

Notes on Private Piano Lessons during Covid

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Guiding Principles

- Embrace the change, even if just for now
 - How can music / piano be a tool for each student to weather this strange time?
 - How can this be something to be excited about, not something to settle for?
 - How can we use this opportunity to be deliberately different?
- Making use of audio / video tech

Tech / Setup

- Digital Piano / External mic routed to Zoom F8 - USB to computer
- 3 cameras: front-facing, side view, and overhead view
- Zoom lessons
- My Music Staff for schedule / announcements / finances / lesson notes
- Whiteboard / large props for visual aid / fun

Other Adjustments

- Rescheduled to add 15 minute buffers
- Added additional “open lesson” slots on My Music Staff
- Additional organization / flexibility for parents

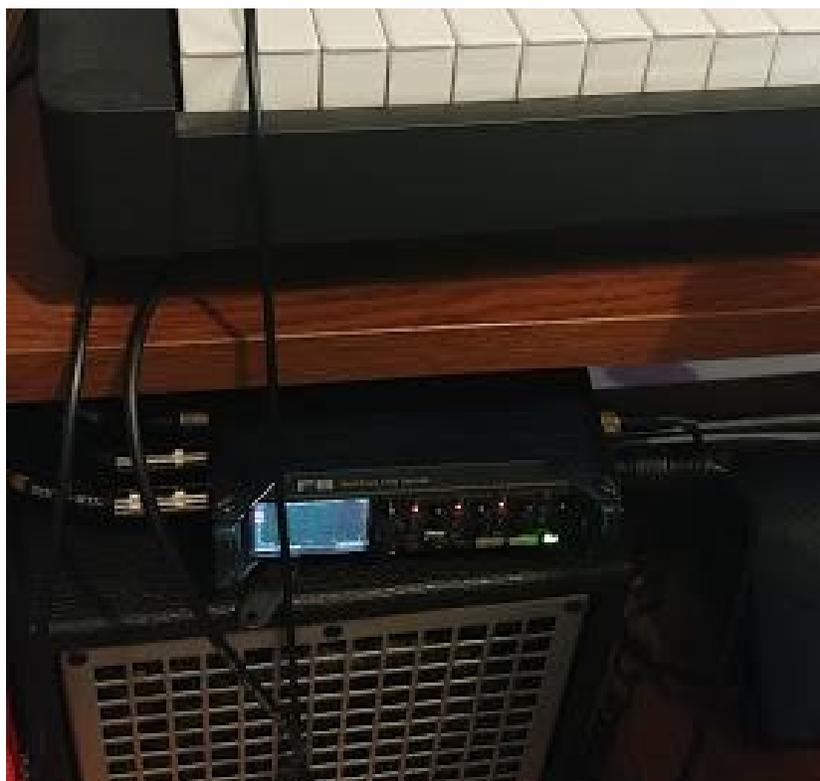
Observations

- If there's a way to setup a direct audio feed from a digital instrument, it's preferable to an acoustic piano
 - While settings on Zoom can be adjusted to enhance student sound, ultimately the teacher's clarity is more vital than the student's
- Multiple cameras have led to insights that are elusive, even in live lessons
- Some collaborative events are made much easier
- Dramatic life change has led to a wide range of needs and personalization of lessons
 - Some students cope by digging more into the discipline
 - Others have completely withdrawn and simply need engagement
 - Other music activities / discussion
 - Playlists for listening and expanding musical taste
 - Students' feeling should be validated, not repressed
- Students are enthusiastic about less formal digital recital

See images below for additional examples

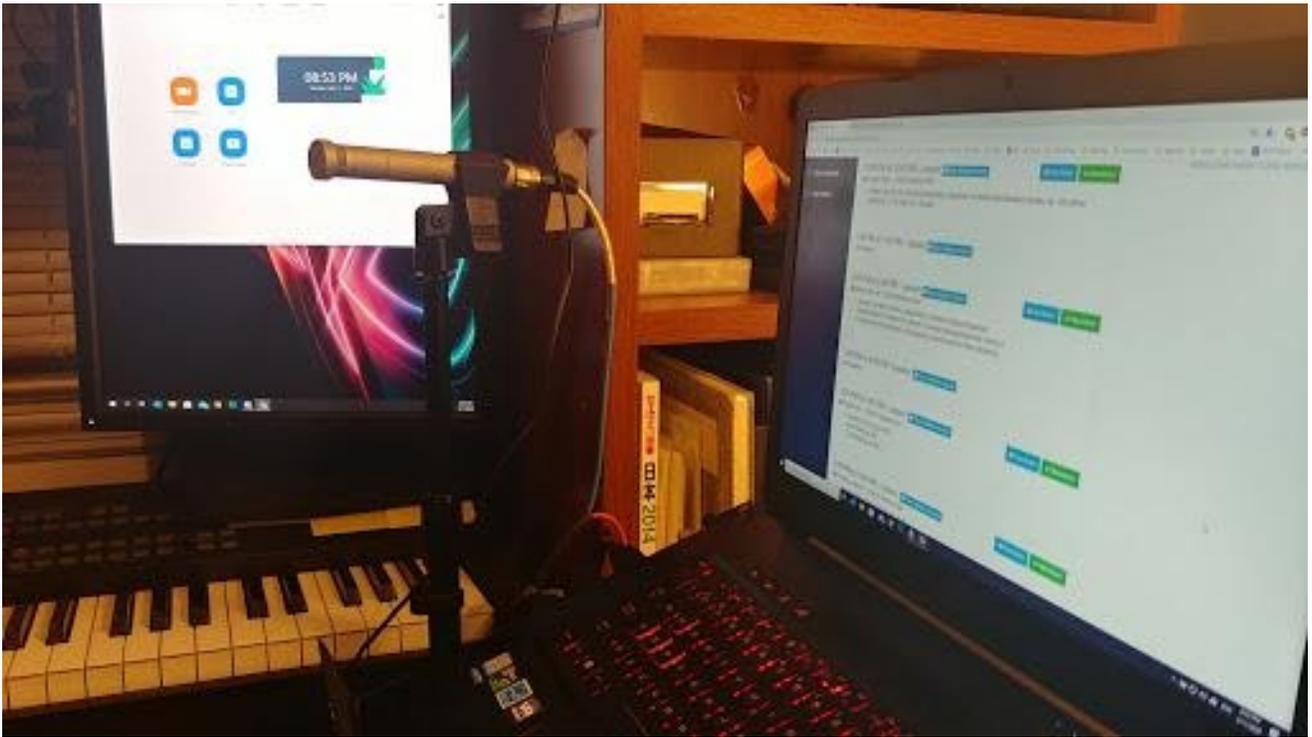


Complete setup

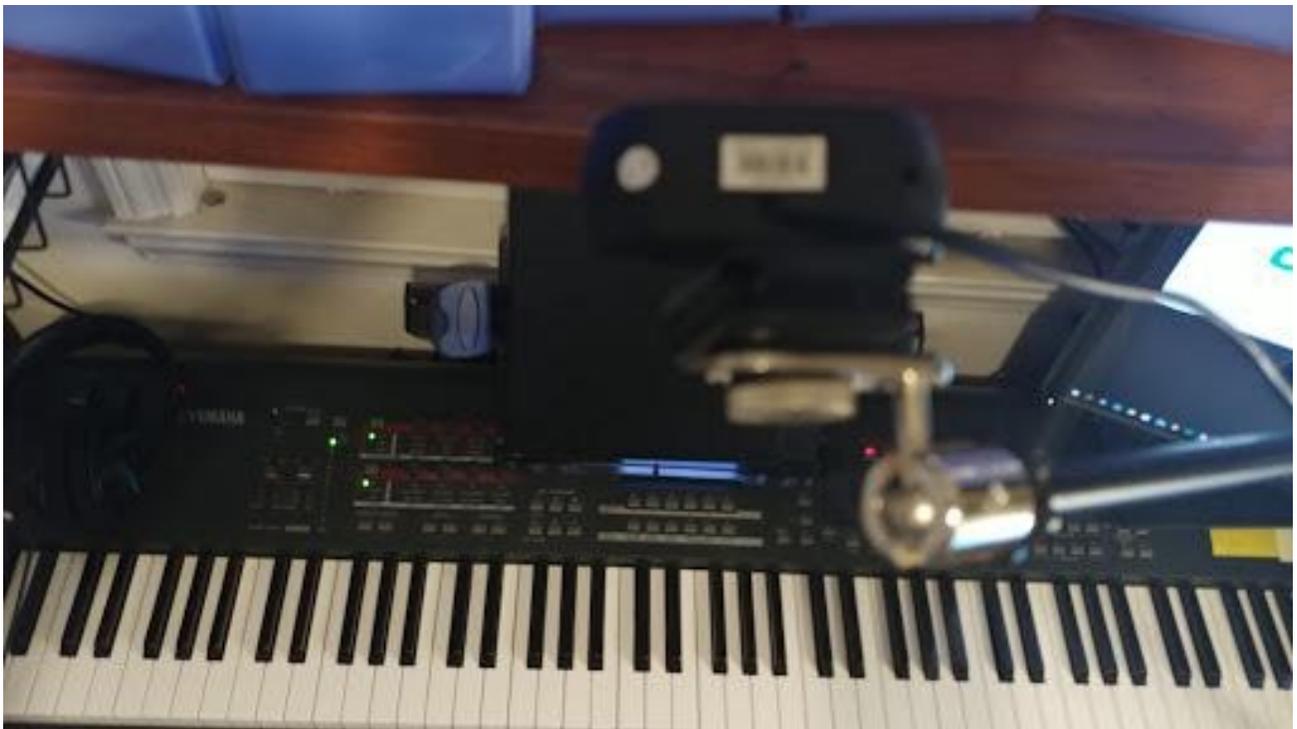


Zoom F8 for premixing audio sources before sending to PC

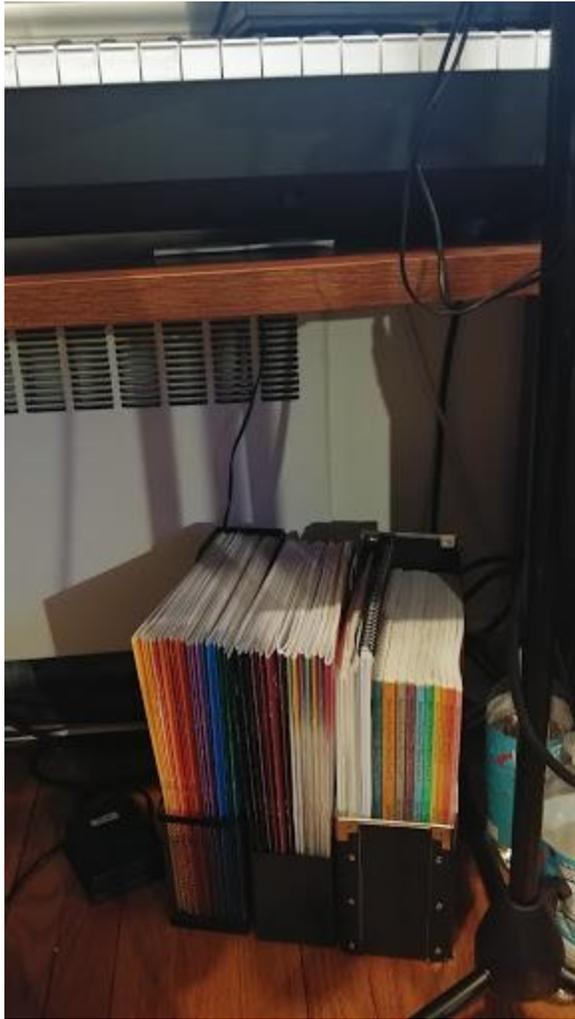
Zoom only allows for one audio source, so a direct feed from the keyboard would not allow for speech. Additionally, my keyboard has no external speakers, so a pre-mix is used to combine the keyboard and mic, which then outputs a single audio source to the laptop to be recognized by zoom.



External mic for speaking, Laptop with camera 1 (built-in) and My Music Staff, second monitor with zoom and camera 2 (to the left)



Overhead mic on boom pole (webcam)



Commonly used books beneath



Less often used books across the room, sorted

Alec Davis



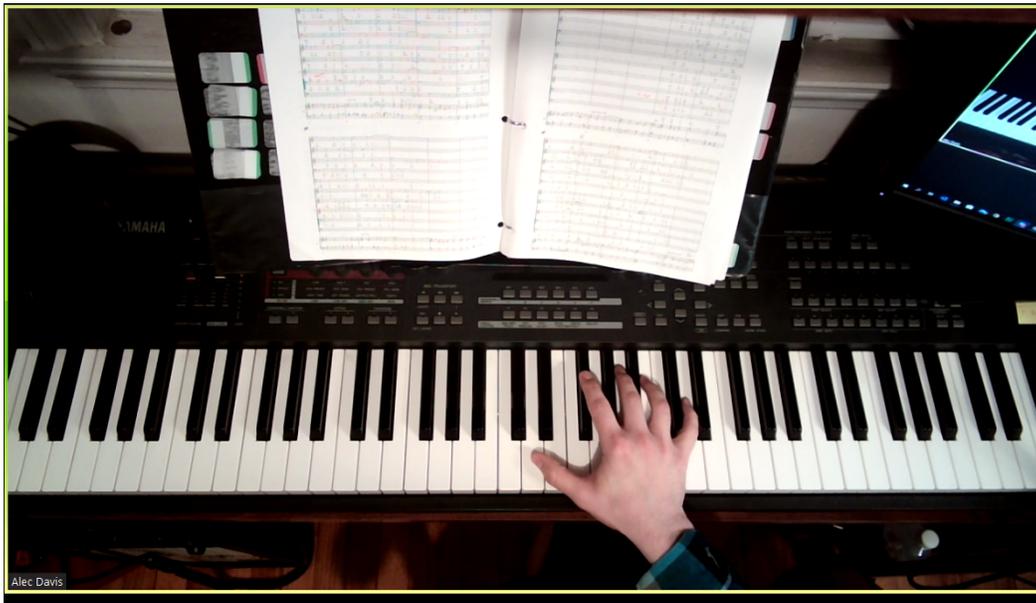
Front facing camera view (USB webcam)

Good for greeting and discussion, or for ear-training exercises that require the piano to be obscured.



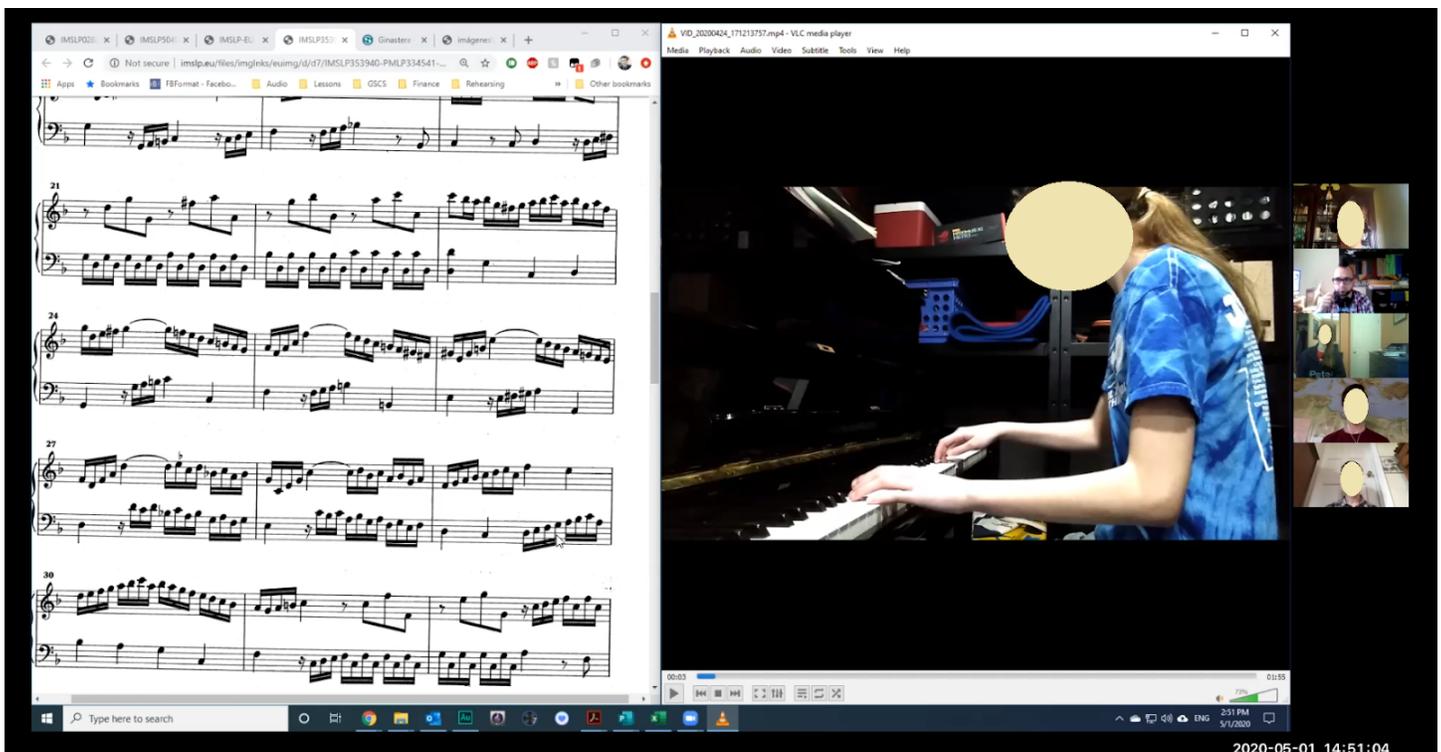
Side view (built in webcam in laptop)

Good for working through pieces and discussions, or showing vertical gestural movement
(image of adult student, used with permission)



Overhead view (USB webcam)

Good for showing lateral gestural movement, hand positions, fingerings, and most playing demonstration



Screenshot from Rep Class

Students each pre-recorded their performance and sent them to me. We had a group zoom with 5 students, screenshared their videos plus the score, then discussed. Since the event was recorded, students can reference the video and comments made throughout.

“Discovery Playlist #1” and written discussion prompts can be found at:
www.youtube.com/user/Pianobyme

Full Presentation Transcript:

My name is Alec Davis, I studied performance and pedagogy under Jim Litzelman at Catholic University in DC, and I currently teach privately in Baltimore and Montgomery Counties. I'm also the Director of Music at Westmoreland UCC in Bethesda and run an experimental concert series called Green Stairwell Concert Series.

I'll do my best to be as concise as possible, but I do think it's important to start by explaining an underlying principle and a caveat that have each guided the workflow and setup that I've found to be effective over the past two months.

The underlying principle is that during this time when we have no choice but to operate under abnormal conditions, that we should lean into our present reality instead of trying to approximate our preferred one. That is to say what's likely apparent to you all, that nothing will truly replicate in-person lessons, but this time presents an incredible opportunity to be deliberately different; and so I have tried to notice and let go of some of my standards and expectations, and instead tried to focus on how music and piano can be a tool for each of our students to weather this strange time. On a personal level, this also means constantly adapting to the individual needs of the students, and ensuring that we are a value add for stability, compassion, and validation, not an added stress in their lives.

The caveat is that I'm lucky enough to have access to a fair amount of audio and video equipment, since I'm married to a professional videographer and I've been a hobbyist audio technician for most of my life. So, that said, I'm happy to present my setup with the caveat that I understand it's not terribly easy to replicate. I do hope, however, that it provides a decent amount of food for thought.

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In the handout, you'll find some pictures of my current setup. I'm using a digital piano and external microphone for speech, both routed to a small sound board that connects via USB to my laptop, and have three cameras in various positions that I switch between during Zoom lessons. I use My Music Staff to manage schedules, announcements, finances, and lesson notes, which is something I already did prior to covid. I keep my most commonly used lesson materials within arms' reach underneath the shelf, and some less often used books across the room, and I have a small whiteboard which I can use for weekly inside jokes.

Aside from my physical setup, I've completely re-tooled my schedule to add 15 minute breaks between lessons, and added 5 additional "open" slots on the My Music Staff calendar, so that students and parents can have some flexibility and reschedule themselves without having to go through me. I've also attempted to make it as easy as possible for lessons to be managed for parents, and reassured that no student should stop taking lessons during this time due to sudden financial changes. This includes putting measures in place to make communication and finances as streamline as possible.

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So that's a pretty good overview of both the tech and policy changes, and I'll just throw in a couple explanations and observations before wrapping up.

I decided to use my digital piano instead of my beloved Kawai downstairs, despite my usual protests against practicing on them. In the end, I feel the clarity of sound that comes from a direct audio feed far surpasses what can be gained from being able to accurately demonstrate on an acoustic instrument (the subtleties of which are generally lost in a streaming environment anyway). If you have the option, I'd recommend experimenting with it - one thing further, I find that clarity from my end is much more pivotal to progress than clarity from theirs. I can approximate what they are doing musically and physically much easier than they can do for me, so while my setup is more extravagant, I put no pressure on the students to follow suit, aside from a few changes to their audio settings on zoom.

I'm sure many have been using Zoom. I'll just mention that while many of the insufficiencies of zoom are plain to see, there are a few things I've found that actually improve on in-person teaching.

One is the instant change in perspective - my three-camera setup allows for a front-facing view, a side view, and an overhead view. (There's some information about what I use each for in the handout, with screenshots of each). The overhead view, in particular, has led to student insights that are elusive even in live lessons, mostly due to the ability to see lateral gestural motions that are easily missed when sitting side-by-side.

Another plus of zoom is that small group collaborations are easy to schedule and facilitate with video and audio aids. I recently had a rep class with 5 advanced students, each of whom pre-recorded their performance and sent it to me. We all gathered on Zoom, and watched the videos along with a PDF of the score via a screenshare, then discussed the performances. That event was recorded via the built-in record feature in Zoom, so that the students could reference it later and review comments. Several students - in particular, adult students - even opt to record all Zoom lessons on their own computers for review throughout the week.

The last point I'd like to make is that I've found that this dramatic change everyone is experiencing has led to a wider range of needs, and for more drastic personalization of lessons. My student's reactions have ranged from doubling down into the discipline and doing some of their best work, to completely disengaging and losing all sense of practice, and everything between. To help those who lean towards the latter of these, I've tried to make things far less formal during lessons by taking a bit more time at the beginning to ask about their lives and offer encouragement, by encouraging a wider variety of musical activities unrelated to piano, by generally lessening the workload, and even by making YouTube "Discovery Playlists" of interesting new music that we can discuss. I've also utilized my small whiteboard to hide riddles or weekly inside jokes, and when I needed a haircut, they had fun voting to give me a Mohawk, which I have kept since. Understanding that this is also affecting the parents, I've tried to stay extremely organized with up to date announcement boards on My Music Staff so that their emails aren't overrun, and have offered flexibility on the traditionally stringent schedule and tuition policies, as I mentioned before, to ensure I communicate perspective about how difficult these adjustments are, especially for parents of young children. Finally, everyone is enthusiastic about an upcoming digital recital, which will be a stitched-together presentation of previously recorded pieces, live streamed so everyone watches together, including extended family and friends (anyone who has the link). They are given the option to introduce themselves and their pieces, and replace a final bow with a wave - these and other changes allow the students to feel more comfortable inviting others digitally into their homes. For this event, they're also encouraged to think outside the norm with their selections, and to be less concerned with perfection or performance etiquette, instead using it as an opportunity to share and find commonality with other students and families

Thanks for listening.