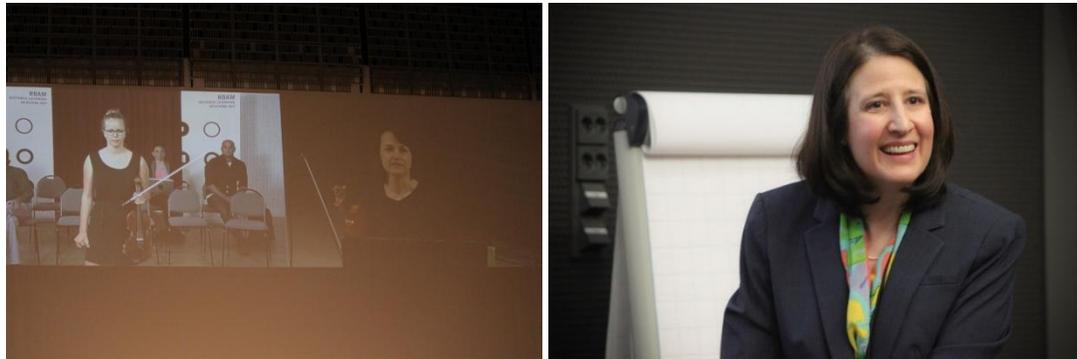




## Distance learning is connecting musicians across continents



For two days, the teachers and staff of Sibelius Academy and international partner institutions have been discussing the possibilities of distance learning and videoconferencing in music in an international symposium. Christianne Orto, Dean of distance learning and recording arts from Manhattan School of Music, visited the Helsinki Music Centre as one of the guests of honour for the Symposium and Practicum in Synchronous Distance Learning organized in the Helsinki Music Centre on May 19th to 20th.

Orto represents the highest knowledge of the field. The Manhattan School of Music has been utilizing video conferencing and distance learning technique since the middle 1990ies. Today, MSM produces over two thousand distance learning programmes yearly. What is their secret?

- We have expanded our personnel and space resources and the institution as a whole has really embraced distance learning. We have been doing this for over 18 years now. By creating an advisory council very early on I was able to bring the faculty together and discuss, what they wanted to do and what they needed. We gave them ownership of the technology. Today our teachers understand that distance learning is the present and the future.

In MSM, distance learning is also a part of the students' everyday life. It is incorporated in their study plans as master classes with the peer institutions. The distance learning team has also recruited teaching artists; students who act as mentors in distance learning for the next generation.

- Obviously having the technology optimized for music has been a major challenge: how to tackle the challenges in sound quality, sound delay and so on. These are issues that are most important to musicians.

Orto showed the enthusiastic symposium audience some examples from the early days of video conferencing in music education. Indeed, the technique has come a long way: today, the image and sound quality is significantly better than ten years ago. She points out that learning is no longer confined to four walls: it has become global and has many shapes and forms.

- Because of this development I don't see how an institution cannot take advantage of the distance learning possibilities! Learning has become global and so should the institutions. Distance learning is a great medium for this.

But after all the emphasis has to be on the art itself – the music. For Orto, distance learning is all about preserving the art and making it more accessible.

- We have to make sure that musical training and performance remain relevant in the 21st century. This can be done by making them visible in the society and making ourselves global. We are all musicians and music is our first love. To us it's very clear that it has to be our primary goal. Technology might be fun, but it always has to be the art's servant.



The experiences of distance learning activities at the MSM have been proven really positive. This has been discovered through a recent survey among teachers who have participated in distance learning. They were very satisfied with their experiences; they felt no major needs to adapt their teaching methods while teaching online, and they found it generally easy to teach musical styles and interpretation. There are still some issues to be solved. When teaching online, the teachers have to find some ways to compensate the lack of physical presence and maybe use more verbal descriptions. Some of them also found it hard to address matters of tone quality, some found the online sound unnatural. Distance learning seems somehow to be a situation of “win some, lose some”. While the technical equipment and the lack of physical presence seem to bother some teachers, there are still a lot to gain for all parties. Also the students gain from distant learning; they get international high-quality pedagogy and they also are enthusiastic to play for guest institutions. Online tuition also offers them very valuable peer learning. According to the MSM survey, students found distant learning just as effective as live situations. They also felt that the environment in online teaching situations was comfortable and warm. They especially appraised the international aspect and the possibility to get tuition from masters abroad.

During the distance learning symposium in Helsinki, the participants got first-hand experiences from some teachers and students trying distance learning for the first time. It became evident, that it probably takes a couple of times for the teachers and the students to adapt to the new environment. How to correct the student's finger positioning or bowing when you can't guide them by the hand?

- This was fun and it's modern, though I still would like to shake my student's hand when meeting, said first-time distance teacher Réka Szilvay, professor of violin music at the Sibelius Academy.