

## **Violinists can tune up online CCM professor develops global 'how-to' guide**

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When it comes to learning the violin, "a picture is worth a thousand words," believes Kurt Sassmannshaus, chair of the string department at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

About four months from now, youngsters as far away as China, Armenia or Russia will be able to take sophisticated lessons on the violin with the click of a mouse. Sassmannshaus has created a groundbreaking new Web site, [www.violinmasterclass.com](http://www.violinmasterclass.com), the world's first that is a comprehensive "how to" guide that teaches, for instance, how to hold a violin bow properly.

Young violinists in CCM's Starling String Project perform the demonstrations in 150 instructional video segments, via streaming media, with CD-quality sound.

The site is in its final stages of development, and will be launched in early September. Funded by the Starling Foundation in Houston, the \$900,000 project will be free and available to anyone who has a computer. Organizers plan to fund its estimated \$6,000 annual costs from advertising income and sponsors.

"If a kid in China or Russia gets on this site, they don't have Visa cards in their pockets to sign up," says Sassmannshaus. "It's definitely not designed to replace a teacher. But it can give helpful information to the child, to the parent and sometimes to the teacher."

Sassmannshaus is the cyber music professor, who explains teaching concepts on the Web, using video, audio and pop-up graphic pdf files. He will also answer e-mail and questions via a link called "Ask Professor S." Visitors can also pose musical questions on a bulletin board, which he will moderate.

"I was very impressed. There's nothing like this that I've ever seen - with video clips online that get right to the detail of what he's trying to communicate," says Haig Avsharian, president of Shar Products, a Michigan store that sells musical instruments, sheet music and teaching videos. "For example, *vibrato* is a difficult technique to conceptualize, but seeing a closeup of the hand - that allows the student to visualize it. There is no substitute for that."

Because of the subtleties involved in learning things like posture, hand position

and intonation, ideally there should be a teacher or parent guiding the student. But this is a case where modern technology can make dry scales and arpeggios - something students have endured for generations - come alive, says Mike Blakeslee, deputy executive director of the National Association for Music Education (MENC) in Reston, Va.

"Playing instruments and engaging in music is so positive for kids, that any tools that help that essential group of the child, the parent and the teacher to reach kids with music is very positive," he says.

## **Global effort**

According to Sassmannshaus, the virtual violin lessons will include pointers for beginners and intermediate students, as well as master classes, exercises and performances for advanced students. It will be available in English, German and Chinese, with plans to eventually translate it to Korean, Japanese, Russian, Spanish and French.

Although it is keyed to classical violin, the site joins others such as [www.berkleeshares.com](http://www.berkleeshares.com), which debuted in November from Boston's Berklee College of Music, and offers 80 music lessons from "basic hard rock trumpet" to "funk guitar" in downloadable formats like MP3s, QuickTime and pdf files. Most other music teaching Web sites, though, are pop-oriented and offer limited instruction.

Sassmannshaus founded the Starling Preparatory String Project, a renowned pre-college program to develop the talent of extraordinary young violinists, at CCM in 1987. In November, he was named the successor to the late eminent teacher Dorothy DeLay. He is also on the faculty of the Aspen Music School.

The idea for a violin teaching Web site struck him one day in 2001, while sitting on a plane on his way to judge a contest in Texas. He suddenly realized that young students were not reading the established books on violin technique.

"The books are too difficult to understand. Human motions are intrinsically difficult to describe in print, the language becomes cumbersome and it's not fun to read," he concluded.

He began to think about developing a Web site, comparing it to learning yoga with an exercise video. "It is obvious that more people will practice with a video than a book," he realized.

It was a defining moment. He knew that, for the first time, he could expose a large

number of budding violinists to the most advanced teaching methods. Until now, such teaching has only been available to an elite few.

The Web site is meant to enhance - not replace - studies with a teacher. A series of books will complement the high-tech lessons. They include violin technique for beginners, written by Sassmannshaus' father, Egon Sassmannshaus (a best-selling violin method widely used in Europe for 30 years), and an advanced technique book, *Virtuous Moments*, that Kurt Sassmannshaus is writing. Both are published by Barenreiter.

Above all, his goal is to make the best information available to young students and their families, all over the globe.

"It shows the standard that can be achieved by children, because the kids are doing it on the Web site," he says.

[http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/05/02/tem\\_violin02.html](http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/05/02/tem_violin02.html)  
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