Members of a student chamber music group rehearse in the Recital Hall.
Chamber music is a deeply intimate musical experience. Although COVID-19 has thrown a metaphorical wrench into the chamber music programs, it couldn’t stop the gears from shifting, turning, whirring, until it found a new form, a new rhythm. Despite the very stringent limitations put in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, the chamber music program is thriving and has moved in innovative and exhilarating new directions.

The University of Iowa was home to a string quartet for over 75 years. However, in 2011 when its current ensemble-in-residence disbanded, the School of Music spearheaded a cutting-edge residency program that instead hosts four or five quartets each year, each of which is nationally- or internationally-acclaimed. The chamber music program has also expanded to include a Wind Chamber Residency program, which invites two ensembles a year to come host masterclasses, seminars, and offer guidance to students.

Both chamber residency programs are flourishing in the online realm, providing students with more opportunities to connect with the musicians than ever before. Beth Oakes, coordinator of the UI String Quartet Residency Program, sheds a spotlight on the fact that “Zoom does open up a way of accessing musicians in a different way. This is another tool for us, in terms of building connections for students and broadening our reach.” It truly is impressive how far the reach does go.

Dr. Ghyas Zeidieh, a cellist and chamber music alumnus, was one of the first to have an all-virtual DMA defense in May 2020. Dr. Zeidieh serves as the orchestra director of the Dubuque Symphony String Ensemble and Philharmonia, and came back virtually to collaborate with the Apple Hill Quartet residency in October 2020. Dr. Zeidieh says, “The easy access and the growing familiarity with Zoom has allowed me to teach masterclasses at multiple universities internationally. This would have been logistically impossible prior to COVID.” The UI Chamber Music Programs have virtually thrown the doors open wider than ever before.

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Beth Oakes
UI STRING QUARTET RESIDENCY PROGRAM COORDINATOR
Oakes has engineered classes and programming for students that incorporate collaboration and creativity right into every moment. The normal pedagogical model for chamber music classes has had to pivot, stretch, and grow into a personalized program for each student.

String students are encouraged to regularly record whenever they rehearse so that they have an abundance of captured content to workshop and from which to get feedback. Constantly capturing content is a new challenge for chamber music students that wasn’t necessary in years past. The extra recordings have allowed Professor Oakes “to have more interaction with students in a different way.”

Another key objective for Oakes’s students is to have them develop comprehensive rehearsal plans. “I am getting more into the nitty gritty of the rehearsal process with my students. This is what I’m calling one of the gifts of the pandemic, though they are few and far between,” says Oakes. “I would not have discovered these tools if it wasn’t for these circumstances.”

The curriculum of the wind chamber music program has also adapted and evolved in ways that add considerable value to each student’s education. “What is chamber music?” asks Courtney Miller, the coordinator of the UI Wind Chamber Residency program. “It is collaboration, communication, creating meaningful work, accessibility and flexibility.” Chamber music, at its core, is about collaboration.

The UI chamber music professors have stretched the limits of what is possible to teach students in the virtual realm. They have developed a highly versatile program that is tailored to each student in such a way that the virtual experiences do not just impact the student’s learning, but enhance it.

“I am not just getting a music education now, but a technological music education. I feel more prepared for the real world now, with all of the new tools I’ve been given.”

GREG BARDWELL
MASTER’S STUDENT IN FLUTE PERFORMANCE

How to plan

- Plan about an entire school year in advance
- Choose your repertoire wisely
  - Time minimums/limits
  - Stylistic requirements
  - Entire works vs. movements
  - Multiple rounds
  - Level of impact
- Schedule recording sessions if needed
- Memorization?
Greg Bardwell, a master’s student in flute performance who participates in the chamber music residency programs, also acknowledges these “gifts” of the pandemic. He conveyed gratitude that he is learning how to be self-sufficient in a way that extends beyond the classroom. “I am not just getting a music education now, but a technological music education. I feel more prepared for the real world now, with all of the new tools I’ve been given,” says Bardwell.

Initially Bardwell wondered, “How much will there be for us to do?” That worry quickly evaporated as the semester commenced. He is in awe of all that his professors are doing to bolster his classes and courses from bringing in a bevy of guest artists to covering a vast spectrum of relevant and applicable topics from video software to microphone placement. Bardwell relays that his professors have impressed upon him: “Here are the obstacles, and here is how we can overcome them.”

For wind chamber music students who are facing more restrictive performance practices, Courtney Miller has challenged her students to “explore the online stage, and become a 21st century musician.” Chamber music students are not only developing highly relevant, impressive skills like “score study, practice techniques, part preparation, and some standard rep as well, but also new skillsets like recording and using a digital audio workstation.” Miller continues that, “After COVID, students will emerge even more skilled— adaptable and flexible, ready to collaborate with anyone around the globe.”

In the same vein, collaboration has added a new level of vibrancy and vitality to the chamber music students. Beth Oakes says that while “students are always really interested in interdisciplinary work, we’ve never had the infrastructure in place to really make that work. COVID has created new opportunities for exciting collaborative pathways.”

Some music students have paired up with dance students in a UI choreography class to design and devise a collaborative piece “working through form, scale, dynamics, and interpretation.”

This opportunity has, as Courtney Miller points out, inspired students to “stretch and influence each other’s creative process on a more equal platform.” COVID has given chamber students the chance to “look at music through the lens of the moment,” which has been a rare and precious gift. This creative conversation, which is transmitted and experienced completely virtually, is a cross-disciplinary, mutually beneficial learning experience.

The UI Chamber Music Residency Programs have picked up the gauntlet, taken off the white gloves, and constructed something entirely and wholeheartedly beautiful to serve, inspire, and educate their students in meaningful and lasting ways.