

Survey Research on Remote Exams | By Dr. Sean Hutchins

As it was with every other domain of our lives, the past year has been a turbulent time for research. Avenues of study that had once been a priority were no longer feasible, and many programs had to be curtailed or dropped altogether. However, the migration of daily life to online modalities also presented new opportunities for research, as well as new priorities. In particular, we realized that research on the effectiveness of digital learning solutions was more important than ever.

Last year presented us with just such an opportunity for relevant and timely research through the beginning of the Remote Examination program. In the Spring of 2020, many thousands of students who had signed up for an RCM exam were impacted by COVID-19 shutdowns, as in-person examinations were no longer possible. As it turned out, even prior to the pandemic, the Royal Conservatory of Music had been developing a version of its examination to be taken online, with a live examiner through video conferencing. Those students who had been scheduled for an in-person exam were given the opportunity to take a remote exam instead, and this proved to be a popular choice. Thus, the first major round of remote examinations almost entirely comprised students who had intended to take in-person exams.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF REMOTE EXAMS

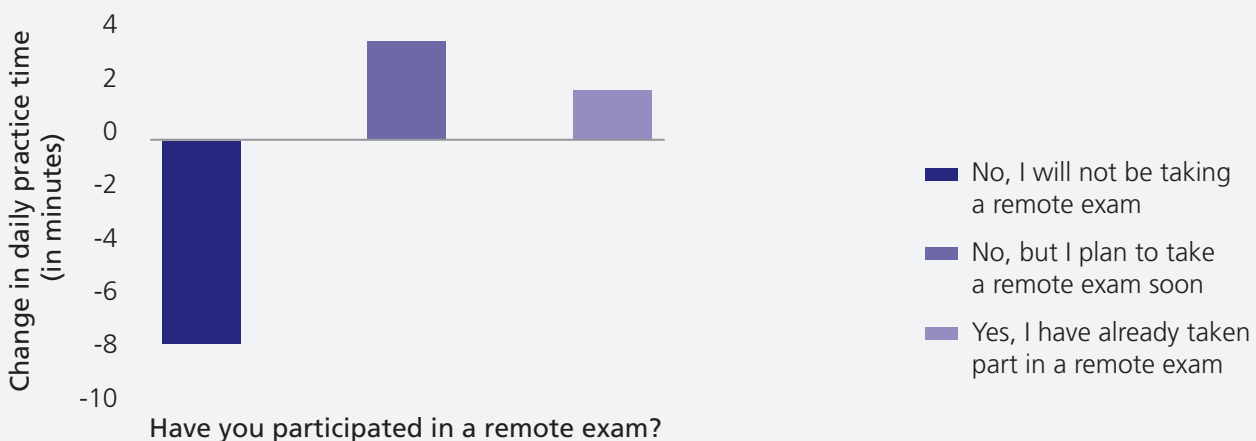
To better understand the impact of remote examinations and the ways that they were perceived by our students, we surveyed two groups of students in July 2020. The first group comprised students who had already taken a remote exam or intended to do so soon. The second group were also RCM students, drawn from a pool who had taken an exam in the recent past, but who were not signed up for a remote exam. Critically, because of the switch to online learning, neither group of students had intended to take a remote exam; the first group was put into that situation by circumstance. Though not exactly the same, the two groups of students had many similarities to each other. In total, 1,873 RCM students of all levels (or their parents/caregivers) completed the survey.

HOW HAVE PRACTICE HABITS CHANGED?

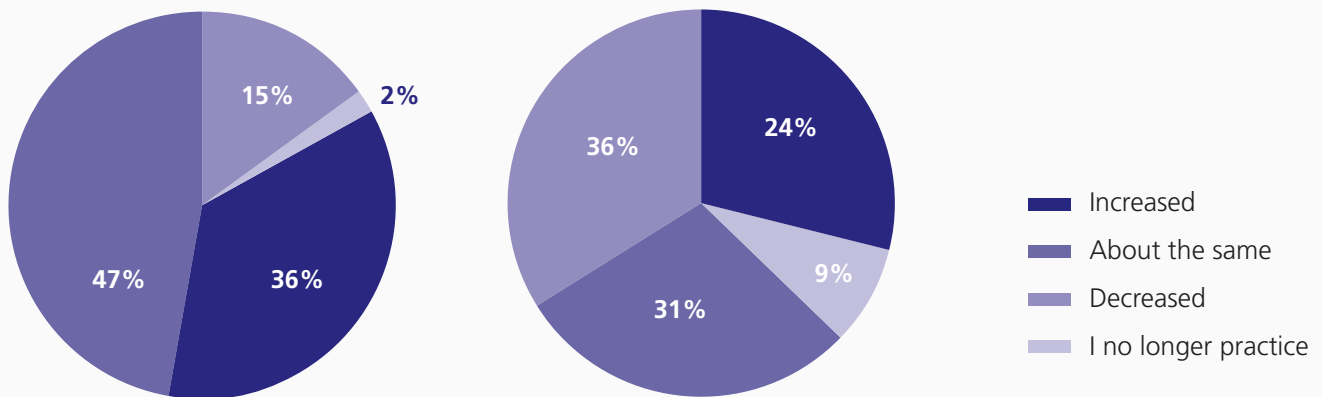
One of the major purposes of this survey was to look at the impact of enrollment in remote exams on practice habits, and how those habits may have changed during the shutdowns. During this time, music practice was more challenging than ever. Many students were unable to continue with regular music lessons and their practice routines were disrupted. Our survey examined whether being signed up for a remote exam was associated with better retention of practice and study habits.

One of our major findings was that students who took or intended to take remote exams maintained or even increased their pre-pandemic levels of practice, whereas those who did not take remote exams reported a significant decrease in practice — about 28% less than the Remote Exam group. What's more, nearly 10% of the group not taking remote exams reported that they no longer practiced their primary instrument at all after March 2020. The data on practice habits is shown below:

Remote Exams and Change in Practice Time

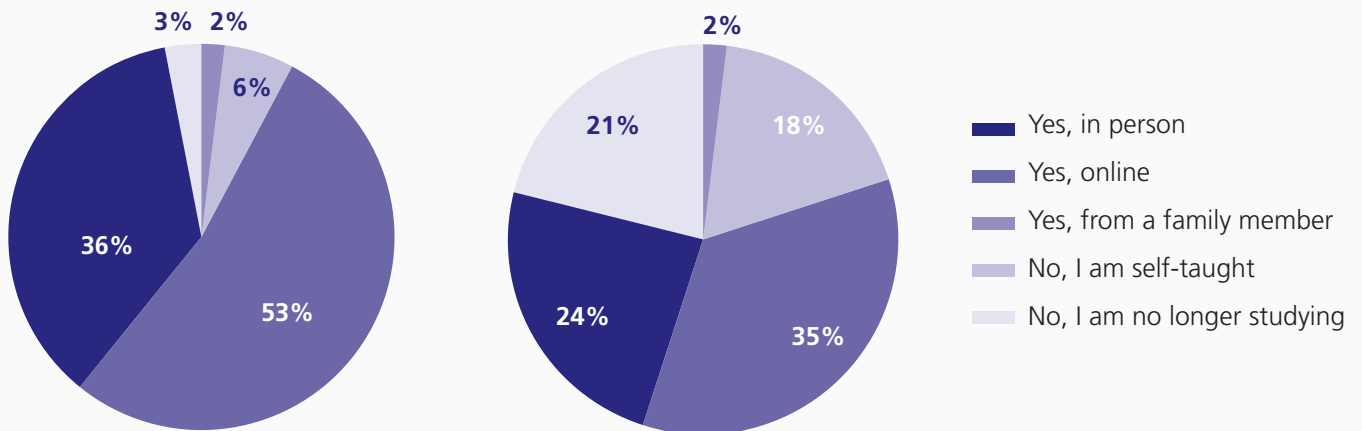


How was your amount of daily practice changed since March 2020?



Similar results held when examining formal music study with a teacher. While about 98% of students surveyed from all groups reported studying with a teacher in person prior to March 2020, afterwards, considerably more of the No Remote Exam Group (39%) reported no longer studying with a teacher, compared to only 9% of the group who did participate or intend to participate in remote exams. In fact, if we omit those students who reported being “self-taught” during this time, approximately seven times fewer in the Remote Exam Group reported stopping formal study altogether. This data is shown below:

Since March 2020, have you been studying with a teacher?



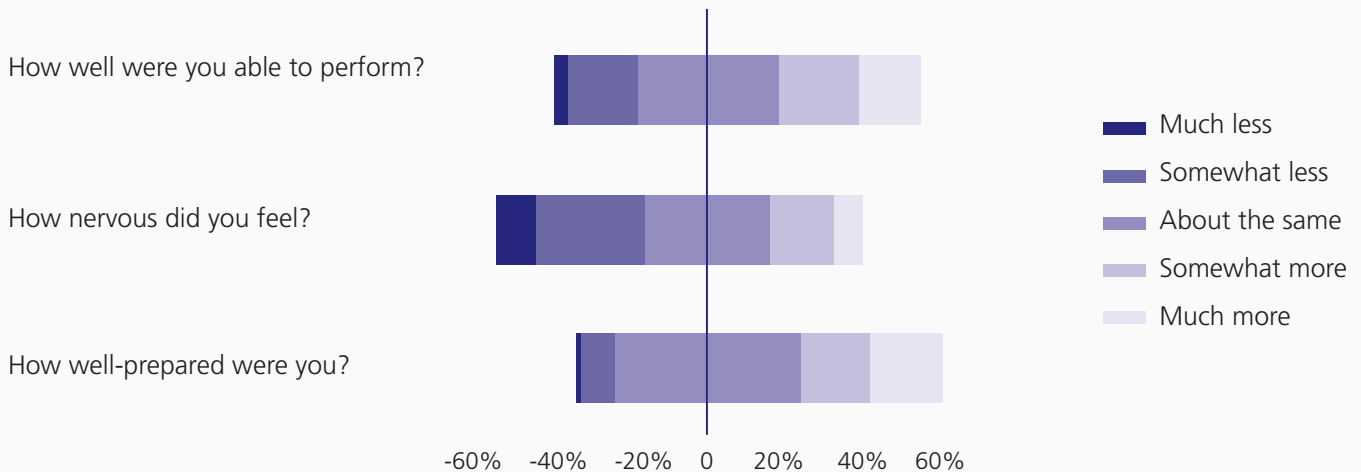
Remote Exam Taken or Intended

No Remote Exam

POSITIVE IMPRESSIONS OF REMOTE EXAMS

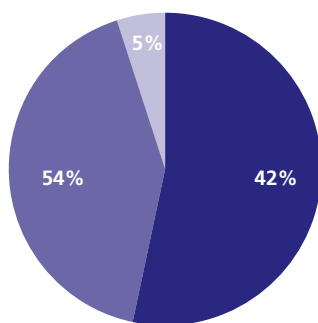
In addition to asking about practice and study habits, we also asked those students who had already taken a remote exam about their impressions of the experience. While impressions varied, most students reported an overall positive experience. Compared with their prior experiences with in-person exams, students reported being better able to perform on remote exams and feeling more well-prepared. Most strikingly, they reported feeling considerably less nervous taking the exam in their own home — a finding which may translate into overall better performance. See our article about the *Encoding Specificity Principle* for more details. These results are shown below.

Compared with an in-person exam...



In the end, most students who took remote exams expressed a willingness to take them again, with a large percentage indicating that they preferred this option. This is especially remarkable given that these students did not intend to take a remote exam when signing up. Thus, they are not sampled from a group already predisposed to take remote exams, but can be considered representative of the general population of RCM students.

Would you participate in another remote examination?



- Yes, I prefer (my child prefers) this examination option
- Only if an in-person exam is not possible
- No, never

In summary, our survey results showed overall positive impressions of remote exams among this population, as well as an association with better maintenance of practice and study habits. While it is important to be clear that this survey-type research cannot prove causality, the design of this study does suggest that remote exams may be an effective tool for helping students to continue music practice and study during challenging times. And while they are not the best option for everybody, our findings do suggest that remote exams may in fact be a better option for certain students in certain situations.

Dr. Sean Hutchins is a neuroscientist and the Director of Research at The Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. He received his Ph.D. from McGill University, studying music and the mind. His current work examines the role of musical training and experience on cognitive and linguistic abilities.