



Adventures in Long-distance Research Mentoring in Music

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It's been my privilege and honor to work with quite a few students in their undergraduate research projects during my 25 years at Elon University. This past year provided both the opportunity to engage with an extraordinary student and navigate the circumstances that ensured we were seldom on-campus at the same time. Our experiences, at times challenging, even frustrating, but incredibly satisfying, prompted us to reflect on the challenges of long-distance research collaboration, especially in our field of music. Perhaps we can offer a little advice gleaned from our experience for other student-faculty pairs working from a distance.

Developing a Project

Both Wesley and I are pianists, exploring topics related to the scholarship of performance, that is, the application of musicological and analytical research to the creation of an authentic and informed performance of a work of music, his in the music of Franz Liszt and mine the music of Belá Bartók.

When I began to work with Wesley in developing a proposal for a major, very competitive research award given by our university, the Lumen Prize, he was already preparing for his study abroad semester in Costa Rica. In addition to the proposal, Wesley needed (and wanted) to continue his piano studies in a very serious way—which meant lots of practice and lots of coaching. That meant he had to be enrolled with me, back here on campus.

With the support and efforts of our study abroad teams at Elon and in Costa Rica, and a few surprising benefactors, we were ultimately successful, but not without having to overcome some roadblocks.¹

¹ We would like to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Woody Pelton from Elon's Isabella Cannon Center for International Studies; Izmael Pacheco, piano teacher at Éditus Academia de las Artes; Linda Holland at ICAS in San Jose; special thanks to Elon music Professor Ramon Brito who connected us with Steinway owner Dr. Escalante, where Wesley finally found a quality instrument on which to practice.

It was a big year for the recognition of musical scholarship at Elon: Wesley was awarded the Lumen Prize, and I was granted a year-long sabbatical. For me it meant not only being off-campus but not in town at all (with very occasional exceptions). And for both of us it meant a huge responsibility to follow through and fulfill our scholarly obligations. So we found ourselves working together from different zip codes during the Lumen application process, during the Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) program of 2012 and during the academic year 2012-2013.

Challenges

Logistics

Our primary challenges have had to do mostly with issues of logistics, technology, process and schedules. Pianists have the unfortunate need to have access to, well, pianos—real acoustical pianos and for lots of hours (should have played the flute!). In Costa Rica, all our contacts were most sympathetic and helpful, but it is hard to gain sufficient access to facilities and instruments for a music major's practice needs. I give Wesley a lot of credit for hanging in there and figuring out ways to grab opportunities between the cracks of classes and excursions and state holidays and more, as well as the intellectual maturity to figure out ways to work with his music away from the piano, and would like to brag that he came back to campus and played a successful jury which advanced him to the next level in his piano studies. Usually Elon music students simply don't attempt performance exams during study abroad semesters, but Wesley is ambitious and needed this accomplishment to

pursue his performance degree along with his music education degree.

Wesley describes a piano experience in Costa Rica: "My first desperate trip to the Dr. Escalante's office was a blessing and a curse. A Steinway baby grand piano was kept in the living room of a cozy house that was attached to the back of the patient treatment area. The area also had recording gear, a drum set, and a few guitars. 'Jam' sessions were regularly held there on Friday nights. I had a wonderful first practice session there, but was met with an unpleasant surprise just before leaving. The dentist's dog marked its territory on my book bag across the room. Thank goodness the bag was well padded; none of my books were ruined. But the sour stench was with me all the way back to my homestay about 1.5 miles down the road. In striving for the best, sometimes you run into the worst along the way!"



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Technology

Speaking of technology, what would we have done without Skype? Such technologies make possible what really couldn't have been a few years ago. Our success required many, many Skype meetings. It's not a perfect substitute for in-person meetings: we don't always have Skype accessibility when near a piano and vice versa. It can be challenging to look at sources and musical manuscripts together when not physically in the same room. But when both parties are committed to the process as we are, we find a way to be prepared.

Wesley adds: "A most challenging part of our work is the difficulty of facilitating discussion about musical materials via the Internet. Musical analysis involves listening, reading a

score, marking that score, and translating the aural-based and score-based observations into written word. While this is very challenging to do over Skype or e-mail, it has enhanced my skills at synthesizing my score and aural-based observations. This is necessary because the discussion between mentor and mentee about observations and ideas is ultimately much more important and valuable.”

Process and schedules

Establishing a process for our work and communication proved the most challenging aspect of our extended long-distance work together. At the beginning, I had some frustration when not hearing from over-extended Wesley, and was then reassured always by the clear evidence of his steady progress—just didn’t know about it during communication blackouts. Schedule coordination is a challenge during ordinary semesters, but when one or the other party is away and out of sync with the Elon schedule, finding that common meeting time was extra tricky. We realized early on we needed to schedule our meetings as regularly as we would a piano lesson on campus. We also realized we needed an additional backup meeting time to account for conflicts that arose and provide extra time when needed, because spontaneous meetings are far more difficult when we are not regularly in the same building.

We revised our process along the way to include clearer guidelines for the student to keep the mentor aware and in the loop of the ongoing work. Weekly meetings on campus aren’t really all that happens between a student and mentor—there are lots of spontaneous moments stopping by the office,

passing in the hall, etc., that need to be duplicated by maintaining frequent email or phone communications, both for the student’s progress and the mentor’s awareness of that progress. We required ourselves to check in by email at least weekly no matter what, and in addition to our scheduled meetings.

Conclusions

Wesley’s advice to students contemplating long-distance supervised research or applied lessons: “Make a detailed contact plan, included monthly and weekly availability. Establish alternative meeting times in case of unexpected complications with the regular schedule. If obligations cannot be met as scheduled, always report to the mentor as soon as you know. Lastly, find a mentor who will be as dedicated to your work as you are, even while also invested in their own scholarly work. Make it a compact.”

Those are the challenges. We think we’re meeting them and are both better for the opportunity to fulfill both our own individual scholarly goals and our commitment to each other. The *advantages* of long-distance mentoring deserve mention: as we’ve pursued our separate projects, we’ve discovered areas of overlap that inspire us to share notes, sources and ideas. I was able to make preliminary introductions to scholars and institutions during my research journeys that Wesley will capitalize on this summer when he travels to Germany and Hungary for his Lumen project. We are even planning a joint presentation and article exploring the overlapping elements of our two projects for next year. Perhaps it’s the beginning of a scholarly collaboration that will reach beyond Elon in terms of time, as it already has in terms of geography.