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The State of Music

The University of Iowa School of Music has harnessed the chaos of COVID-19 and has come out triumphant. While the pandemic certainly isn’t over, the School of Music has not only adapted, but has innovated in a way that further proves the enormous flexibility and fluidity of musicians. By embracing the circumstances as a way to create more opportunity, we all can see beyond a shadow of a doubt—you can’t stop the music!

BY LILY ALLEN-DUENAS

On March 18, the Voxman Music Building had to lock its doors as the State of Iowa ordered the University to move all instruction online in response to the virus. In a way, the timing was fortunate. Students were already on spring break, which gave professors an extra week to figure out how to prepare and deliver their courses virtually. As Dr. Tammie Walker, director of the School of Music remembers, “March was incredibly dramatic. All of a sudden the University shut down everything and we had to move everything 100% virtual, immediately!” The staff and faculty had to pull together to navigate the challenges and to handle the fast learning curve. Projects were crafted, Zoom was heavily utilized, and lessons were taught virtually. The semester came to a close.

“We used the summer to really dig in and to evaluate how we could offer our students the best pedagogical experience possible using technology and to see what would be possible in the classroom,” Walker said. Delivering the curriculum under new limitations and protocols required lots of innovation and permutations. It also needed some significant collaboration from a team of University of Iowa scientists.

Dr. Walker led a number of initiatives on campus during the summer with scientists and medical professionals to determine what type of in-person learning environment would be possible at Voxman itself. The details of these scientific findings and medical recommendations are covered in another article on page eight. Director of Bands Mark Heidel says about the fall semester, “It’s not like we experimented. So much effort was given throughout the summer, so that we had a good plan in place by the time our students came to campus.” With an extensive list of protocols enacted, Heidel emphasizes, “We’re doing just about everything imaginable within the School of Music to ensure the highest level of health and safety for our students, staff, and faculty.”

In a moment of supreme honesty Heidel states, “Frankly, maybe the easiest way would have been to say: ‘let’s not even do this. Let’s just say our lives will need to be entirely virtual because we don’t want to run the risk. It’s too complicated.’ So, I applaud Dr. Walker because she didn’t take the easiest path.”
With sanitizing stations, mandatory masks, taped-off grids to indicate social distance guidelines, voluntary twice-weekly testing, and a plethora of other safety requirements, Voxman Music Building was able to open for fall classes in August. Aerosol and non-aerosol instruments have had to follow different guidelines: wind and voice lessons, for instance, could no longer be held in faculty studios. While some of those lessons went back on Zoom, others found suitable space in other UI buildings, rented facilities, or even outdoors when the weather cooperated.

As Dr. Walker states, “We have really strict guidelines to keep everyone safe, and some of them are wildly inconvenient. Yet every single student has embraced this semester with an incredible attitude. I am proud of our students who have not given up, and who have been part of the solution.” Complying with protocols, exerting patience and understanding, and coming up with ingenious, creative, versatile solutions shows that UI music students truly never miss a beat.

Concertizing is the culmination of musical studies, and although few audience members are allowed in the concert halls, there are still many concerts and recitals taking place at the UI School of Music. Concerts are either live-streamed or pre-recorded and rebroadcast at set days and times. “Considering the complexities that go with music performance I feel really good about the solution that we came up with and I’m thankful that we are still performing live music because that’s what we’re here to do,” asserts Heidel.

Truly, the most astounding demonstration of resiliency is evidenced in students and in our alumni. In this new reality, our students have risen to the occasion, assuming more personal responsibility all while cultivating even more creativity. Even with dark stages, our students and alumni are still shining bright.

Saxophonist Cole Peterson is a fourth-year jazz studies major. While he had a robust lineup of summer gigs lined up, the pandemic wiped all but one of them off the table, a jazz night at Louie’s Wine Dive in Des Moines on their outdoor patio. While Iowa City’s vibrant music and nightlife scene, with venues like The Mill, The Yacht Club, and Gabe’s are all shuttering up, musicians like Peterson have turned to live-streaming online. Luckily, as Peterson points out, “People have been really understanding about leaving virtual tips. It often adds up close to what a regular gig would have paid.” However, the true value of the challenges that the pandemic has catalyzed lies in learning. Over the summer, Peterson had to find ways to practice quietly so as to not disturb his neighbors. “This helped me delve into new creative territories that I normally wouldn’t have gotten into. Since jazz music is highly improvised, certain sounds trigger a set of responses in my head, but by having to play quieter, it made me unbox a new set of ideas,” Peterson relays. “Using new quiet and fluttery techniques produces a different tone, which unlocked a whole new mindset.” Being forced to play in a different way actually inspired a new creative exploration in Peterson that will live on long after venues start opening their doors again.
**Carey Bostian** is a UI School of Music alumnus who is the co-director of Eastern Iowa's Red Cedar Chamber Music. Dr. Bostian is also the conductor of the Iowa City Community String Orchestra and was formerly the principal cellist for Orchestra Iowa. Considering himself somewhat of an outlier, Dr. Bostian feels that he’s reaching a larger audience than ever before from the comfort of his living room. His wife, Miera Kim, is co-director of Red Cedar Chamber Music, and their two teenage sons are fine string players as well. As a family, they have been producing and live-streaming concert series each month from Biber, Bach, and Beethoven to Swiss Family Bostian to supplement their normal programming. COVID has given Bostian and his family the opportunity to band together and create intimate chamber music concerts for their viewers and patrons. Dr. Bostian quips, “One of our organizational mottos is: ‘Perhaps smaller is better.’ Due to the fact that we are smaller, we are more flexible.” In fact, they were able to start producing events just four weeks after everything shutdown. In terms of their audiences, Dr. Bostian declares, “We have basically reached the same number of people that we would normally reach in the whole season, just through a few live-streams.” It is clear that one of Dr. Bostian’s many talents is reaching the hearts of people through music. “Even though the delivery model has changed, our patrons are still very supportive and very loyal,” Dr. Bostian says in earnest. The pandemic has flipped the script but it hasn't changed the narrative—music is thriving.

**Kate Kammeyer**, a UI School of Music oboe alumna, was hired as the senior vice president and general manager of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra in October 2020. Kammeyer is the epitome of ‘making lemons out of lemonade’ during COVID. While she lost her job as the assistant dean of artistic planning at the Longy School of Music of Bard College at the beginning of the pandemic, she wasn’t unemployed for long when the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra swooped in to recruit her. Not only did she secure a new position at one of the most prestigious orchestras in the country, but she also used her downtime to complete an online certification program in change management at Cornell University. “Whenever you have a plan, you need to have a plan B, C, D, and E. We’re always going to be chasing change, especially now,” as Kammeyer confidently states. Moreover, she sees the pandemic as ripe with possibilities for growth and expansion in the arts. “The pandemic has blown things up. Now, we all have to really examine the structures, principles, and practices of our organizations,” says Kammeyer. This opportunity for thinking outside of the box, can only be beneficial for arts organizations like the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra in the long run. “There isn’t going to be a ‘back to normal’ after this. So, the flexibility factor and preparing for what comes after is crucial to the survival of the arts,” Kammeyer states. Sitting at the crux of it all, this Iowa alumna has both hands on the wheel and is showing the way for the future of the arts.
Shelly Zeiser is a master’s student in the music therapy program and she has been working as a board certified music therapist since 2015. The focus of her master’s capstone project was on how community music experiences could lessen the effects of culture shock in international students. Needless to say, Zeiser’s research was ruined by COVID-19. International students largely had to return home, and community music experiences were nearly impossible once the state shut down most venues in March. By abandoning that project, Zeiser made space for the opportunity to bring music therapy to a place where it was not previously offered—Iowa City’s VA Medical Center. “It’s unfortunate that it took a global pandemic to bring music therapy to the VA Medical Center, but I’m grateful that it has,” says Zeiser. At first everything was conducted over Telehealth, however in August Zeiser was able to transition to in-person therapy at the hospital. While working with veterans is a new experience for Zeiser, she has expanded her repertoire to include music that is more specific to Iowa veterans, namely country western songs and hymns. “Being with the vets has given me an increased appreciation for those who have played a role in protecting our freedoms and the challenges they face when returning home,” she expresses with compassion. The connection that Zeiser has formed with her clients runs deep. While she has helped soothe and take them away from their present pain, they have transported Zeiser into their pasts as well. It couldn’t ring more true: “Music is a powerful catalyst for eliciting meaningful stories.”

Eriq Vazquez (B.M. 2017 trombone, teacher licensure) began teaching at Coal City High School, a rural public school in Illinois, after graduating. He was tasked with teaching a plethora of different classes—everything from music theory, to pep band, to music technology, to jazz band. However, Vazquez was aching to be closer to Chicago. So in the midst of the pandemic, Vazquez started job hunting. He quickly secured a teaching position in Chicago at Stephen T. Mather High School in August 2020, albeit completely remotely. Serving a highly diverse population representing roughly 140 different nations, Vazquez feels honored to teach these students. “In a lot of ways, this is my dream job. I value the immense diversity here—my students have enriching stories and varied cultural backgrounds.” However, teaching music in the public school system during COVID has been chock full of unique challenges. Only two of Vazquez’s hundreds of students actually have instruments. “Most of my students have no previous musical experience whatsoever, which is difficult. Yet, the privilege that I am their very first music teacher isn’t lost on me.” Vazquez has pivoted the focus of his band and choir classes to music appreciation and music literacy. However, as Vazquez articulates, “My number one priority is that my students get their social and emotional needs met. We’re in the middle of a global pandemic, and a lot of my students still have to work at their jobs and to take care of their siblings. Their lives are hard.” It is with compassion, integrity, and a hefty dose of enthusiasm that Vazquez strives to be a light for his students, bringing encouragement and support to their days.
West Music Delivers

When the University of Iowa abruptly shut its doors in the face of mounting coronavirus numbers, many students were left in a lurch. Pianists, in particular, were left with no way to practice once Voxman Music Building was locked.

Anthony Capparelli, a D.M.A. candidate in piano, describes the nerve-wracking day. “I rushed into the building to grab all of my stuff and when I left, I was worried. As a pianist, Voxman was my only means of practicing,” recounts Capparelli.

Enter Ryan West, longtime School of Music friend and president of West Music. West arranged for Yamaha P-125 digital pianos to be delivered to piano majors in need, including Capparelli. “It was fantastic to get a piano during that time and I had it until July, working on my dissertation proposal,” says Capparelli.

Sarah Fairfield and Kate Hagen are University of Iowa alumni who recently launched Music ConstructED, an online platform and digital resource center for music teachers. In a joint partnership with Iowa City’s West Music, championed by West Music CEO Robin Walenta, Music ConstructED was born during COVID. Both Fairfield and Hagen are dedicated Iowa City Community School District music educators, each with over 20 years of teaching under their belts. Through providing lesson ideas, lesson plans, community forums, and professional development opportunities, Music ConstructED is a way to connect and collaborate with music teachers nationally and internationally. “We want to try to represent the music, learning, culture, and repertoire that is going on in different regions in the United States, as well as globally,” says Fairfield. Striving to amplify diverse voices is at the core of their mission, as is providing professional development trainings and continuing educational opportunities to music educators. Hagen adds, “We want to offer different professional development trainings and opportunities with graduate credits that would count towards teacher licensure.” As most of the trainings currently available are concentrated on general elementary educators, there is a sincere need for music-specific professional development opportunities. While Fairfield and Hagen have contemplated creating an online platform for the past few years, neither was willing to sacrifice their careers, which they both love. The pandemic afforded them the opportunity to sit down and get to work. “Without the pandemic, I don’t know if Music ConstructED would have come together so quickly. COVID gifted us with the time to get it done,” declares Hagen with tenacity resounding in her voice.