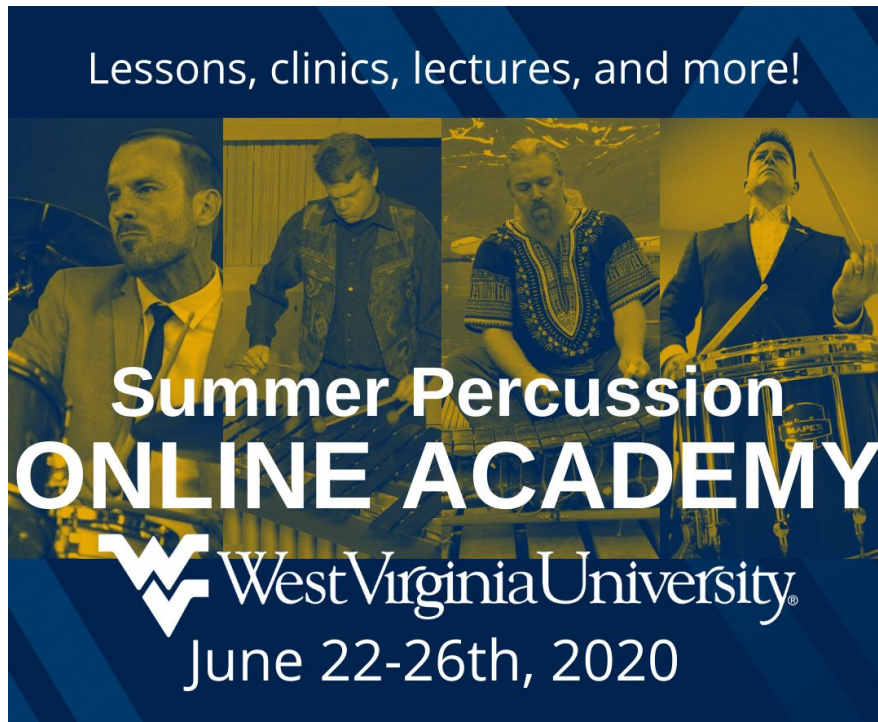


“GLAMPING”

The 2020 WVU Summer Online Percussion Academy

by Ian Riley - July 5th 2020



Introduction

As a graduate assistant at West Virginia University, I have the honor of working with some of the most dedicated percussion faculty: educators who are constantly improving the educational experiences of their students through meaningful interactions, excellent programming, and sincere investment. WVU is incredibly lucky to have George Willis, Mike Vercelli, Brian Wolfe, and Mark Reilly providing such profound education to their students.

As many of us know, this Spring 2020 semester was unlike any other - on March 18th, we received an email from University president E. Gordon Gee, likely similar to the ones that many of you undoubtedly received, confirming the closure of the University for the remainder of the semester, and the move to online instruction. While this transition has

been stretching for the studio, the school, and the university, I cannot be more proud of the immediate commitment of the WVU Percussion Faculty to supporting our students and colleagues in every way possible as we all navigated this “new normal.”

As the semester concluded online, I remember talking with George about how we were feeling about the things that worked and that didn't, and we briefly touched on likelihood of returning to campus for the summer session, and how much we would miss the annual WVU Percussion Camp which would be going on its 9th consecutive year. On the one hand, both of us were pretty much “Zoom-ed out,” but I remember saying something to the effect of, “Yeah, I mean there's no **way** that we could do something like that online... is there?”

I think that you can guess the punchline; suffice it to say that over the next 6 weeks, through the tireless effort of the WVU Percussion Faculty in collaboration with Joshua Swiger from the Music Industry department, WVU alumnus and managing editor of *Modern Drummer* magazine, Mike Dawson, and Darren Proctor, DMA graduate percussionist at WVU, we were able to deliver a mix of live and pre-recorded content delivered directly to 37 attendees from 9am-5pm for 5 days in late June.

Quality AND Quantity

It became evident in our earliest conversations about the WVU Summer Online Percussion Academy (or “SOPA” as it would come to be referred to) that we were, frankly, only interested in working towards this goal if we were able to deliver a product that was of a quality that we would feel comfortable with.

Marketing

Soon after final exams wrapped up at the beginning of May it became evident that this may be something that we could actually pull off - but time was of the essence. Alongside Darren Proctor, we created advertisement images for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and email, using the WVU Brand Kit guidelines and assets provided by the University, and assembled on Canva, a free, online graphics-creation website.

Simultaneously, we began posting information on the WVU Percussion Facebook page, within University Percussion groups that we were members of, reaching out to band directors, friends, and colleagues throughout West Virginia and beyond.

Directing interest to the wvu.edu page that has been set up for the camp, we collected registration fees via the Eventbrite platform and attendee information via the Wufoo online form builder.

Creating Static Content

In collaboration with Joshua Swiger, Visiting Teaching Associate Professor for Music Industry at WVU, we were able to create a wide range of professional, pre-recorded video content, covering topics from two-mallet marimba and orchestral accessories, to Samba techniques and note-for-note drum set transcriptions. Using the equipment available at Josh's studio, 'Blues Alley Studios,' the WVU Percussion Faculty recorded their pre-recorded content with professional video, audio, lighting, mixing, and mastering, all made possible because of the commitment to inter-departmental collaboration exhibited by members of the WVU music faculty.

This static content would be delivered in conjunction with the dynamic, live content offered during the week of the academy - this mixture promoted a sense of flexibility for both the students and faculty, ensuring that they could take breaks should they need to during these 'static' sessions, and the content would still be there when they got back.

New static content was 'released' each day for a total of nearly 35 different videos for students to watch over the course of the week, and beyond.

Equipment and Devices

The WVU Percussion department worked closely with the WVU Music Industry department, collaborating on the types of equipment and devices that we would need in order to make SOPA a success. While much of the equipment was shared, this list can be delineated into two major categories: local and remote.

Locally, we used a series of a BlackMagic Studio Camera in conjunction with two Sony PLZ Remote Cameras to capture local dynamic content from different angles, foci, and

resolutions, and to have the ability to rearrange those elements between sessions. This flexibility was very helpful for the diverse needs of a snare-drum clinic versus a marimba or timpani clinic, etc.

Connecting to an analog mixer, we employed two Earthworks QTC30 overhead 'room' microphones, alongside two small-diaphragm condenser microphones to capture both instrument sound and speech, often with one microphone directed towards the presenter, and one towards their instrument during interactive clinics.

The feed from these inputs was sent to a video switcher which was then sent to a Macbook Pro to combine, process, and deliver the audio and video.

Additionally, we used a secondary personal laptop as well as personal cell-phones in order to monitor the live feed from the Zoom conference, and mix the audio in real-time, accordingly.

Remotely, each faculty member used their own combination of laptops and other equipment to capture their dynamic remote presentations. In most cases, setting Zoom to 'enable original sound' was sufficient to get consistent audio quality from the remote presenters.

Hosting Platforms and Administration

For several weeks leading up to our start date, I spent time 'testing' a number of platforms for content delivery, looking for the best mix of quality, accessibility, and integrity possible before we committed to our platform(s). Without belaboring the details of the pros and cons of different options, SOPA eventually found its home for static content on unlisted YouTube playlists via the WVU Percussion YouTube page, and would deliver dynamic content via the Zoom video conferencing platform with which many of us are recently familiar.

The academy schedule included constant content delivery between 9-11am each morning, with a break for lunch, and a mix of content between 1-5pm each afternoon, some of which included private lessons with WVU Percussion faculty.

While Zoom was the primary contact point between us and the attendees, a number of other programs played intermediary roles in our interface. For dynamic content, all of our audio and video was first run through OBS, an open-source streaming program that is able to combine all manner of video, audio, image, and text content into a single out-going package. In order to use OBS in conjunction with Zoom, we employed the NDI Virtual Camera plug-in which allows the output of OBS to be seen as a 'camera' by Zoom, rather than using the built-in webcam, as well as VB-Audio's 'VB-CABLE Virtual Audio Device,' another bit of free-ware that would allow Zoom to see our computer audio as a 'microphone' for Zoom (more on why this was necessary below).

Apart from content delivery, SOPA communicated with its attendees primarily through email, with morning and afternoon session overviews sent with GMail's 'schedule send' feature each day at 8:30 am and 12:30 pm. We used Google Drive to host any hand-outs, videos, or supplementary materials that did not easily fit into any of the prior categories, wanting to limit the number of hoops that attendees had to jump through in order to access all of the content that we would deliver.

Delivering Dynamic Content

Each day, we delivered approximately 6 hours of dynamic content to the attendees of the WVU Summer Online Percussion Academy. This content included everything guided warm-ups and clinics on technique, to faculty performance spotlights and current-student interviews. This diversity of content was possible in large part due to the diversity of the WVU Percussion faculty, and in conjunction with a desire to present a holistic percussion experience for the attendees.

Local dynamic content was delivered via Zoom to those who connected to the daily call. Our goal was to eliminate the needs for students to constantly reconnect to different sessions for different clinics, so instead we used the 'co-hosting' functionality of Zoom in conjunction with WVU's generous access to the University's enterprise-level license to permit each presenter to have the ability to 'spotlight' their video, share their screen, and generally have administrative control of their sessions.

Each morning, we had a privilege of introducing one of Brian Wolfe's "Drum set through the Decades" videos, in which he breaks down five different songs from five different decades, from Frank Sinatra's 1959 version of 'Cheek-to-Cheek,' to Lizzo's 2019 'Juice.' OBS in conjunction with NDI Virtual Camera and VB-Audio Cable allowed us to stream these videos that were recorded by Pf. Wolfe just a few weeks prior for the camp, directly via the Zoom call, eliminating the necessity for attendees to navigate away from the session and possibly experience difficulty rejoining for the next clinic.

As part of their attendance, each participant had the opportunity to take 3 private lessons with members of the WVU Percussion faculty. With their responses to a survey querying their interests in hand, from 2:30-4:30 pm each day, approximately two-thirds of the attendees had one-on-one lessons with a faculty. Using Zoom's 'Breakout Rooms' feature, we were able to direct each student into a separate room with their instructor at their appointed lesson time, all within the same persistent 'afternoon call' that they were already connected to.

At the end of every day, the WVU Percussion faculty concluded the afternoon sessions with a 'round-table' style discussion on topics chosen by both faculty and students. During the last half of these sessions, along with the latter portion of all of the live sessions, students were encouraged to submit questions that they had for the faculty, who would answer them live during the call. This sort of direct access to the WVU Percussion faculty remains paramount to the goal of the percussion program at WVU.



IT and Technical Support

A large portion of my immediate responsibility for SOPA was as IT and Technical support liaison, both internally among our faculty and staff, and externally, for our attendees. Vital to any sort of online event are, for me, two primary factors: reliability and accessibility.

As the saying goes, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." This adage helped to inform the sorts of infrastructure that we considered for SOPA, and how I designed our 'Failstate Flowchart,' (see Appendix D) a tool that I use personally when considering an event or system in order to free-up bandwidth on the day of the event to deal with issues as they arrive - the more states that you can anticipate, the less 'down-time' you will have trying to devise a solution for something that was unexpected.

In large part, by choosing platforms that have proven to be reliable and accessible in the past (e.g. Zoom, YouTube, Google Drive), we were able to eliminate much of the worry surrounding fail-states, and furthermore, by choosing these platforms that I was already very familiar with, I was able to confidently guarantee that the majority of issues that we may face would be resolvable without significant interference to the delivery of content.

It is important to note here that as the complexity of a system increases, so too do the numbers of points of possible failure; this was elucidated plainly when, due to quarantine

conditions for faculty that live out-of-state, we had designed to stream 'Live from Marion Meadows!,' putting on a small 'living room concert' in the Willis household for Thursday morning's session. It was a surprise to us all when, not 90 minutes before we were to 'go live,' a squirrel met a shocking end at the hands of the nearby transformer, knocking out the power (and thus the a/v equipment and wi-fi) to our 'venue.' Somehow, this scenario hadn't made it onto my flow-chart!

With the support of Joshua Swiger and the professionalism of George Willis and Brian Wolfe, we were able to capture a 4k cell-phone video recording of a cold-run of their performance before quickly travelling to our setup at the WVU campus in order to begin the stream at 9:02 am and having a wonderful clinic conversation about the effects of preparation and interference on our subsequent performances!

Moving Forward from Here

As we draw ever closer to the Fall 2020 semester, there is no shortage of speculation as to 'what will happen now,' what the 'right thing to do,' is, or how we will 'deal with everything' in light of the complex situations being navigated throughout our musical and academic communities, across our country, and throughout the world.

While I am thankful to have been able to support such a successful project as the 2020 WVU Summer Online Percussion Academy, more important is the lessons that we learned from this endeavour.

In spite of changes that seem insurmountable, and regardless of whether or not we are ready to transition to this 'new normal,' the WVU Percussion Faculty has shown me, first-hand, what is possible when a group of dedicated, compassionate, and thoughtful musicians and educators can accomplish when faced with an opportunity to overcome an obstacle that may at first seem, at best, inconvenient, and at worst, impossible.

Thank you to George Willis, Mike Vercelli, Brian Wolfe, Mark Reilly, and Mike Dawson for their immediate willingness to strike out on this adventure, to Darren Proctor, and Joshua Swiger for their vital assistance, to Michael Ibrahim, director of the WVU School of Music, and Keith Jackson, dean of the WVU College of Creative Arts for their trust and support, and to all of the members of the inaugural class of the WVU Online Percussion Academy.

We all must navigate our days in the best way that we can; I for one am beyond humbled to be among those who see an opportunity to “do good, well” and strive for it.

Appendix A - The Daily Schedule

8:45am – Technical Overview/Troubleshoot as needed (Monday only)

9:00am - Stretches and Warmups (various)

9:30am - Faculty Performance Spotlight (various)

10:00am – Album of the Day (various)

10:15am – Drum Set Clinic w/ Brian Wolfe

10:45am – Method Book of the Day (various)

11:00am – Guided Practice Prompt, Static Content via YouTube

12:00pm – Lunch

1:00pm – Classical Percussion Clinic w/ George Willis

1:30pm – Rudimental Drumming Clinic w/ Mark Reilly

2:00pm - Drums & Electronics Clinic w/ Mike Dawson

2:15pm – FLEX Clinic (Darren Proctor or current WVU student interviews)

2:30pm to 4:30pm – Individual Lessons; Practice Time/Static Content via YouTube

4:30pm – Faculty Round Table Discussion

Appendix B - Comprehensive Content Overview

Stretches and Warm-ups: Each day, a member of the WVU Percussion Faculty would guide the attendees through a series of stretches and warm-ups, both to get them ready for a day of playing, but also as a way of interacting with them in real-time and developing the sense of community that is integral to the WVU Percussion studio.

Faculty Performance Spotlight: Every morning, the attendees had the opportunity to attend a live, real-time concert performance by different members of the WVU faculty, including marimba and violin with The Willis Duo, a blend of traditional and world music styles with George Willis and Mike Vercelli, an original composition for marimba and drum set with George Willis and Brian Wolfe, and solo performances by Mike Vercelli and Mark Reilly. Each of these performances led into Q&A where attendees were able to ask questions about all aspects of the performance.

Album of the Day - WVU Percussion Faculty members described some of their most favorite, and most influential albums, including music from diverse backgrounds.

Drum Set Clinic - Brian Wolfe's "Drum Set Through the Decades" series provides an analysis of the function of the drum set in American "pop music" as explored through transcription and extraction of exercises from five different Grammy nominated recordings, spanning the decades from 1960 to 2020."

Method Book of the Day - WVU Percussion Faculty members described some of their most favorite, and most influential method books, including those on topics ranging from fundamental percussion practice to in-depth drum set and world music techniques.

Guided Practice - Students were prompted at the start of this session with 1-2 goals for their practice, and then directed to the static YouTube content to watch videos at their pace about various percussion instruments, traditions, and techniques.

Classical Percussion Clinic - Each afternoon, George Willis presented techniques and skills necessary for playing concert snare drum, two- and four- mallet marimba, and timpani. These clinics were directly related to the static video content that was available to attendees, and took a more in-depth view of those skills.

Rudimental Drumming Clinic - Each afternoon, Mark Reilly presented a live clinic on different aspects of rudimental drumming technique and tradition remotely from his home near Washington D.C. These clinics covered a variety of practice and warm-up techniques, thoughts about the history and traditions of rudimental drumming, and supplementary performances on rope-tension and rod-tension marching drums of different origins.

Drums & Electronics Clinic - Each afternoon, WVU alumnus Mike Dawson presented a live clinic on the integration of live electronics in drum set performance remotely from his home in New York City. These clinics explored everything from using a digital audio workstation (DAW) to create unique ambient practice tracks, different options and configurations for modern drum set micing, and options for ways to include electronic instruments like the Roland SPDS-X into your live performance routine.

FLEX Clinic - Depending on the day, we were lucky to have Darren Proctor share the fundamentals of rhythmic recitation, both from its applications in the traditional tabla music of North India, through to the ways that he applies it to his practice of modern, classical percussion and the marching arts. On alternate days, we welcomed two current WVU Percussion majors for a series of Zoom interviews regarding questions surrounding their experience as first-year students in the percussion studio at WVU.

Individual Lesson Time - Between 2:30-4:30 pm each day, attendees of the academy had one of their three private, one-on-one lessons with WVU Percussion Faculty members. Each attendee had the opportunity to study with 3 of the 4 WVU Percussion Faculty, delineated based on factors including their expressed interests and their access to various instruments (marimba, drum set, etc.). Those students who did not have a lesson that day would use the time to practice or catch up on static video content that they wanted to review.

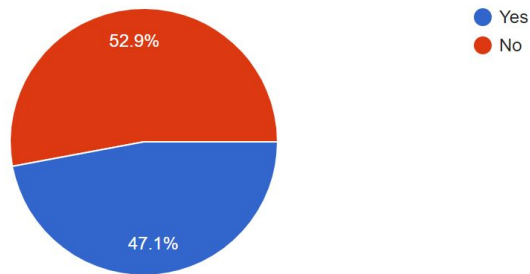
Faculty Round Table Discussion - At the end of each day of the academy, the WVU Percussion Faculty would reconvene to discuss all manner of topics relating to how to practice, what to prepare for an audition, and what it means to be a musician. The crux of these sessions revolved around questions submitted during the call via the Zoom chat by attendees who wanted to know more about a specific topic.

Appendix C - Attendee Feedback Summary

Data as of 7/5/20

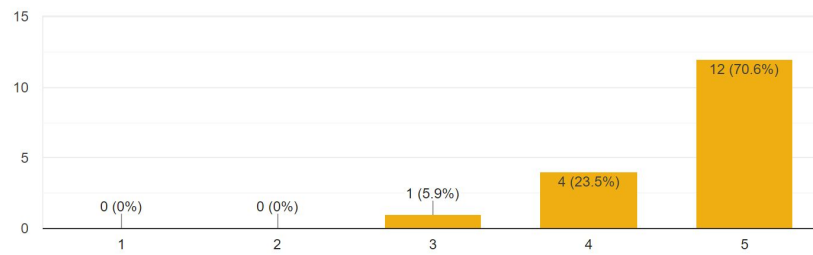
Have you ever attended an online event before?

17 responses



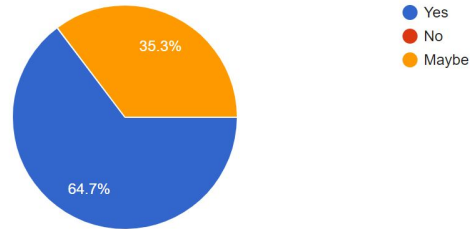
The Academy overall was...

17 responses



Would you be interested in other online WVU Percussion Academy events throughout the year?

17 responses



Appendix D: Fail-State Flowchart (sample)

