



Sound decision a boon for musicians

THE latest videoconferencing technology allows students at the Australian National University's school of music to attend masterclasses in New York without leaving the Canberra campus. And by virtue of a relationship developed during the past 12 months between ANU and the Manhattan School of Music, this can occur in a virtual environment with CD-quality sound and high-definition vision.

Videoconferencing is not new but being able to do it with high-fidelity stereo audio, without time delay or echo, is a recent advance. "Now you can get down to subtleties like hearing bow pressure on the strings," says Adrian Walker, head of the ANU music school, where a week-long workshop earlier this month put through its paces a telepresence system developed for MSM by US company Polycom Corporation.

Like all Australian universities, ANU is connected to the Australian Academic and Research Network, which has a large capacity and direct linkages to the US equivalent, Internet2, along with European and British universities. AARNet has sufficient bandwidth to transfer uncompressed video and audio files. But, even so, "I think what probably surprised everybody was the quality of the audio, both for the string quartet coaching

session and for the violin class," Walker says.

"The chamber music one was particularly demanding because you've got four instruments and the lecturer [in New York] was able to comment on quite subtle nuances in balance between instruments, [even] the tone quality of a particular voice in a contrapuntal texture."

MSM is a leading US provider of distance education and has been developing the use of videoconference technology since the mid-1990s. "We initially explored videoconferencing to accommodate the touring schedule of violinist, conductor and MSM faculty member Pinchas Zuckerman so that he could teach his students while [giving concerts] around the globe," says Christianne Orto from MSM.

The potential was immediately apparent and MSM has expanded its programs to include masterclasses, workshops, clinics and community outreach.

It has also pressured technology vendors to come up with the audio quality needed for high-level music education.

"That's where MSM has been really good," Walker says. "They've pushed the providers significantly in developing that technology. I think you've got to demonstrate, whether it be to

policy-makers or to research development in companies like Polycom, the importance of this technology and what an influence it can have."

As an MSM partner, ANU receives a Polycom system. One application that occurs to Walker is the idea of a virtual residency.

"We could bring someone from overseas, from the MSM or even from a major institution in London, and they could spend a week or two at the school of music here at ANU," he says.

"They then go back to their home institution, but they stay in residency working with the students via videoconferencing for the rest of the semester. So you overcome that problem of them having to be away long term from their position.

"Probably the most exciting thing is that [the new technology] completely changes the way we're going to be delivering high-quality music programs into the future. Gone will be the days where a student goes through a university degree and only works with one lecturer. Traditionally you'd go through with, say, your flute lecturer, and that would be largely the sum of the exposure you would have.

"Now we can have input and masterclasses given from top flautists across the world."

ALISTAIR JONES