Online instrumental teaching

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Introduction

Many music teachers have been successfully delivering one-to-one online lessons for a number of years. This has generally been at a higher education level, and often involves international students and well-known musicians. However, the coronavirus pandemic and social-distancing measures have brought the need for online teaching to far more music teachers.

For many, teaching online may be a daunting prospect. For those who are eligible for the government's financial assistance, it may be tempting simply not to teach at this time. But for many pupils (and for many teachers, too), having a weekly online lesson at a regular time brings much comfort and some structure to what can be a chaotic and disturbing time.

If you work for a school or music hub, you should first contact them and ask about their online teaching policies. They may direct you to a particular platform or way of working. For private pupils, you may want to join a teaching network such as Music Tutors (**www.musictutors.co.uk**) or Lessonface (**www.lessonface.com**). The advantage here is that you may pick up more students and will also receive online assistance to get up and running. But you will also pay a percentage premium to the platform for your pupils. Many teachers, however, just need a free way of connecting with existing pupils, which is not as difficult as it may initially seem.

Most of us already have everything we need to teach online in our homes. Our pupils will almost certainly already have the technological knowledge to cope with online lessons, so all it needs is for the teacher to have the courage to give it a go. It's important to treat ourselves compassionately, as we do our students, and to allow ourselves to make mistakes and learn as we go along. This resource is aimed at giving you the confidence to start your online teaching journey, if you haven't done so already.

Your teaching space

Hardware

Your best equipment for online teaching is the equipment you already have. It's also the equipment you know how to use best. The basic requirements are a device (computer or tablet) with a webcam and microphone. Your options are:

1 **Laptop computer:** in my opinion, this is the best option if you have it. It should have a built-in webcam and microphone, which will be sufficient for your teaching. It's also portable, which is useful when setting up your teaching space.
2 **Desktop computer:** this will probably need an external webcam and microphone, but will have great capability. Obviously, your teaching space needs to be next to your computer.
3 **Tablet:** these are absolutely fine for your purposes. More recent tablets have excellent cameras and microphones, but you will have a reduced range of settings (see the Setting up your software section below) available to you.
4 **Smartphone:** it's possible to teach via phone if that's all you have, but the screen is so small that it will probably make communication difficult.

The important things to remember are:

▶ Start simply. You can always add more and/or better equipment later (see the Additional technology section below).
▶ Some quality of sound and picture will be lost over the internet, so your set-up will never be perfect.
▶ Your set-up is only half the story. You are also reliant on each student's set-up. Spending time and money on your side will make your room sound great, but you can do little about the sound coming from the student's room.
▶ All of these things are secondary in importance to your internet connection.

Internet connection

A decent internet connection is vital for successful lessons. You'll ideally need a download and upload speed of over 2Mbps (megabits per second). Connectivity can be improved by hardwiring your device via an ethernet cable (rather than relying on wifi). You can also try shutting down all other programmes or apps you have running, making sure other devices are not using the wifi, or restarting your device.

> Don't rely on information from your internet supplier. To test your internet connection, go to Speedtest (**www.speedtest.net**). Simple click on 'Go' and wait. You will then get three readings:
> ▶ Ping: the reaction time of your connection.
> ▶ Download speed: how quickly you can pull data from a server on the internet to your device.
> ▶ Upload speed: how quickly you can send data from your device to the internet.

Headphones

The only other piece of equipment you may need is a set of headphones. As a brass player and teacher, I would only ever have one ear of the headphones on, because covering both ears hugely distorts hearing your own sound. In fact, I generally teach without headphones. With younger students, although headphones may help to focus concentration, they may also get in the way, and if the student is moving around, they risk pulling at their device, possibly even causing an accident.

Software

Once you've settled on your hardware, you must now choose which video software to use. Your options include:
▶ Skype
▶ Zoom
▶ FaceTime
▶ Google Hangouts
▶ Microsoft Teams
▶ WhatsApp Video

Skype was for many years the industry leader in video conferencing, but other platforms have been catching up. Many teachers already have experience in using Skype, perhaps just for family and friends: if you've used it before and don't want to learn how to use another platform, this is the platform for you. Just remember to create a new 'business' profile away from your social contacts.

Keeping business away from social messaging is also why you might want to avoid using WhatsApp Video and Facebook Messenger. FaceTime is also widely used as a social tool, but is only on Apple iOS, so again, you should probably only use it as a last resort.

Some teachers successfully use Microsoft Teams and Google Hangouts (which includes some 'fun' features), but your pupils will probably not have a working knowledge of these platforms. If you have no prior knowledge of any of these platforms, you can download them and try them out.

The platform I would recommend, however, is Zoom, for these reasons:
▶ It's currently a very popular platform, and many younger people will be using it already.
▶ The free version is extremely comprehensive and should satisfy most teachers' needs. You can have unlimited one-to-one calls and a maximum of 40 minutes at a time with a group of more than three students.
▶ It's very straightforward and intuitive. There are many optional advanced features, but they're only available if you're using it on a laptop or desktop computer.
▶ It has excellent connectivity and delivers good sound and audio feeds.

Setting up your software

Once you've settled on your software, you should set up an account using your work email address. You will get an opportunity to create a profile if you wish – just remember when choosing a photo or username to keep it professional.

You can either download your chosen platform's software from the internet or as an app on your smartphone or tablet. Using an app on a tablet is more straightforward than on a computer, but you have a limited range of settings. However, this also means that once an account has been activated, it's pretty much ready to go.

There are plenty of online tutorials showing how to get started on the various platforms: try a Google or YouTube search for the platform you've chosen.

Advanced settings

The platforms we are discussing were originally designed for video conferencing. That means that they are optimised so that lots of people can join in a conversation with the minimum of background noise and interference. Unfortunately, it means that devices often mistake music for background noise. They can't tell the difference between a long note on a clarinet and a washing machine, so they may well try to cancel music out. Unless you adjust your settings, music will sometimes just disappear.

Microphones also compress sound, which makes spoken word very clear, but we want a more 'live' sound for our rooms.

On Zoom, there are a few steps to optimising your system for music, but only on a desktop or laptop computer.

First open Zoom, then go to Settings (or the cog icon), and then to Audio. This can also be found while a meeting is happening: click the upwards arrow next to the microphone symbol in the bottom left of the screen, and then select Audio Settings.
▶ Click the Advanced button.
▶ Tick the box for Show in-meeting option to 'Enable Original Sound' from microphone.
▶ Choose Disable from the 'Suppress Persistent Background Noise' drop-down menu.
▶ Choose Disable from the 'Suppress Intermittent Background Noise' drop-down menu.
▶ Set 'Echo Cancellation' to Auto.
Then in your live video window, turn on 'Enable Original Sound'. (To be sure, it's turned on when you see the words 'Turn off Original Sound'.)

But remember: it's only the sound of your room that you are adjusting. If you want to hear your students with the same clarity, they will have to use a computer and go through the same steps themselves.

Your teaching space

With your hardware ready and software set up, you should also make sure your teaching space is fit for purpose. Have everything ready and accessible in your teaching space – you won't want to leave the room to get a particular piece of music you've forgotten during a lesson. Set up your webcam (or tablet or laptop if the webcam is built in) so you can see your space. Your entire playing action should be in the camera frame. There should be a clear view of your face and hands. Be aware also of having the camera too low, since the view can be somewhat unflattering (particularly after a few housebound weeks!). Some musicians, especially pianists, may want to set up a second camera on their hands (see Additional technology below).

You should be well lit but not too bright and with no strong lights behind you. Low-level lighting can make a video look grainy. Your background should be tidy (a blank wall is fine) or you could set up an official-looking space, perhaps using shelves of music or inspirational quotes. Above all, make sure it looks professional.

The lessons themselves

Testing your equipment

It's a good idea to test your equipment before you use it in a lesson. Make some calls with friends or other music teachers. Make sure you practise all the things you want to do in your lesson: play your instrument, listen, give direction and so on. Test out your microphone and speaker levels, and adjust them as necessary.

Before the first lesson

Email the parents of your student before their first lesson to obtain written permission to teach online and also to sort out the following questions they might have:

Equipment required

▶ What hardware do I need, and how do I check my internet connection speed?
▶ Which software are you using? How do I download it, sign up and create an account if necessary?
▶ How do I set up my room? Should I use a chair, music stand, and so on? (You should make it clear the lesson must be in a living space, not a bedroom.)

Joining a lesson
▶ How will you schedule the lesson and invite the student to it?
▶ How do I join the lesson? Do I need a room meeting number? Or can I click on an invite?
▶ How do I enter your virtual teaching space? Can I join before the lesson time to get ready? Is there a 'waiting room' system?
▶ What is your policy on rescheduling if there are technical difficulties?

Safeguarding issues
▶ What is the appropriate dress and behaviour for students?
▶ Should an adult be present? At the start of lessons, or at the end? Can they stay for the whole lesson?
▶ What is your policy on recording lessons?

Payment
▶ What are your rates? Are they different from previous 'face-to-face' prices?
▶ What is the payment method?

The first lesson

Even if you're not used to working online, your pupils will be. Try to relax and always allow extra time than you normally would for the first lesson. You might even consider holding a separate 'lesson' just to check the pupils' set-up, although you can also work with an imperfect system for the first lesson and then contact the parents afterwards to discuss changes. You can troubleshoot (see below) in the lesson, but you shouldn't distress the student by fretting over connections that aren't working. Occasionally you will have to just smile and say, 'Well done, that was great,' even though the sound might have cut out for the whole middle section of a piece.

Don't be surprised if parents have not properly read or acted on the information you sent them in advance. You may find your pupil sitting on a sofa, along with the family pets, with their music on the floor and you on a phone propped up against their Xbox.

In the first lesson, help the accompanying adult (probably with help of the student's superior technical knowledge) adjust their system to improve it if they can. If they're on a laptop, where you can optimise their sound, help them through that process but also be aware when there are limitations that can't be quickly or easily improved. Check sound and vision levels to make sure you can clearly see and hear each other, and once you've achieved the best set-up you can in a few minutes, properly start your lesson.

Differences between 'live' and online teaching

When teaching online, as with so many things, there's no substitute for experience. After only a few lessons, you'll get a proper feel for what works and what doesn't. It will hopefully become a rewarding voyage of discovery as you learn how to put your ideas across with new learning parameters in place. But before you start, it's worth considering the main changes that occur when moving to online lessons.

1 Due to the nature of online video, you generally won't be able to play at the same time as your pupil. If you both have fast, well-optimised connections, and the music you're teaching is very simple, you can try, but even then you will almost certainly encounter problems. Therefore, you will need to find other ways to teach, and to build a pupil's confidence. Call-and-response works well once you get used to the slight delay.
2 You need to over-communicate. Because you're flat on a screen, you will have to work harder at your communication. Big gestures and clear diction work really well online. Use your hands and don't be afraid of moving towards and away from the camera for effect. Keep as much eye contact as possible.
3 You can't put your hands near or on students. Modern safeguarding restrictions have allowed teachers to explore alternatives to physical contact in lessons anyway. Teaching online provides the ultimate test for anybody who claimed it wasn't possible to teach without physical contact: here, you have no choice. You will need to find new language or visuals to help students with their body movements.

Troubleshooting

The more familiar you are with the software you're using, the more you can help your pupils when technical things go wrong. Find out how they could accidentally mute themselves, for example. Being familiar with your software across all devices (desktop and laptop computers, tablet and phone) can prove extremely useful. Most importantly, however, stay calm: if any technical faults can't be immediately resolved, be prepared to reschedule your lesson.

Further considerations

Administration

In some respects, it's easier doing lesson admin online because it has to be done digitally. There are no more notebooks to write in, or dog-eared messages from parents pulled from the bottom of your student's school bag.

However, you must keep on top of your communications with parents. After your initial letter, try to schedule a regular, weekly lesson. Importantly, though, send a reminder the day before if possible. It's much more likely that a student and parent will forget if they're out of their usual routine, and if there's no physical journey to be made to the lesson. You may also want to schedule a five-minute gap between pupils to allow for any problems, or to allow the new pupil to get set up early.

Send lesson notes to your students, via their parents' emails, with what they should practise for the week. It's probably better not to use the built-in chat or messaging functions that some platforms offer: again, you should make the experience feel as professional as possible, rather than simply another social media interaction. Consider writing lesson notes during the lesson, screen sharing them at the end of the lesson (see Additional technology below) and then emailing them to parents.

Child protection

There are mixed opinions about the best way to conduct online lessons, particularly in relation to recording them for child protection purposes. Obviously any recording must only be done with parental consent. Not recording lessons yourself but allowing parents to record your lessons if they wish may well be the best option.

Many of the issues of child protection should be covered in your initial letter to parents, but here's a quick checklist:

▶ Dress smartly, in the same way as you would in school. If your student is not dressed appropriately (for example in pyjamas), terminate the lesson until the issue is resolved.
▶ Never use a bedroom for lessons or have personal information in your webcam view. And if your student starts the lesson in a bedroom, terminate the lesson until the issue is resolved.
▶ Keep all online profiles professional and not linked to any social media.
▶ Put all devices on 'Do not disturb' mode during lessons to avoid any personal notifications.
▶ Insist that you make contact with the parent at some point during the lesson, preferably the beginning and the end. Make sure that the pupil is not in a closed room: keep an 'open door' policy or make sure the parent is recording the lesson.

Additional technology

As online music teachers, most of us are only scratching the surface of the technology that's available to us. Each musical instrument poses its own problems when being taught online, and they're issues that can generally be solved using a combination of equipment and knowledge. If you're ready to develop your online teaching, here are some things to consider. Be aware, though, as before that these changes only apply to your room, not what you'll receive from your student.

4 **Additional cameras:** most platforms have the capacity to switch views between more than one camera. Pianists, for example, often like to have one camera on their face, for easy communication, and another on their hands from above the keyboard. Guitarists might also like to have a separate camera on their left hand.
5 **Better microphones and webcams:** if you want to demonstrate your instrument to a high level and want to capture your sound as well as you can, invest in a separate microphone. An improved webcam may make a slight difference, but it is definitely secondary to the quality of your microphone.
6 **File sharing:** you may already store your music digitally. Many platforms allow you to send files to your students, which could be sheet music, exercises or lesson notes. Just be aware of copyright issues when sharing music.
7 **Screen sharing:** platforms may also allow you to share your screen, or an additional connected one, with your pupil. This may be a score, which you can annotate live, or your current lesson notes.