same books that our teachers used with us, this is a chance to regain our imagination and keep our students interested and motivated.

This is a brief and by no means comprehensive overview of some of the online resources that can enhance our teaching. Some of the sites and apps I mention are free, while others are paid for. Usually, you get what you pay for, and let's remember that website and app designers and developers need to earn a living too – this is particularly apposite for musicians to consider, when so many people seem to think that we should work for nothing. So, if you want to use their stuff, be prepared to pay for it. Often there is a 'lite' version or a free trial, so you don't always have to commit to purchasing something without trying it first.

When I embarked on writing this resource, I asked around among colleagues, expecting to be inundated with suggestions of amazing websites and apps. I was surprised, however, to hear many excellent teachers say: 'I don't really use much in the way of online materials.' A few teachers came up with suggestions, and some internet-savvy students have suggested some real gems. But it goes to show the huge range of resources online that may not be being exploited.

Listening

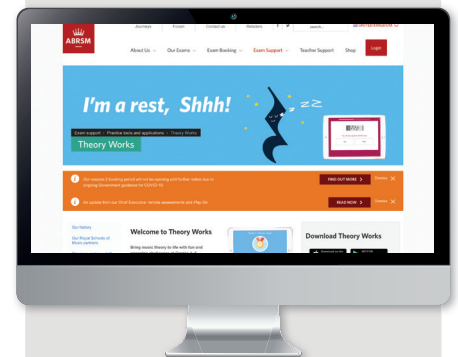
We should always encourage our student to listen to a broad range of music. Their own instrument, and music that they're currently studying, can serve as a starting point, but there are no limits to where this exploration ends. To engage a student, you can make this a two-way process: they can educate you, too. Are you familiar with the music that your students (or even your own children, if you have any) choose to listen to?

YouTube is a virtually limitless library of music, where you can explore your instrument in a multitude of genres, and, of course, hear top virtuosos as well as some fairly awful amateur players. Students should be encouraged to listen to all kinds of music with an open mind. In addition to listening to specific performances of solo and ensemble pieces that they might be working on, they should be set extended listening tasks.

You can listen to even the best performers critically: how would you have played it differently if you had such a formidable technique? And listening to amateur players can prompt many questions about technique and musicality. Why did this bit not sound convincing? Are the breaths enhancing the phrases or making the piece sound disjointed? If you were their teacher, what would you suggest to improve it? If you were an examiner, what mark would you give it, and why?

Here's an activity to try: pick five genres and five performers related to your instrument. Send one link out every week and ask students to review it. Don't be afraid of sending out challenging listening: just ask that they listen with an open mind. Instead of influencing them by saying, for example, 'This contemporary piece sounds ghastly,' ask them about textures, the mood the music creates, what story it's telling, or what type of film could use it as a backing track. Then ask your students to use this as a basis for further exploration and ask them to send you a link back, which you can perhaps circulate round your other students. I ask my students to educate me, too (especially when it comes to pop music).

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Of course, YouTube is not the only place to listen to music. Here are several other platforms:

- ▶ Spotify
- ▶ Amazon Music
- ▶ Apple Music
- ▶ Soundcloud
- 1 Berlin Philharmonic digital concert hall (www.digitalconcerthall.com)
- 2 LSO performances (<https://play.lso.co.uk/performances>)

Finally, as musicians, we should encourage students and parents to pay for the music that they like to listen to. If they have a CD player, encourage them to buy CDs of their favourite music, or otherwise to pay for digital downloads. Explain that if they've listened to the music for free, the performers and composers will receive only a minimal payment and, in all likelihood, nothing at all.

Online tutorials

You might think that YouTube tutorials present an ethical dilemma. We don't want them encroaching on our work. Aren't they trying to do us out of a job? But, before the internet age, weren't there still books entitled *Teach Yourself...* ?

If teachers are proactive and stay ahead of the game, students will stay with us regardless. Isn't the idea of a good teacher to eventually do themselves out of a job anyway? As the saying goes, a good teacher is 'one who makes themselves progressively unnecessary'.

A teacher will never be replaced by an app or a website, because they provide guidance, feedback and, of course, human contact and interaction: one-to-one relationships will always be preferable. So rather than feeling threatened, we should have confidence in ourselves and embrace all available resources.

If a famous musician has a YouTube tutorial that reaffirms our advice, this isn't undermining us, but instead strengthening our position. Even if they contradict you, it's perfectly legitimate for people to have different ideas and perspectives, and it can make for an excellent discussion on how approaches are not always the same, and how we need to find an approach that suits us the best.

Even if students do fall for the marketing – for example, 'Beginner to pro in under 4 hours' (which really is the strapline of an online saxophone course) – they will soon realise the need for a real-life teacher. Many tutorials reduce playing an instrument to the level of playing a video game. There are a multitude of piano tutorials on YouTube, where rectangles drop down, Tetris-like, onto the key that has to be played. I once took on a piano student who could play quite advanced pop songs, having painstakingly followed this method. The problem was that she had no technique and couldn't read music, and it proved very difficult to go back to absolute basics.

There are some great online tutorials, however, ranging from famous players giving insights into their prodigious techniques, to teachers helping beginners to pass early grades. For starters, try typing the name of a famous musician into the YouTube search bar, followed by 'tutorial' or 'masterclass'. The chances are that you'll find some excellent advice to pass on to your students.

Here are a few to get you started:

- ▶ Lang Lang (piano)
- ▶ Nicola Benedetti – 'with Nicky' (violin)
- ▶ James Galway (flute)
- ▶ Emma Johnson (clarinet)
- ▶ Yo-Yo Ma (cello)
- ▶ James Morrison (trumpet)

General YouTube tutorial sites:

- ▶ Pianote
- ▶ Drumeo
- ▶ Trombonist Training at Home

Other tutorial websites:

- ▶ Drums: Mike's Lessons (www.mikeslessons.com)
- ▶ Guitar: Justin Guitar (www.justinguitar.com)
- ▶ Bass guitar: SBL (<https://scottsbasslessons.com>)

JoyTunes (www.joytunes.com) has a stable of apps that offer tutorials to learn simple tunes: Simply Piano, Piano Dust Buster and Simply Guitar. Music Gurus (www.musicgurus.com) offers a comprehensive selection of online tutorials and individual lessons. During the Covid-19 outbreak, Warwick Music Group is making some Music Gurus brass tutorials available free of charge – details (and the free promotional code) are available here (<https://blog.pbone.co.uk/coronavirus-free-resources-for-teachers>).

Here are some more integrated sites, which offer combinations of tutorials, sheet music, aural, theory and other resources:

- ▶ Tido Music (www.tido-music.com) is a learning app for pianists and singers, with a large library of sheet music that you can read from an iPad (and has an automatic page-turning function) and has video tutorials and other tools.
- ▶ ViolinSchool (www.violinschool.com) offers many resources including online courses, sheet music and theory.
- ▶ MusicOnline UK (www.music-online.org.uk) offers piano tutorials as well as theory and aural resources.

Sheet music downloads

Every literary book released by all major publishers is available digitally, and can be downloaded on your Kindle or iPad. Despite an increasing number of musicians and students who read music from iPads, however, many major music publishers seem to be slow to make digital copies of their works available. At best, there are a few piecemeal downloads available, but few offer a comprehensive digital catalogue (Warwick Music is leading the way in this respect). However, there are a lot of sites online that fill this gap.

Easy and intermediate sheet music downloads include:

- ▶ 8notes (www.8notes.com) has a huge library of free sheet music and backings, plus extra material if you pay an annual subscription.
- ▶ Musescore (<https://musescore.com>) is a platform to create and share music. It includes free software and a huge library. The music is not always particularly well-edited, however.
- ▶ Free Scores (www.free-scores.com) does what it says on the tin, providing a mixture of free solo and ensemble music and MP3s, with another section for purchasing music.
- ▶ Musicnotes (www.musicnotes.com) has a large number of downloadable scores for sale, with an app that gives you additional tools, such as playback, looping, marking up or transposing the music.
- ▶ Making Music Fun (<https://makingmusicfun.net>) has lots of free beginner music with piano backings, theory worksheets and other resources. Like many sites, you can unlock extra resources with a subscription.
- ▶ Virtual Sheet Music (www.virtualsheetmusic.com) offers a mixture of free and purchasable PDF files and synthesised accompaniments.

More advanced solo and orchestral repertoire sites include:

- ▶ IMSLP (<https://imslp.org>) is probably the best-known source of orchestral sheet music, scores and recordings.
- ▶ The New York Philharmonic's digital archive (<https://archives.nyphil.org>) is a treasure trove of printed scores and parts, along with old concert programmes and photographs.
- ▶ Choral Public Domain Library (www.cpdlib.org) is a library of choral music.
- ▶ The Clarinet Institute (www.clarinetinstitute.com) is a site that, as you might guess, has a lot of (free) clarinet music. In the archive section, there's a huge amount of music for strings, wind and brass, including solo and ensemble music that can be purchased.

Backing tracks

Many music books come with accompanying CDs of backing tracks. Unfortunately, the CD seems to be rapidly becoming an obsolete format. In these days of streamed music, I'm always surprised at how few students own a CD player. In my experience, only a tiny fraction of CDs that accompany books ever get used, and frustratingly the majority of these backings are not available online.

In my own teaching, I've downloaded a large number of backing tracks onto my phone, which I then play through a Bluetooth speaker. If played through the ABRSM Speedshifter app (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/speedshifter/>), you can adjust the speed of playback, which is an extremely useful tool.

Some of the websites listed above under Sheet music downloads offer MP3 backings in addition to music scores, but they are sometimes of poor quality. There are plenty of piano accompaniments available for ABRSM exams, both downloadable from the ABRSM website and using the ABRSM Practice Partner apps (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/>) for selected instruments. There are also these online accompaniment resources:

- ▶ Your Online Pianist (www.youonlinepianist.co.uk) offers a large selection of accompaniments for ABRSM and Trinity, as does Exam Accompaniment Tracks (<https://exam-accompaniment.store>).
- ▶ Piano Accompaniments (www.piano-accompaniments.com) offers high-quality accompaniments of advanced repertoire, played by a real pianist. Although there isn't a function to change the tempo, there are slower 'practice' tracks available for some fast movements.

Aural

The ABRSM Aural Trainer app (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/aural-trainer/>) is an excellent way to familiarise students with the aural elements of the exams. Not all of my students find it particularly user-friendly (and it has, on occasion, told me that I've got an answer wrong when I'm sure I'm right...). But there are many other resources available online, including these:

- ▶ E-music Mastro (www.e-musicmaestro.com) is a subscription site offering aural training for both ABRSM and Trinity exams.
- ▶ Hofnote (<https://hofnote.com>) also offers aural training, via a website and app, for ABRSM and Trinity.

A few other apps covering aural elements worth looking at include:

- ▶ MyEarTraining (www.myeartraining.net)
- ▶ Earpeggio (<https://earpeggio.com>)
- ▶ Aural Wiz (www.auralwiz.com)

Theory

Of course, there's a lot more to music theory than just passing grade 5 theory, but if you do need to pass this, look no further than the ABRSM Theory Works app (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/theory-works/>).

For younger students, Flashnote Derby (<https://flashnotederby.com>) is a fun note-naming game, where you can select the notes to be tested, and from the same developer, there are rhythm drills with Rhythm Swing (<http://rhythmswing.com>). For children (and adults) who like playing games that involve blowing things up, StaffWars (downloadable at www.themusicinteractive.com) is a great note-naming game.

Here's a selection of other online theory sites:

- ▶ Musictheory (www.musictheory.net) offers free exercises, lessons and tools, and there's an app available.
- ▶ My Music Theory (www.mymusictheory.com) offers a mixture of free and paid resources, along with subscription courses.
- ▶ Classics for Kids (www.classicsforkids.com) is a great website aimed primarily at younger children, with lots of theory games, including a very basic music notation function allowing children to drag notes onto the staff and write simple tunes. There's also information about composers and instruments of the orchestra, with lots of recordings to listen to.
- ▶ Music Education (www.music-education.co.uk) offers very many resources for class, as well as instrumental, teachers, along with many external links.

Scales

One way to make scale practice more palatable is to play along to a backing track. Of course, this can also be used for improvisation.

- ▶ On Pianoscales (www.pianoscales.org), the tracks can be used on any instrument, despite the name of the site – the important thing is the key (and they're free).
- ▶ The ScaleTracks app (www.scaletracks.com) provides accompaniments for scales and arpeggios in a variety of styles.
- ▶ Drone Tone (www.dronetone.com) can be used for practising scales over a drone – a good way to improve intonation.

Improvisation

Many people think of jazz when the word ‘improvisation’ is mentioned, but of course, musicians of all genres routinely improvise. As teachers, we sometimes need to strike a balance between allowing, indeed encouraging, students to indulge in flights of fancy and insisting that they stick rigidly to the notes on the page. Is your student only playing a semblance of what’s written because they’re being too lazy to read accurately, or are they having a burst of creative energy?

Trinity exams have an option to improvise using a stylistic, rhythmic or melodic stimulus. This can be in a variety of genres, so if you go into a crazy jazz lick when the stimulus is a march, you won’t gain many marks. There are resources on the Trinity website (www.trinitycollege.com/qualifications/music/resources/general-resources/improvisation) and you can find examples of the test on Trinity’s YouTube channel.

Learn Jazz Standards (www.learnjazzstandards.com) offers very comprehensive resources for learning jazz improvisation, with play-a-long backing tracks and tutorials on jazz theory.

Practice trackers

Not all music teachers will want to be notified with daily practice updates from their students, and they should not be judged harshly if that’s the case. If you’re lucky enough to have 60 students and receive updates from each one every day, the heartening news that all your students are practising hard will be somewhat tempered by the deluge of communications you have to deal with.

There may also be safeguarding issues with anything interactive between teachers and students online, so do check with parents and, if you’re teaching at a school, the head of music or one of the safeguarding leads. We always need to be vigilant in both protecting students and ourselves.

- ▶ ABRSM Music Case (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/music-case/>) is a practice tracker that enables students to organise their practice and track their progress.
- ▶ Tonara (<https://tonara.com/>) is a popular music-learning app with a multitude of features.
- ▶ Practice It (www.practiceit.com.au) is an online practice journal.
- ▶ Online Practice Record (www.onlinepracticerecord.com) is, as its name suggests, a free online practice record that synchronises between teachers and students.

Music exams

We are probably all familiar with ABRSM, Trinity, RocksSchool and London College of Music exams. There are, of course, lots of performances of exam music to be found online, so if you type the name of a piece from a syllabus into the search bar on YouTube, you’re almost certain to come up with a performance.

There is one exam board, however, that’s fully online and continuing to operate during the Covid-19 outbreak: the Music Teachers’ Board (www.mtbexams.com). Like the other boards, MTB is Ofqual regulated, but all exams are recorded by the teacher and submitted through their app. Entries can be made at any time, and the exams are assessed by an examiner who is a specialist in the instrument being examined. In this time of social isolation, the exams can be conducted by the teacher through a webcam and accompaniments are optional. They will also accept ‘free choice’ pieces of an equivalent standard – for example, pieces prepared for a different board. There are some excellent scale/aural/reading resources on the board’s website.

RocksSchool has also recently announced the introduction of video exams – see the board’s website (www.rslawards.com) for further details.

Teachers’ administration services

As we move our teaching online, we may need to offer lesson slots in an online calendar and share lesson notes. Not surprisingly, there are resources for this available online:

- ▶ For online calendars, try Appointlet (www.appointlet.com) or Calendly (<https://calendly.com>).
- ▶ For sharing lesson notes, try Evernote (<https://evernote.com>), or, of course, shared Google Documents.

A paid integrated service is My Music Staff (www.mymusicstaff.com), which offers a multitude of features, including lesson scheduling, invoicing and sharing resources and lesson notes through the student portal.

Connect & Teach (www.connectandteach.com) is a new service focused on delivery of lesson content, which allows teachers to make an updatable webpage per student with embedded sheet music, audio/video files and lesson notes.

And finally...

The ABRSM has a mixed bag of resources called Play On (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/inspire/>) to provide inspiration for teachers, parents and students.

Conclusion

This survey only scratches the surface of what's available online. It doesn't claim to be exhaustive, and is intended to be the starting point for exploring exciting new resources, and pointing you in directions you might not have considered.

Although it might seem that there's an overwhelming amount of material available online, there are still niches to be filled by innovative educators and developers. The role of a music teacher is often rather isolated, so the more we can share good ideas and resources the better. Let's keep exploring new materials and challenge ourselves to work outside our comfort zones, thus allowing our teaching to continually evolve. When we resume face-to-face teaching, we should be able to give more rich and varied lessons using some of the online resources we have discovered.