Manhattan School of Music connects students and teachers across the world with Polycom solutions.

Distance learning in music education, how is this possible? Skeptics wonder if video conferencing technology can capture superior sound quality or has the necessary clarity for tracking minute movements during performance. The surprising answer: Yes.

The Manhattan School of Music, a preeminent international conservatory of music offers bachelor, master and doctorate degrees in music performance. The school hails as the first conservatory in the country to incorporate video conferencing into its music performance education curriculum.

Founded in 1918, the Manhattan School of Music is dedicated to the personal, artistic and intellectual development of each of its students who range from pre-college through postgraduate levels. In addition to approximately 850 students from over 40 countries in the College Division, the school serves about 450 New York-area students ages 5 to 18 in the Preparatory Division; almost 2,000 New York City school children through its arts-in-education program; and approximately 1,700 college and K-12 students worldwide through its distance learning program.

The school trains students in performance and composition, while providing a broad-based education in music theory, history and humanities. Under the leadership of Marta Istomin, president since 1992, the school employs a superb artist-teacher faculty of 250 professional musicians and presents over 400 public performances annually. Manhattan School of Music’s more than 10,000 alumni remain active in every aspect of American musical life. Many are among the most distinguished artists performing in opera houses and concert halls, and on jazz stages throughout the world today.

“We initially explored video conferencing technology to accommodate the touring schedule of world renowned violinist, conductor and MSM faculty member, Pinchas Zukerman, so that he could teach his students while concertizing around the globe,” said Christianne Orto, director of recording and distance learning for the school. “The program proved so successful that Istomin decided video conferencing presented great opportunities for the conservatory environment. We have since expanded our program to include master classes, workshops, clinics, one-on-one teaching, education and community outreach, professional development, coaching and the creation of a new elective class, ‘Arts-in-Education & The Virtual Classroom,’ designed to expose students to the virtual learning environment.”

Searching for Quality Audio and Video
As they searched for the right solution, the Manhattan School of Music staff faced technology limitations with video conferencing. Other vendors’ products proved inadequate for the high fidelity sound and acoustical requirements of music instruction. Finding a suitable vendor involved careful consideration of equipment capabilities, ensuring it would address sound quality and flexibility.

| Challenge | Providing adequate video conferencing products for the high fidelity sound and acoustical requirements of music instruction. |
| Solution | Polycom’s VSX™ 8000 |
| Result | Collaborating to approximately 850 students from over 40 countries in the College Division, about 450 New York-area students in the Preparatory Division and approximately 1,700 college and K-12 students worldwide through the distance learning program. |

“This technology meets our standards - high quality audio and video. We can now teach music performance education on a high level suitable for our esteemed artist faculty in a virtual environment”

Christianne Orto
Director, Recording and Distance Learning
Manhattan School of Music
In the past, video conferencing provided only mono sound, which was unacceptable for delivering the superior quality necessary for music education. In addition, vendors could not allocate extra bandwidth necessary for high quality audio. Since sound is a paramount requirement, the school thought existing systems were unacceptable.

Until they discovered the Polycom VSX 8000, which offers StereoSurround™ capability that can allocate 96 kbps of sound quality, including full-duplex stereo echo cancellation. Plus, the company’s technical support staff equipped the VSX 8000 with custom features tailored to the school’s music application. Louis Brown, chief audio engineer at the Manhattan School of Music and an innovator in adapting recording techniques for music performance video conferencing adds, “The Polycom 8000 allows me to create a greater depth of sound and image providing a more realistic virtual environment. I am now able to explore and utilize more creative audio techniques, never before imaginable, with impressive results.”

“Additionally, Polycom’s VSX 8000 rack mountable unit gives us the flexibility and mobility we need for presenting video conference performance or teaching events in different venues,” said Orto.

“This technology meets our standards - high quality audio and video,” said Orto. “We can now teach music performance education on a high level suitable for our esteemed artist faculty in a virtual environment.” Additionally, Manhattan School of Music is now collaborating closely with Polycom by providing suggestions and improvements to help better serve the music education market.

Video conferencing and Music Education

With Polycom’s technology, Manhattan School of Music exports and imports music education to master classes at institutions of higher education including the Cleveland Institute of Music and the New World Symphony in Florida. Jazz clinics, workshops and music enrichment classes for K-12 students are also given across the country to schools from Alabama to Wisconsin.

On a daily basis, the school also imports information from national and international institutions, providing the faculty an effective way to lead classes at the institution. Guest artist teachers are available via video conference from remote locations.

The school applies the technology in many creative ways in order to build a pathway for the future. On one occasion, the school used video conferencing to present an honorary doctorate degree during a commencement ceremony. The recipient, Mstislav Rostropovich, renowned laureate conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., is one of the most sought-after cellists in the world and highly regarded in the music arena. He has given countless memorable performances and inspired the world’s leading composers to enlarge and enrich the standard cello repertoire with works especially composed for and dedicated to him. His inclusion in the ceremony through video conferencing proved moving and inspirational for both faculty and staff.

President Istomin remains a staunch supporter of video conferencing technology. Its use has enabled the school to extend its distance learning program and the global reach of the musical arts.

“Our music programming was always ready for us to deliver to remote locations, but the technical limitations of the technology for music performance education were of great concern,” said Orto. “Polycom’s solutions saved the program because of their ease of use, reliability and quality. It made all the difference in the world. We can now look forward to expanding further with the possibility of remote auditioning for prospective students.”

Other Considerations

For those looking to start similar services, the Manhattan School of Music recommends the following:

1. Invest in a Polycom infrastructure. Advanced, high-quality equipment that is easy to use is critical to acceptance.

2. Secure support on many institutional levels. It’s vital to receive backing from senior administration, faculty, and student leaders before implementing a video conferencing program.

3. Educate and inform as many people as possible to help ensure buy-in from a large constituency. Once people understand the benefits of the technology, they’re more willing to accept and support its use. Demonstrating its potential is essential.

4. Integrate distance learning with recording and audio services. Convergence of content and technology is the key to superior sound quality. Similarly, incorporating institutional video technolgy services is also necessary to ensure the highest production values for music performance video conferences.

About Manhattan School of Music

Manhattan School of Music is a preeminent international conservatory of music granting bachelor of music, master of music, and doctor of musical arts degrees. Founded in 1918, the School is dedicated to the personal, artistic, and intellectual development of each of its students who range in age from the pre-college through the postgraduate level. In addition to approximately 800 students in the College Division, who come from some 40 countries, the School serves about 450 New York-area students ages 5-18, in the Preparatory Division, almost 2,000 New York City schoolchildren through its arts-in-education program, and approximately 1700 college and K-12 students worldwide through its distance learning program. The School trains students in performance and composition and provides a broad-based education in music theory, history, and humanities. Website: http://www.msmnyc.edu