

# Are We Teaching Music in a Virtual Nightmare?

Dr. James P. McCrann – NYSSMA® Band/Wind Ensemble Review Editor

Do not “abandon all hope, ye who enter” this virtual music education existence. Though the times in which we live are indeed unprecedented, we can still take a step back, recalibrate, and embrace the potential new opportunities that shine forth in the silver lining permeating these dark clouds.

Yes, the shuttering of schools and cancellation of concert performances leaves a void in our programs that a remote experience cannot supplant. Instead of trying to replace what you cannot have, consider forging a new path to the destination you wish to reach.

It is only natural to reach a point in your career where, sometimes, you wish you could be liberated from the pressing demands of a performance deadline. Most of us, at one time or another, felt compelled to sacrifice the search for deeper meaning in the music while pursuing the perfect precision that will never be. Freed from the confines of keeping up appearances for public consumption, we can now delve into areas of music once deemed too peripheral.

## The joys of YouTube

Consider exploring a composer’s life and music in greater detail. Examine how historical events and culture can shape the music of a particular time and place. Take a virtual field trip, not just to a concert hall, but to the impoverished communities in which the El Sistema movement was born. Documentaries on YouTube will bring you from the streets of Caracas to the podium of Gustavo Dudamel with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Now is an ideal time to pass the baton to your students. Using online platforms such as Flipgrid, Screen-castify, and Google Meet, as well as an abundance of publicly available

educational videos, you can introduce your students to the world of conducting. Enlighten the budding maestros with the basic technical and expressive language of your conducting “instrument” and the elements of score study. With an infinite resource of outstanding recordings on YouTube and various publisher websites, your unit can culminate with the students making a video of their own conducting debut.

Perhaps, like me, you have been remiss in exposing your students to the glorious music of underrepresented communities. There are trailblazing

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women composers who continue to invigorate the wind band repertoire, including Jennifer Higdon, Joan Tower, Cindy McTee, Jodie Blackshaw, Alex Shapiro, Julie Giroux, Kathryn Salfelder, and Nancy Galbraith, to name a few.

You might also consider the rich musical heritage of the African American community, which is masterfully woven into the idiosyncratic compositions of the immortal William Grant Still. A band conductor as well as a composer, Still created and adapted many works for this medium, including his transformational orchestral masterpiece, the *Afro-American Symphony*.

More recent and profound contributions come from composers William Owens and Dr. Quincy Hilliard. Among the rising stars in all musical realms is Omar Thomas. He was the first African American composer to

win the prestigious Revelli Award for his monumental piece *Come Sunday*, a stirring expression inspired by the use of the Hammond organ in Black worship services.

These are but a few ideas you might pursue in this area. While your immediate performance prospects of this music may be nil, you will emerge with endless ideas for concert programming when things return to normal.

## Your student stars

Perhaps the most underrepresented composers in the field are your own students, who may never have even tried to write music. Among the learning standards that ensemble music directors find most difficult to implement in their classrooms are those related to student composition. The reasonable question often posed is, how do I find time to incorporate composition when I am inundated with so many performance requirements?

The COVID crisis has at least temporarily removed the most onerous obstacle. Encourage your students to find their own voice, even if it begins with a short melody on their instrument. Teacher-guided parameters and ongoing commentary will go a long way in helping the students to focus on attainable goals while discovering a new creative outlet. Even if you are completely devoid of ideas, rest assured, help is on the way. At the time of this writing, numerous professional organizations are collaborating on research initiatives that will impact every aspect of our field.

## New adventures await

In due course, we will learn the results of studies dealing with the potential aerosol transmission of viruses in a band rehearsal setting and the safe handling of shared instruments.

Recommended practices will be offered for new learning environments that can include live, virtual, or hybrid models of instruction. Renowned composers, including Steven Bryant, Brian Balmages, Robert W. Smith, John Mackey, and Frank Ticheli are collaborating with their publishers in developing expressive, high-quality materials for flexible settings, such as solo, chamber, and small ensembles of mixed instrumentation.

Chamber music playing is essential to learning how to become a complete musician. Perhaps this pandemic will compel us to engage in a worthwhile endeavor that we should have been spending more time on all along. Our large ensembles just might emerge stronger as a result when they return.

In further support of this new direction, Alex Shapiro is taking her innovative integration of electronic soundtracks with live instrumental music to a whole new level. Her efforts are aimed at bridging the divide between the ensemble experience that students crave and the desolate reality of playing in solitude. Be on the lookout for an infusion of pioneering resources in the months ahead.

### **Avoiding the virtual trap**

For the love of ensemble music education, I respectfully offer some words of caution about performance videos, some of which have gone viral in recent days (no pun intended). I mention these with the utmost respect for the incredible work of many teachers, whose technological adroitness far surpasses my own.

It is imperative in this computer age that we never give the impression that these “virtual concerts” are a suitable replacement for traditional music performing organizations. There is simply nothing “ensemble” about recording individual tracks in isolation, which are then manipulated, edited, and spliced together using a software interface. Truly training students to balance their sound within a group setting, adjusting to each player’s musical intricacies and nuance, and melding their parts into the whole is an incredibly important skill set that

requires applied, hands-on training and honing.

In producing a final product that is artificially spliced together and computer-generated from separate tracks, we fail to teach the most vital aspects of community music-making. In some ways, all it becomes is a less intensive version of a private lesson. Furthermore, great ensemble music demands a vast array of subtle tempo, mood, and timbral changes. It is not as simple as recording something in time on a track and sending it to individual players, upon which they will base their parts.

Though the outcome can be quite compelling, herein lies the danger. While we as educators attempt to assert that our work with students is not “all about the concert,” we can undermine our own argument with a seemingly polished gem presented as the pinnacle of our remote learning experience. Like the proverbial “fool’s gold,” the initial glitter, in the form of a broadcast via school district websites, social media, and by easily forwarding an e-mail link, may indeed induce a sense of being aesthetically prosperous. It can also generate a heightened state of awareness of your program. Beneath the style, however, is a lack of authentic and organic musical substance.

Bear in mind that there are board members and administrators who desire the positive PR for what it means to the school district, not necessarily for the music program itself. Many lack a broad understanding of music programs and their importance to a well-rounded education. Yet, they, too, will inevitably find themselves facing dwindling funding in a time of economic crisis.

They will need to slice and dice what they perceive to be their discretionary budgets. Perish the thought that they would deem music teachers expendable, believing that one can successfully serve the needs of the masses in a new, remote setting. Why would they not if we, ourselves, provided the compelling evidence? The “virtual concert” must always be presented with appropriate caveats, lest we potentially render ourselves

and our critical mission to be considered obsolete.

Our programs aspire to create beauty, while empowering students to experience life in all of its various manifestations of feeling. Playing in sync and in tune is a means to express all that makes us human in a way that transcends the limits of our own individual existence. Social distancing has created a void in our lives that a virtual reality can never satisfy. That our students feel the loss of that intimate, ensemble, music-making experience is not entirely a bad thing. It exemplifies that we have successfully instilled a passion for music that they will yearn to be part of again, even if it is simply by appreciating its magnificence by any means in which they can partake. Better to have loved and lost as the saying goes.

Being resistant to change is not at all the intention here. We must, however, remain vigilant in protecting our medium from morphing into something it was never intended to be. Along those lines, in pursuing alternative modes of study such as the aforementioned, we should also be wary not to bog our students down with so much written work that we no longer distinguish our class as their welcomed respite from the rigors of traditional academic studies. Remaining true to our creative intentions, we can guard against assignments that become too tedious and impede a love of music.

As you continue to navigate these uncharted waters, bear in mind that some failure will undoubtedly be an option. Changing the essence of our delivery of instruction on a moment’s notice was not something that any of us learned in college. Whether your new assignment underwhelms, or your online class gets “Zoom-bombed” (hopefully with nothing too sinister), a great teacher always reflects and reimagines.

As Winston Churchill reminds us, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal, it is the courage to continue that counts.” Given that his sage advice helped lead the Allies to victory in World War II, it can give us all the confidence in the world that we, too, shall overcome. ||