MARLI - The Music Academy’s Virtual Summer Program – Two Weeks On! WOW!

By Kenny Mehtner, PhD / VOICE

For anyone who wondered how the Music Academy of the West could pull a summer school and festival off online, several returning fellows have stepped up to share exactly how monumental and life changing the online experience has been for them – after just two weeks! Hint: They are very positive about it!

This year, the Music Academy of the West is training and empowering 134 of the world’s top young musicians from 23 countries and 22 states to continue honing their craft and use technology to continue their education and prepare for 21st century careers during the Music Academy Remote Learning Institute (MARLI) which runs through July 24th. For four weeks, the full-scholarship fellows are participating in private lessons, studio classes, and workshops with faculty and guest artists. Fellows also all received a technology package for training and recording including an iPad mini, Apogee microphone, lighting kit, and more. They receive six hours weekly of Innovation Seminars from 28 guest artists and speakers. Seminar topics combine inspirational experience in the field and technical training in audio and video recording.

The online format is allowing the Santa Barbara and world community to participate in a way that’s unprecedented. Every weekday the Academy is adding content at 5pm (through July 24th) and it is unique. Just sampling one of it can feel like an opportunity to be a fellow yourself! (Look for Concert Hall Online and for the Resonance Blog.)

Following four weeks of training, 96 of the fellows have opted into a two week Creative Extension receiving a $1,250 professional stipend for some to create recorded content to share for a Digital Challenge; some will participate in the Fast Pitch Awards – a live competition pitching their ideas for future projects to be awarded; some will continue education online; and some will participate in orchestral auditions to participate in the Keston MX program to perform in London with the London Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Music Director Sir Simon Rattle.

What have you learned/experienced that will carry with you and use your entire career?

I did not initially know how much the video concept would be. Upon receiving our instructions from the director, Sean Scanlin, I called up a friend who came over to help me shoot some creative takes. This was my first adventure into the world of video outside of a dry and boring audition tape, and my friend and I had so much fun brainstorming interesting shots. The bass drum and I went across a small creek, we walked up a nearby hill, we cruised down the street...I’m sure the neighbors were very confused, but I had so much fun with this license to think outside of a box, to be creative in ways beyond playing my instrument.

Do you have a favorite Resonance Blog entry or Concert Hall Online that you’d recommend?

My favorite piece is a blog post by a returning trumpet fellow, was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He is earning a master’s degree at Rice University Shepherd School of Music.

What have you learned/experienced that you will carry with you and use your entire career?

Gustavo Leite, a returning trumpet fellow, was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He is earning a master’s degree at Rice University Shepherd School of Music.

How has your work with your instrument been impacted by the cultural changes evolving in the time of COVID-19?

A common theme presented by many of our performers this summer has been the need to take their musical craft to the next level, often outside of a traditional venue. How are you bringing the music to the audience, and how are you finding new and unusual situations to engage your community?

What have you learned/experienced that you will carry with you and use your entire career?

Music Academy of the West has always been extremely helpful and supportive to me and all Music Academy fellows. I am extremely honored and happy to be part of this great institution. This summer was a concrete proof that they are not only concerned about our summer experience itself, but with the quality of experience/education we are receiving while enrolled, and how we will carry this experience to our future as professional artists. During these couple weeks as a fellow, we have had a lot of seminars provided by MARLI that were both inspiring and informative. My main thought, after some of these seminars, is, “How can I be innovative and creative during a period of time that could only offer concerns and negative ideas about my future and the art’s future in general?”

The main idea is not to put me down with those thoughts, but have the right mindset and skill to transform those negative thoughts into a boost of motivation to keep trying something new every single day. Also, using this motivation to think about something useful, creative, and innovative that my community might need during this period. I started to not only use this tool for my music, but incorporating it to my life in general as well. This helps me to engage better with my community and, when this pandemic is over, I can carry that on to my audience.

If I had to summarize the answer for this question, I would say that I have learned how to motivate myself and, hopefully others around me, even if the situation is not favorable to us. I am allowing myself to be a human first, find my weaknesses in everything I do, and fix it. This is a really challenging task because it involves a daily, non-stop self reflection. But it does help me to become a better human being for our society and I am almost positive that it helps many others as well. I believe that motivation is the key for everyone’s success, not only for musicians, and MARLI provides this to me every day.

How has your work with your instrument been impacted by the cultural changes evolving in the time of COVID-19?

As soon as I got back home from my current school, Rice University, I was impacted by the new and unusual situation that COVID-19 brought to all of us. To be really honest, I was not as motivated and my skills, as a player, started to decrease. After a couple days, I was invited to do a simple project for a FaceBook page and this project consisted in recording myself playing any short piece to entertain other people that were in quarantine as well. I accepted it, but every time I listened to myself playing I would hate it. This started to bother me a lot, in a way that I could only be angry and have negative thoughts about my playing. That was the boost I needed to start thinking what was wrong and what was the best, most efficient way to solve/fix those mistakes in a very short period of time. This is something I have learned with my current teachers at Rice, Professor Barbara Butler and Charles Geyer, who are also part of MARLI’s faculty. Since then, I...
have been having great results in my playing and feeling motivated to find new challenges with my instrument to fix and move to the next level.

I am currently not performing outside or with any ensemble. I am using my time to focus in my music and the way I want to sound like. Asking myself how do I want to share my thoughts and emotions through my instrument, which is extremely difficult for me.

**What has been your most creative moment at MARLI so far?**

The most creative moment at MARLI so far is being able to record myself for the MARLI projects. It was a truly challenge for me. Last week, we finished a project with the Brass section and we had to record audio isolated from our videos. The audio part was easier because most of our musicians, are used to recording ourselves in our daily routine. But the video part was surprisingly difficult.

We had a MARLI Seminar, a couple days before this projects deadline, and the theme was *Cinematography and Filming... for Musicians* with filmmaker Adam Larsen and light designer Pablo Santiago. This was a particularly incredible class for me because I realized that I have never thought about anything else in my videos besides my sound and music itself. I tried to incorporate most of the tips that both teachers gave us, especially with lighting and different angles, and it was extremely challenging for me. At some point I had to move all my furniture from my living room around and it was a huge mess. My parents were a bit bothered by this mess, but I did like the final result. I am absolutely sure that all fellows experienced the same I did for those projects and had to be really creative in order to submit a high quality material.

**Connor Alexander Rowe**, a tenor trombone returning fellow, lives in Lompoc, California, and earned his bachelor's degree from Colburn Conservatory.

**What have you learned/experienced that will carry with you and use your entire career?**

I don't believe I have the time or space to include everything that I have learned in my first three weeks at MARLI. As far as personal lessons go, being at home 24/7 has certainly taught many of us the true necessity of self-discipline, as well as how difficult it can be to impose a schedule on oneself without any external assistance...

I am very grateful for MARLI if for no other reason than the fact that it is preventing me from spending the majority of my days transfixed by myself how do I want to share my thoughts and emotions through my instrument, which is extremely difficult for me.

**What has been your most creative moment at MARLI so far?**

As in-person collaboration has been made virtually impossible by the pandemic, all of our solo classes have been sadly unaccompanied this year. However, that did not stop me from attempting to remedy this marked absence. I have been using Sibelious (a music notation software that allows you to play back what you have written as a MIDI file), to practice with since I was a freshman in college...

For the first class, I played Lars-Erik Larsson's *Concertino for Trombone and String Orchestra*. Since I wouldn't have a pianist, I thought: “Why not try and bring the whole orchestra to class?” So I transcribed all of the string parts into Sibelius, and with the help of my mom (starting the piece at the right time), played along with a MIDI orchestra. It was a little strange playing with an accompaniment that doesn't follow you at all, but it certainly added a unique “collaborative” aspect to an otherwise purely solo class.

**What do you have a favorite Resonance Blog entry or Concert Hall Online that you'd recommend?**

As far as favorite blog or concert hall entries, I recommend all of them!! Henry Michaels is doing a fantastic job with the blog, and the virtual concerts are all engaging and inspiring. I found the entry, *Little Boxes: Unpacking Honegger* to be particularly interesting, and if I could only watch a single concert, it would probably have to be Virtual Picnic Concert no. 3, featuring Anya Garpoli and Alyssa Katahara on harp, and Nicholas Caux on double bass.

**Sehie Salsa**, a returning viola fellow, lives in Solvang. She is 21 years old, and attends the Juilliard School.

**What have you learned/experienced that will carry with you and use your entire career?**

One lesson I am continually learning is how to be patient and gentle with myself. I know from personal experience that being surrounded by first rate musicians everyday can lead to extreme self degradation.

An example would be simply walking down the hallways at Juilliard. When I'm walking past the practice rooms, I find myself unintentionally listening for a fellow violinist, and when I find one, I can't help but slow down my pace as I pass by the room to 'check out the competition.' When I enter my own practice room later in the day, I still remember how that violist sounded, and I begin to tear at my skills and abilities leaving only rubble. Once finished practicing, all that's left is a person who has been stripped of all passion and joy.

Learning to be gentle with myself will always remain the hardest lesson to learn. To be gentle with oneself is to separate your self-worth from what you create and to see your art as unique and rare, not as worse than the violinist practicing next to you.

**How has your work with your instrument been impacted by the cultural changes evolving in the time of COVID-19?**

Though shows have taken pause, consistent practice and development are a necessity to artists. The emotional toll, physical circumstances, and lack of resources has affected everyone. To have had the Music Academy’s support and their decision to make MARLI an option, we developing musicians have something to work with and toward.

**What has been your most creative moment at MARLI so far?**

We’ve been working on creating a program, themed around mythical and legendary characters, in order to tell our individual stories and what we represent. Tying in the work we did with our mission statements, I’ve begun making a program that I’m very proud of...

**Claire Satchwell**, a returning viola fellow, lives in Solvang. She is 21 years old, and attends the Juilliard School.

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I believe this year has been a real test of an artist’s patience and adaptability. With schools closing midway through the spring semester, students had to be willing to adapt in order to mentally survive. Students all around the world had to quickly shift to online classes and lessons,
all while moving back home for the remainder of the year. Now with everything shifting online, you not only have to have stage presence, but online presence as well. The pressure to adapt and begin to brand yourself on an online platform is challenging, but also presents exciting new possibilities.

As we move forward, questions arise: What is the future of classical music? Is this the deadly blow that takes it down? Most of these questions are seeded in deep panic and fear as so many graduating musicians who had dreams of taking orchestra auditions have had to rethink everything. However, from what I have been seeing online, music is thriving! Yes, the future is being reshaped, but we young artists now get to guide and create the music world we want to see online, music is thriving! Yes, the future is being reshaped, but we young artists now get to guide and create the music world we want to perform in. Another upside is that performances are now able to reach far beyond the doors of the concert hall, and the globalization of music has become mandatory. In terms of responding to cultural changes during this pandemic, musicians have been rising to the call by bringing peace, solidarity, and change.

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What has been your most creative moment at MARLI so far?

Recently, I was able to participate in MARLI’s online production of the fourth movement of Haydn’s London Symphony. Before recording, we were provided with countless resources to expand our knowledge of the stylistic approach and historical context of the piece. This production has been, I believe, my fifth or sixth project where you listen to a recording and play along, and I can definitely say that I am increasingly comfortable with the process. While we are not able to sit in a rehearsal space and discuss where we want to take time and what bowing works in measure 87, I have found there are still ways to be creative within these rigid boundaries. You now have the chance to experiment with the best angle for your camera to engage the audience and ‘set the stage.’

I have discovered that creativity in the traditional sense simply has different semantics now. Collaboration now entails listening to a recording and noting where the musician takes time and rehearsing it over and over with the tape... Throughout all these projects, my musical intuition has broadened from better matching my playing to a prerecorded tape which has forced me to react quicker and with greater precision. In a way, playing with a prerecorded tape has become like chamber music more than ever—just some fingering adjustments and bowings are not as open for discussion!

Do you have a favorite Resonance Blog entry or Concert Hall Online that you’d recommend?

I would definitely recommend reading Marc Lombardino’s ‘The Hands Behind the Sonata!’ Lombardino discusses how Haydn’s last piano sonata might have never reached its popularity today if it hadn’t been for female pianist Therese Jansen, who performed the sonata at the time of its composition. I found it very thought-provoking to see how ‘we would do well to go beyond music theory and instead focus on who actually played this piece of music when Haydn first wrote it’ (Lombardino).

In closing, as Lombardino mentions, the creation of music is a collaboration between two or more people. Music is not created in isolation from others, but instead thrives off of and prospers from our friendships and shared experiences.