

# The Pros & Cons of Long-Distance Learning

## String students all over the world are taking advantage of videoconference technology for their lessons

By Sarah Welsh posted September 2012



Illustration by Maritsa Patrinos

When it comes to learning, geography isn't the barrier it used to be. Videoconference technology, used by such institutions as the Manhattan School of Music and the Cleveland Institute of Music, and often delivered via high-definition Internet 2 technology, has become highly successful at connecting students with teachers who aren't in the same state, or even on the same continent. With travel time cut down to almost nothing (not to mention the reduction on related expenses), string students are now able to access some of the most distinguished instructors and music programs available, often no matter where they live.

Susan Bengtson, a high-school student and violist who lives in a remote part of southeastern Washington, used to travel up to seven hours for weekly lessons. As she advanced, her teacher suggested that Bengtson find someone to study with who would help prepare her for a conservatory. Without close proximity to a major metropolitan area and growing tired of spending hours in the car, Bengtson started to weigh her options.

She discovered that her choices aren't as limited as she had thought.

Enter the Cleveland Institute of Music's distance-learning department. Bengtson was able to enroll in CIM's preparatory division, located a half a continent away. Now, instead of seven hours, Bengtson travels just 20 minutes to a satellite campus of Washington State University, where she connects to CIM's video feed and takes weekly lessons. "I had no idea what to expect, but I was willing to give it a try because I figured anything would be helpful," Bengtson says. "It's been amazing—life changing, really—at least in terms of my musical career."

For two years, Bengtson has been studying remotely with Jeffrey Irvine, a master violist whose former teachers included William Primrose and Karen Tuttle. But even though Bengtson has such a fantastic instructor, some people remain skeptical of the program's benefits because of the unconventional nature of her long-distance lessons. "A lot of people ask me, 'Aren't you severely handicapped taking lessons online?'" Bengtson says.

“But the only thing that’s different is the physical barrier, which you can make up for by talking and through demonstration.

“So it hasn’t been hard.”

### **Beginners Need Not Apply**

That’s not to say that videoconferencing doesn’t have its limits. For instance, how does a teacher respond if, for instance, a student isn’t holding a bow properly? “I think it would be a lot harder if you had someone who was a beginning student, because in the initial levels [physical proximity] is really important,” Bengtson says. “I have some beginning students and I have to touch their hands all the time, but at a certain point you don’t need as much of that. It’s just slight adjustments that can be communicated verbally.”

This fall, Bengtson will be entering CIM’s conservatory program, where she will continue to study the viola with Jeffrey Irvine. Only this time, they’ll get to work together in person.

CIM, like a growing number of conservatories, also facilitates videoconferences with other schools. Many of these offer master classes, in which CIM faculty members teach students at another school, or faculty members at other schools coach CIM students. CIM frequently works with schools such as the Royal College of Music, the Royal Danish Academy of Music, and the Manhattan School of Music.

Megan Shung, a violinist in the conservatory program at CIM, has been able to take advantage of the school’s technology to participate in master classes. One such class was through the Manhattan School with Grigory Kalinovsky, someone she may have never been able to study with otherwise. “I thought it was great because I was able to hear him really clearly,” Shung says. “It’s so much easier without having to worry about traveling. You can easily talk to people and play and ask questions.”

The Manhattan School is the first major conservatory to use a distance-learning program and has been instructing students using videoconferencing since 1996. The Manhattan School, just like CIM, uses technology developed by Polycom, Inc., a company that provides videoconferencing capabilities that connect thousands of students a year to teachers around the world.

“I was actually surprised when I experienced it for the first time because it was completely new to me,” says Anna Nilson, a sixth-year violin student at the Manhattan School. “I was surprised to see how good the quality is. There’s absolutely no delay on either picture or sound. So it’s almost like being in the same room as your teacher.”

Violinist Pinchas Zukerman, Nilson’s teacher and one of the first string educators to use videoconferencing, often connects with his students remotely when he’s not available to hold class in New York. He also archives the material. “He can basically be anywhere in the world and still give us a lesson, which is amazing,” Nilson says.

A few of the added benefits Nilson cites are the ability to watch and learn from someone else’s lessons and to watch your own classes on DVD.

“You don’t [often] get that from regular lessons,” Nilson says.

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