



CELLO

What I Learned from Teaching Cello During a Pandemic

by Sally Dorer

For the past 20 years, my small home studio of 8-10 cellists has been a part of my varied musical career which includes playing in opera, chamber music and orchestra concerts. The pandemic interrupted this rhythm and allowed for space to transform my teaching framework. As the pandemic began, along with thousands of other music teachers, I started learning how to teach through an online method. During 2020 and 2021, I had time to discover new pieces, complete three Suzuki teacher training books online, attend online teaching forums, watch numerous videos of teachers performing and teaching pieces, and learn from many wonderful teachers who shared ideas on Facebook forums. During this time, I became more organized, better at verbally articulating points to students, and better at categorizing the skills I feel students need at each level. This process helped me create a clear path for teaching students who come to me at various levels of cello development.

Organizing Music by Graded Levels

In the first few weeks of the pandemic, I started looking at graded level lists and skills required for the local youth orchestras and high schools, the ASTA Certificate Advancement Program Handbook, the Suzuki Association of America Syllabus, and the Royal Conservatory of Music Certificate program. I discovered several pieces I did not know, and I began creating my own system of benchmarks using the pieces I most enjoy teaching.

In the process of revising my teaching materials, I discovered the wonderful *Cello Time Joggers*, *Runners*, and *Sprinters* books, which complement the early Suzuki books and the *Essential Elements* books used in my local schools. The *Cello Time* books come with backing tracks in a variety of styles, offering cellists a chance to practice ensemble skills from home. In the back of each volume there are scales corresponding to the pieces in the book.

I also began using the Carey Cheney books *Solos for Young Cellists*, as they have many enjoyable pieces, including original

pieces in various styles. A favorite piece for many of my students is Carey Cheney's *Clock Tower Bells*, which uses harmonics. The first volume corresponds well with Suzuki Book two.

Teacher Training

The Suzuki Association of the Americas offered teacher training online all last year, and I completed teacher training for Suzuki Books three, four and five with teacher trainer Shu-Yi Scott. Connecting with teachers from different countries and time zones was fun and uplifting, and I was amazed by the depth of our discussions. Classes were held during the weekends, so we were able to complete the training while teaching our own students during the week. Being able to switch between training and teaching was a unique gift of the online format. I found that connecting with other teachers offered support, creativity, and excellent training.

YouTube

YouTube offers many resources for listening to performances and master classes, both historical and current. I love the YouTube channel called CELLO KIDS <https://www.youtube.com/c/CELOKIDS>. It is a set of performance videos put together by two fantastic cellists and teachers in Paris, France. Cellists Valérie Aimard and Antonina Zharava perform some of their favorite student pieces with their pianist, Cédric Lorel. I discovered many pieces I did not know. I have added Georg Goltermann *Capriccio*, David Popper *Tarantella* Op. 33, Francis Poulenc *Serenade*, and Rudolf Matz *Rondo* to the pieces I enjoy teaching my intermediate to advanced level students.

Two of my other favorite places to find performance videos and master class videos are CelloBello <https://www.cellobello.org>, and Johannes Moser's YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/c/JohannesMoserCellist>. In addition, Facebook groups such as Suzuki Cello Teachers <https://www.facebook.com/groups/107424672639089/> and Distance Learning Forum for Music Teachers [\[facebook.com/groups/2960981433922933\]\(https://www.facebook.com/groups/2960981433922933\) are filled with discussions of repertoire, techniques, and many practical ideas for teaching.](https://www.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Teaching Online

Having a suitable online setup can be simple. When teaching virtually, I teach on Zoom on my laptop placed on a music stand. I keep a paper folder for each student and write notes after each lesson. I like having a written record of each lesson to help me keep track of each student's progress and goals. My students have made good progress these past two years and have continued playing in their school orchestras and recitals. Several of them joined youth symphonies, and I have been grateful for the technology that allowed us to continue working together.

With warmer weather, we enjoyed lessons in person outside on my front porch. Despite competing with lawnmowers, it was great to be able to play duets together. In fact, sometimes we challenged ourselves to play louder than the lawnmowers!

In 2020, we recorded an online recital from our homes, which I then shared with the local retirement home where we normally play recitals. The residents were able to watch the students from their rooms on their own schedules. In spring of 2021, we played a recital outside in my yard, and I accompanied my students on my cello. It was a celebration of their progress, and having a live audience of families and neighbors added to the feeling of accomplishment.

Teaching Theory

Before the pandemic, I did not have a regular system of teaching theory to my students, but now I make sure that my new students and middle school students understand some basic concepts. I like using *All for Strings Theory Workbook 1 for Cello*, by Gerald E. Anderson and Robert S. Frost. The book has a very simple approach to theory which relates visually to the cello. By the end of the book, students have learned how to write music by hand, understand a

few intervals, and build major scales. Writing out music by hand has helped greatly with note reading, and some of my students like to write pieces for their lessons. For younger students, the website <https://www.makingmusicfun.net> has lots of printable games and puzzles relating to note reading. The simple addition of a few minutes of theory revealed to me how much guessing was going on before with students who really did not understand these concepts.

Learning new skills and resources has helped me discover practical and inspiring ways to teach during this time of increased stress and uncertainty. Exploring pieces that are new to me has helped me to better adapt my teaching for students with different needs. Families have appreciated flexibility as well as the ability to have regular lessons and keep progressing no matter the circumstances of the moment. I hope that this article can encourage other teachers to explore and enhance the ways that they love to teach, to play, and to connect with

students and other teachers.

Sources:

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Home—CelloBello. <https://www.cellobello.org/>

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