

MARLI: Music Academy of the West's 2020 Incarnation

By John Fleming, *Musical America*

August 19, 2020

Music Academy of the West, whose home is a stunning Spanish Revival mansion and garden estate a two-minute walk from the Pacific Ocean in Santa Barbara, CA, has an illustrious legacy. Lotte Lehmann, Otto Klemperer, Darius Milhaud, Arnold Schoenberg, Maurice Abravanel, Gregor Piatigorsky, and Marilyn Horne are among the luminaries associated with the summer music school and festival. The 2020 season, which ran for six weeks through July 25, will go down as one of the most significant ever in its 73-year history.

Necessity + invention = MARLI

In May, when it was clear that the spread of the coronavirus pandemic had made public performances and other social interaction unsafe for the foreseeable future, the school announced that it was [shifting all activity to a virtual environment](#) called the Music Academy Remote Learning Institute (MARLI). The 134 young musicians on fellowships (more than 2,000 applied) from 23 countries and 22 states participated online from home or wherever they were, as did the 51 faculty and teaching artists. At the same time, the U.S. economy was in freefall and the killing of George Floyd had sparked global outrage over systemic racism and police violence.



“This put all of us to the test,” says Scott Reed, president and CEO of Music Academy since 2010. “It was one of those moments when we got to transform the organization. Not only did we quickly pivot to an all-remote curriculum, but we needed to bring in panelists for online seminars on developing careers and using art for activism in social justice. We developed a wellness program of yoga, meditation, Alexander Technique, cardio workouts, and counseling for our fellows. This summer the objective wasn’t solely about being able to put together a great audition and getting an orchestra job. It was about how you use your art form to survive—mentally survive, physically survive, culturally survive.”

Tech kits for all

To ensure the best chances of reaching those goals, MAW sent each fellow a kit of technical tools to make the online experience easily accessible and consistent. Each tech kit, valued at about \$1,000, included an iPad mini, high-quality microphone, headphones, and LED lighting. Fellows and faculty were trained to use the kits for private lessons and coaching sessions as well as their own creative projects. Zoom was the platform of choice.

“The generosity of that was jaw-dropping,” says fellow Cristina Cutts Dougherty, a tuba player. “It definitely made it easier for us. And since we all had the same equipment, it was easy to give us instructions on how to make amazing videos. The big lesson for me was that the internet and connecting virtually isn’t as scary as I thought it was.”

Dougherty’s newfound skills paid off in a live online presentation she made to the judges for MAW’s annual Fast Pitch Awards for entrepreneurial and innovative ideas in classical music. Her proposal to write a book on historic women brass players won a stipend of \$1,500 plus the opportunity to attend an all-expenses-paid, five-day Innovation Residential in March 2021 in Santa Barbara, where fellows get to workshop their projects.



MAW fellows perform Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man remotely as part of MARLI

The final round of the Fast Pitch competition is part of a collection of more than 25 MARLI videos on Music Academy's [Concert Hall Online](#) page, which also includes a keynote speech by opera impresario Beth Morrison sounding the summer's theme of innovation and urging fellows to "think outside of the classical music box." There are richly layered, multi-track productions of Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, scenes from Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, and the finale of Haydn's *London* Symphony with Christian Reif conducting. Flutist Claire Chase and singer/composer Joyce Kwon give inspiring presentations on stretching musical boundaries. In a collaborative piano class by guest artist Emanuel Ax and faculty artist Jonathan Feldman, Ax likens the phrasing of the piano part in the Brahms D-minor violin sonata to Sisyphus pushing the boulder up a hill only to see it roll back down and having to start all over again.

The Digital Challenge



For the Digital Challenge, fellows produced short videos of their own invention that were judged on musical/artistic excellence, technical proficiency, and creativity. One of the three winners was baritone Byron J. Mayes, who sang, drew the artwork, and programmed synthesized accompaniment to his presentation of Margaret Bonds's setting of "I, Too, Sing America" from *Three Dream Portraits* by Langston Hughes. "I was definitely influenced by Black Lives Matter," Mayes says. "Hughes' poem is about being viewed as different because of the color of

your skin. It is perfect for this time in our country."

Digital winners, who were awarded \$2,500, also included a dazzling treatment of William Bolcom's *The Serpent's Kiss* by pianist Byeol Kim and an artful collaboration on the "Perpetual Motion" movement from Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson's *Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite* by cellist Lavinnia Rae and painter Alex Hoare. Honorable mention went to Gerbrich Meijer, who played Stravinsky's Three Pieces for Solo Clarinet in *The Plog*, a charming tour of her hometown in the Netherlands.

Music Academy has a partnership with the London Symphony Orchestra, which comes to Santa Barbara every other summer—including, in the planning anyway, 2020. Instead, five of its principals coached the fellows remotely; there was also an online chamber concert by a small ensemble from the orchestra.

Rethinking the budget

Reed had to redo completely the budget to accommodate MARLI. With no public performances, all revenue from ticketed events vanished, but operating costs were less. "What was planned as a \$9.5 million budget – that's our year-round budget – turned out to be about a \$6.5 million budget," he says. Robust philanthropic support from the Music Academy board and patrons, including a

\$700,000 relief fund that was above and beyond the annual fund, has led to a projected balanced 2020 budget.

Richie Hawley, former principal clarinet of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and now professor of clarinet at Rice University's Shepherd School Music, joined the Music Academy faculty in 2005. His parents live in Santa Barbara, and he came from his home in Houston to stay with them during MARLI, which allowed him to teach his classes remotely from his studio in Hind Hall.



"At first, it was surreal to be on campus and in my studio without anyone around, but once my students and I got into rhythm it felt good to be together online," says Hawley, who credits Reed for setting the tone for MARLI. "From the beginning Scott realized that the summer was a chance to create an island of enlightenment in the midst of the pandemic, and it truly did that. I know the fellows had their eyes opened and hearts lifted from seeing they can have a career in music despite all the uncertainty right now."

All 2020 fellows have been invited back to Music Academy for next summer, when it is hoped that live, in-person performance will be possible. But the experience and expertise developed from MARLI guarantees that the virtual component will continue to play an important role.

Photos from the top:

Faculty member Richie Hawley teaching a clarinet master class from his MAW studio;

The fellows performing online;

One of the many gardens at Music Academy of the West;

Academy CEO Scott Reed

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