

# Teaching Online Music Lessons

*Terry Ewell considers this method of teaching which has become so essential under the current worldwide lockdowns, and which is enabling oboe and bassoon pupils and teachers to maintain studies and livelihoods.*



Terry Ewell

The technical changes we are experiencing in our society are remarkable. It is fortunate indeed that, in reaction to Coronavirus, music education can continue over the Internet. I have taught lessons for over a decade to students in China, Canada and throughout the USA, and now do so even more frequently as a university professor and a private bassoon instructor. This article draws upon over 20 years of my experience with online education and presents practical advice for those seeking to teach music lessons this way.

Supporting this article are five supplemental videos that provide further explanations to various portions of the text. These are referenced below as videos 1 to 5; see the end notes for further details.

## Which Online Platform Should I Use?

A decade ago, Skype was the main platform available for VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). Today, however, there are many more platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangouts, FaceTime and others. It is best for the online music teacher to settle on a platform that allows for easy access for all students, either by computer or smart phone. FaceTime is not available to Android phone users, so this is not recommended. I have not taught lessons on all of the available platforms, but I have had success with Skype and Zoom and both are in current use by a number of online teachers. Regardless of the platform chosen, however, the advice given below will apply equally to teaching online lessons.

## Planning for Online Lessons

Special planning and preparation are needed for successful online lessons. Naturally you will need to communicate your account information with your student in advance of the set lesson time. I also give students my cell phone number in case we have difficulties connecting over the Internet. Ideally computers should be connected by ethernet cables directly to the routers rather than using wireless connections. The speed of Internet connection will determine the quality of the session, so wireless communication should be avoided, if possible. The choice of microphones can make significant differences for sound quality. Some of the built-in microphones work adequately and others don't. The best solution is to have good quality USB microphones that plug into the computers for both student and teacher. The sound qualities of these devices are significantly better than the small microphones built into computers or smart phones. The students will hear the audio through the computer or device speakers. I, however, use earbuds during the lessons to eliminate any problems with feedback. In any case, the microphones should not be placed directly in front of the computer speakers to avoid these feedback issues.

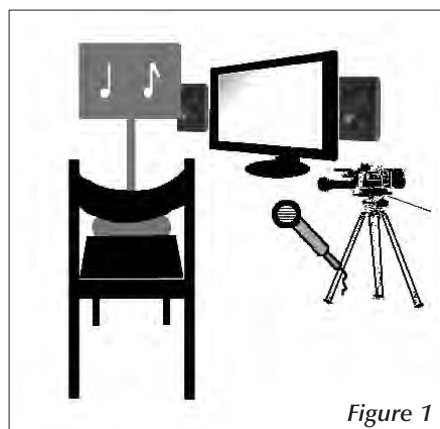


Figure 1

Sound quality is dramatically improved if the students do not play directly into the microphones. Students should place the microphones and laptops with built-in cameras off to the side. For bassoon lessons, I prefer the cameras focused in such a way that I can see both hands with thumbs and fingers and their embouchure (Figure 1). This position is well illustrated in video 1 'Teaching Skype Music Lessons' at 2:45, although I would like to see more of the right hand (Figure 2). Viewing a student

from the right provides the position that I normally see during a face-to-face bassoon lesson. The music stand can be placed in the normal position in front of the student. Oboe teachers may prefer to have the student face forward, but off to the side (45-degree angle), for the best visual and audio quality.

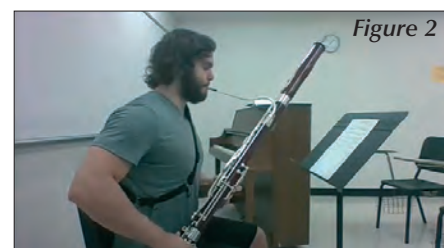


Figure 2

There are large dynamic differences between speaking voices and the performing instruments. Instruments are generally much louder than normal speech. For this reason, it is best to disable the automatic microphone settings with online applications such as Skype or Zoom. This microphone adjustment for Skype is demonstrated in videos 1 and 2 and procedures for Zoom are in the end note 3 below. Once the microphone levels are adjusted best to represent musical sounds, the students may need to speak up more, particularly if they are a distance from the microphone. When I demonstrate a passage over an online lesson, I purposely play bassoon in the pp-mf dynamic range in order to mitigate the volume differences between my performance and speaking. Also, I don't want to overwhelm the microphone's capacity to broadcast my sound, which would provide distortion.

Other musical materials and advice for lessons are more obvious. Students should have on hand pencils, metronomes, mirrors and, of course their instruments with reeds. It is quite important that both students and teachers have the same edition of the music. This will facilitate discussions and performances on the students' and teachers' instruments. Adding bar numbers to the music is quite helpful as well. In addition, lessons are best given in places where the students can concentrate without disturbance. Teachers should arrange for professional looking spaces that are free of distractions and with good lighting. In addition, I send lesson reminders a day or so prior to the lesson time, and follow up

with an email summary of the lesson to the student and their parent/guardian.

### Strategies for Teaching Online Lessons

Latency, which is time lag or delay, does not permit teachers to play duets with students over the Internet. While there are some specialised attempts to mitigate the problems of latency, at this point the solution is not ready for everyday online lessons.<sup>i</sup> All students, especially beginners, should be performing with others in lessons.<sup>ii</sup> This helps students master performance skills of intonation, timing, ensemble playing and a good tone. My solution has been to prepare audio and video files of duets from *A Tune a Day*, *Rubank Methods*, and my own publication *Graded Bassoon Excerpts*.<sup>iii</sup> These 'music minus one' duets and trios, available for all, provide students with many hours of practice (See [www.2reed.net/PlayAlong/](http://www.2reed.net/PlayAlong/)). The student places an ear bud in one ear or headset on one ear leaving the other ear free. With this method they can clearly hear both the recording and their playing. In addition, the student can play the recorded music through larger speakers. In general, the speakers on laptop computers, tablets, or smart phones are not loud enough for duets.

Other issues of timing must also be approached in a different manner in online lessons. One solution is to have the student turn on the metronome when they are playing, the teacher does not use the metronome at their location. In this manner timing issues can be addressed with both student's performance and the beat sounding at the same time in the same location. Tuning issues can be addressed with the student sounding a drone at their location while playing with it.<sup>iv</sup>

### Digital Accompaniments

My University Department of Music is readying for juries or end of the semester musical exams. These exams will be online or with video. Videos 3 to 5 address the use of digital accompaniments: their production, modifications, and use for practice and recording, but a brief summary is provided here. Accompaniments saved as MIDI files provide the most flexibility for adaptations with tempo and instrumentation. It is quite useful for a student to be able to practise at various tempos and for this reason I have created

one of the largest repositories of MIDI accompaniments and practice files for double reed players: [www.2reed.net/MIDI/](http://www.2reed.net/MIDI/). These hundreds of files are provided without cost to the double reed community. Computers equipped with the software Windows Media Player (PC), QuickTime (Mac), or VLC Media Player (PC and Mac) can play these MIDI files. Video 4 explains, however, how any of the MIDI files in the collection can be converted to audio files such as mp3 and then played on a smartphone.

Audio files need special attention for practice and performance purposes. The tempos of audio files (such as mp3) can be adjusted, although the result is not as good as adjustments to MIDI files. (See Video 3 for a further explanation.) My website also provides several audio files of major literature for the bassoon at different tempos: [www.2reed.net/mp3/home.html](http://www.2reed.net/mp3/home.html). Video number 5 presents helpful information on how to practise with the sound files and approaches to recording a solo with these digital accompaniments.

### Conclusion

Over ten years ago, my article title in *Double Reed* ended with a question mark: 'Online Lessons with Skype: Ready for Everyday Teaching?'<sup>v</sup> Then the answer was no: Skype was not quite yet ready for everyday online music teaching. Now, however, I would answer yes: online lessons can be presented on dependable platforms for everyday instruction. Improvements in Internet bandwidth and upgrades to software and hardware have significantly improved the online experience. While the advantages of face-to-face instruction are not easy to duplicate, the benefits of online education are significant. As a result, one-on-one, synchronous, online lessons can be a successful way in which to deliver music instruction when the teacher understands the strengths and weaknesses of the medium and takes careful steps to mitigate the problems.

### Figures

*Figure 1.* Illustration of camera, microphone, and computer screen location to the right of the performer. The music stand is in front of the performer.

*Figure 2.* Screen capture from an online lesson, Student Max Coleman.

### Further Resources

My private online students and the hundreds of public students on YouTube and 2reed.net have benefited from my online videos. I have been fortunate in the last decade to have been aided by many capable translators who have helped me expand the reach of my 281 videos in the English language to five other languages: Chinese (Mandarin), Korean, Farsi, Spanish, and Russian.<sup>vi</sup> In all, the Bassoon Digital Professor series now includes over 400 videos, many of which are supported by other online publications on my websites. These videos address a range of topics that provide important supplements to one-on-one online and face-to-face instruction: beginning bassoon lessons, reed making, reed finishing, articulation (including double and triple tonguing), vibrato, circular breathing, orchestral excerpts, studies by Julius Weissenborn, solo literature, etc. These videos have been viewed over 1.4 million times on YouTube.

### Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Two companies that provided solutions appear to be out of business: Jamlink and Jamkzam. Jamlink required hardware to be purchased in addition to the software. Jamkzam appears to be just a software online solution. Although latency is reduced with both solutions, the delay is still an issue.
- <sup>ii</sup> See my article 'Two are Better than One: New Ideas for Duets in the Bassoon Studio,' *Double Reed News* 97 (Winter 2011): 20-23.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Graded Bassoon Excerpts*, Levels 1-2, Duets. Published on Lulu (2015), [www.lulu.com/shop/terry-ewell/graded-bassoon-excerpts-levels-1-2-duets/ebook/product-22295189.html](http://www.lulu.com/shop/terry-ewell/graded-bassoon-excerpts-levels-1-2-duets/ebook/product-22295189.html) 'Play along files' are available at:
- <sup>iv</sup> MP3 files with drones are available at: [www.2reed.net/2\\_drones.html](http://www.2reed.net/2_drones.html)
- <sup>v</sup> Terry B. Ewell and Luis C. Engelke, 'Online Lessons with Skype: Ready for Everyday Teaching?', *The Double Reed* 32/1 (2009): 107-110.
- <sup>vi</sup> See [www.youtube.com/user/tewelltube](http://www.youtube.com/user/tewelltube) or [www.2reed.net/bdp/home.html](http://www.2reed.net/bdp/home.html)