Virtual Evolution.

Scott Reed created a remote learning institute for Music Academy of the West.

by JUDITH MALAFRONTE

Music Academy of the West.

SCOTT REED, PRESIDENT AND CEO of Music Academy of the West, is tenaciously upbeat. In March, when the pandemic turned the world upside down, the storied summer training organization had already selected 134 fellows from more than two thousand applicants, age nineteen to thirty-one. “Canceling was never an option,” says Reed.

“We limited screen time to ten or twelve hours per week.”

Fellows were provided with a technology package comprising an iPad, a premium microphone, Sennheiser headphones, cables, stands, lights and other accessories, along with tech support from industry professionals. Lessons and master classes took place online and included asynchronous activities in which students sent practice videos to their teachers for review and comment. The Acting Intensive went online, along with career development workshops and lectures. The Music Academy’s partnership with a local fitness program transitioned to online sessions in mindfulness, yoga and cardio, while a psychologist was available for private work. Large-scale performances, along with the popular Piano Competition and the Marilyn Horne Song Competition, were scrapped, replaced by a newly created Digital Challenge that extended the four-week program. “We really thought about the new skills musicians need to have if they’re going to have sustainable lives,” says Reed. The simple guidelines—create a three-to-seven-minute video that showcases some aspect of performance ability—left room for creativity, with judging based on musical and artistic excellence, as well as technical innovation and sound and video quality. Among the three winners was baritone Byron J. Mayes, with a project about racial identity and visibility based on Margaret Bonds’s setting of Langston Hughes’s “I, Too.” Another competitive offering was the Fast Pitch Awards, an online event with audience voting that gave cash prizes to projects involving outreach and social impact. Mezzo-soprano Alice Chung was a finalist, with her pitch advocating Korean Folk Songs as a bridge to classical music. One special performance opportunity for the singers was a program called “Myths and Revelations.” Each fellow curated a short set of songs that illustrated a personal connection to the intentionally vague theme. For the final one-hour video, music by Wolf, Sibelius, Libby Larsen and Hildegard von Bingen and monologues by Aeschylus and Euripides were combined with images of the singers’ homes and environments, creating an intimacy even deeper than in a live performance.

Up until 2020 the Compeer Program had connected fellows with local residents through socializing over dinner or engaging in local sightseeing; this year, the pivot to online meetings was surprisingly effective. “It opened up so many things when we were not limited by location,” says Reed. “Three representatives from Goldman Sachs shared mentorship of one of our singers. Imagine when the people who run your investments can connect with your program through one of your fellows! When you’ve got that connection from a mission-oriented place, it changes everything, and it gave new opportunities to all of us.” Reed’s commitment to fostering community also led to “Project Resonance,” which introduced fellows to graduate students at UC Santa Barbara to explore public speaking, crafting program notes and using personal qualities for effective communication.

Speaking with Reed stirs admiration and awe. “It was crazy running MARLI from our homes, with kids running around, because schools and daycares were closed,” he says. “You find out what you’re made of—"You learn what your capacity is. Right now we’re building multiple mod-

els for 2021, so it’s a busy time. It’s incredibly gratifying and fulfilling, as well as desperate and challenging and complex.”

When he is asked about combating the despair ravaging the performance community, Reed’s tone softens. “It’s really, really difficult,” he acknowledges. “It’s being optimistic, being hopeful, being adaptable. It’s being willing to think of things in a new way. It’s supporting yourself in a new way, for a greater purpose. It’s using your art in a different way. It comes from a place of being completely inspired year after year by the artists who come through our program, and from being the best we can be for the people around us.”

Always quick to praise his team, Reed says, “Any time you lead from a place of arrogance, you are already a step behind. I’ve always said, ‘What if you had the best people in the industry— in artistic planning, in fundrais-

ing, in marketing—all working at the same organization?’ And I feel like we have that! We have the same mantra and ethics. When everybody comes together and is aligned, we can move those mountains. At least we are willing to try.”

Judith Malafonte, a mezzo-soprano, vocal coach and continuo player, teaches at Indiana University’s Historical Performance Institute.