How to do a distance lesson for music instrumental teaching:

A Guide for *Dummies*

by Lucia Di Cecca

lucydicecca@hotmail.com

I teach piano at the Conservatory of Music in Santa Cecilia, Rome.

When Italian schools and universities closed down for the COVID-19 emergency, we have been asked to do distance lessons.

I contacted my students and said to them: "Let's do distance lessons, see you on Skype on day X at time X and let me listen to what you have been practicing".

I knew the sound quality on Skype wouldn't be good but I didn't imagine such a disaster.

That's how one of the biggest challenges of my life has started: was there any chance of making a distance piano lesson profitable for advanced students accustomed to the physical presence of the teacher?

Please find here a "Guide for Dummies" that I put together based on my experience on distance piano lessons in Corona times.

1. **What (in my opinion) a platform for distance lessons should offer:**

    a) *Be simple and free*
    b) *Have the ability to adjust sound quality:*
        All existing platforms are tailored to speak, not to play music, and therefore the system automatically intervenes to improve the audio thinking about the voice, even erasing background noises. However, if you play and want the person on the other side to hear what you play and not a heavily altered (and worsened, from our point of view) sound, you need to be able to intervene on the sound settings.
        The quality of videos got in general much worse in this period; even YouTube had to lower its standards due to the crazy increase in data traffic.
    c) *Be able to share your screen and audio:*
        Almost all platforms, precisely because they are designed for lessons or business meetings during which participants just talk and show charts or slides, allow you to share your screen (meaning that everyone can see what a person is doing on his/her screen). However, in music lessons we need to share the sound of the screen as well.
   d) *Be able to record the lesson:*
        Recording the lesson has been proven necessary especially at the beginning, because the students needed to realize what I was actually hearing while they were playing.

After trying many platforms, I decided to use **Zoom**, because it allowed me to satisfy the 4 points mentioned above.
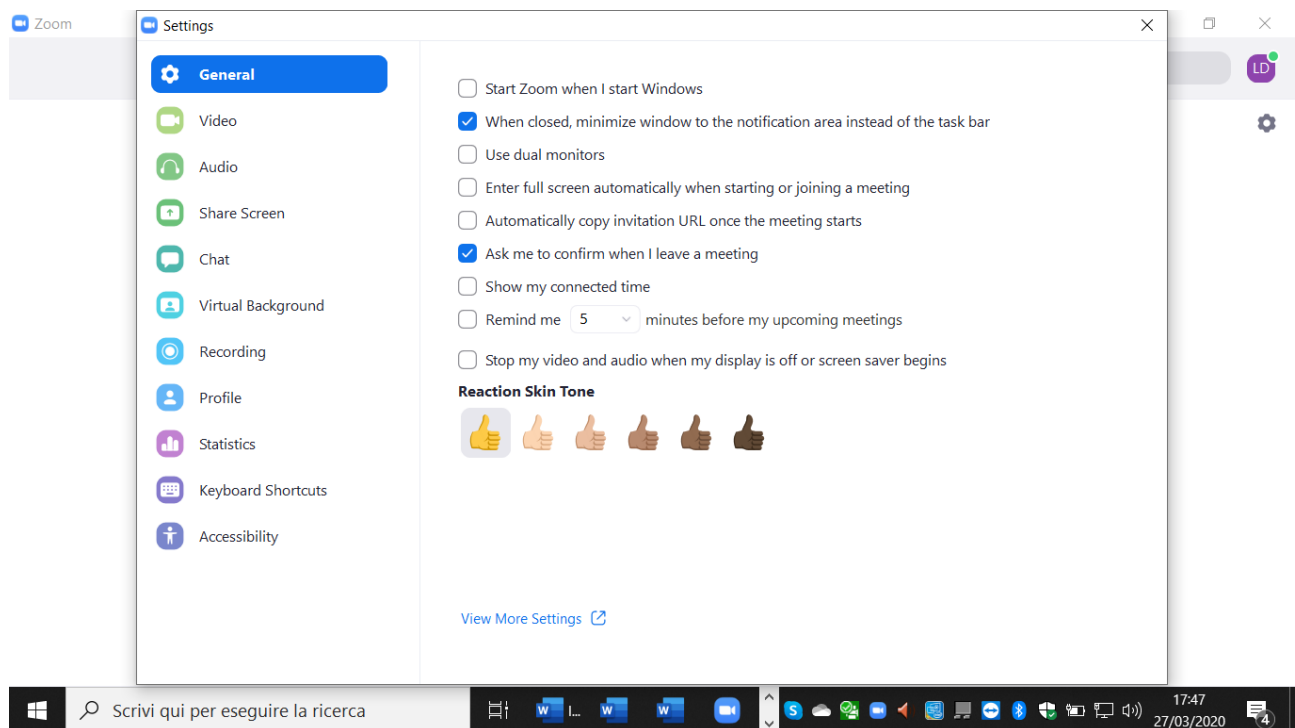
2. How to use Zoom

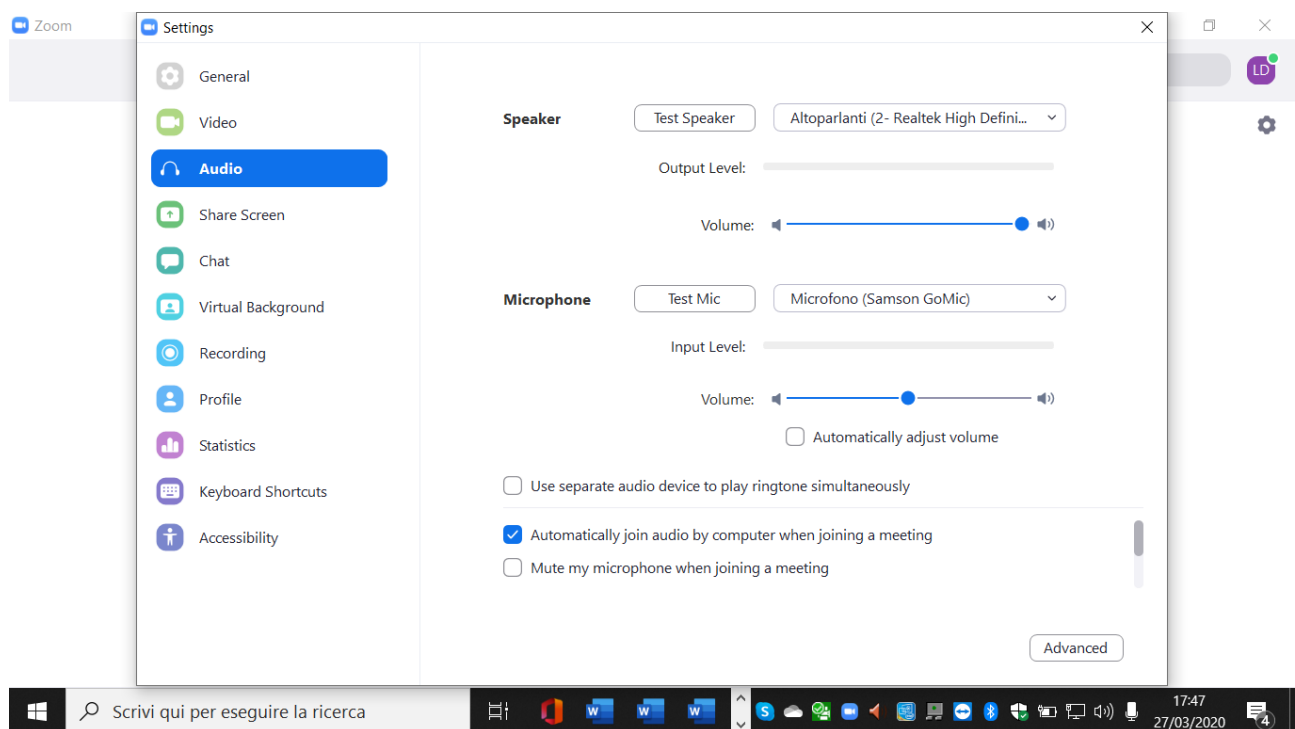Go to https://zoom.us/download and download Zoom Client for Meetings.

After installing Zoom, this window will open:
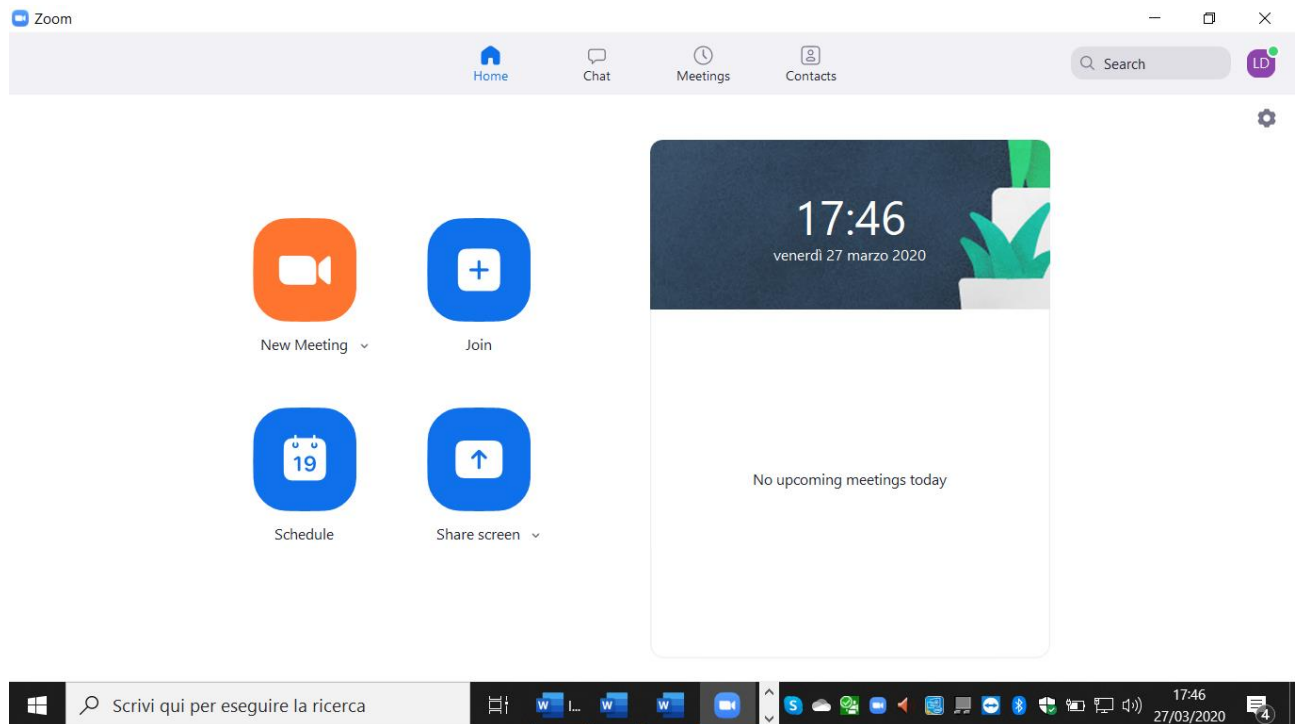
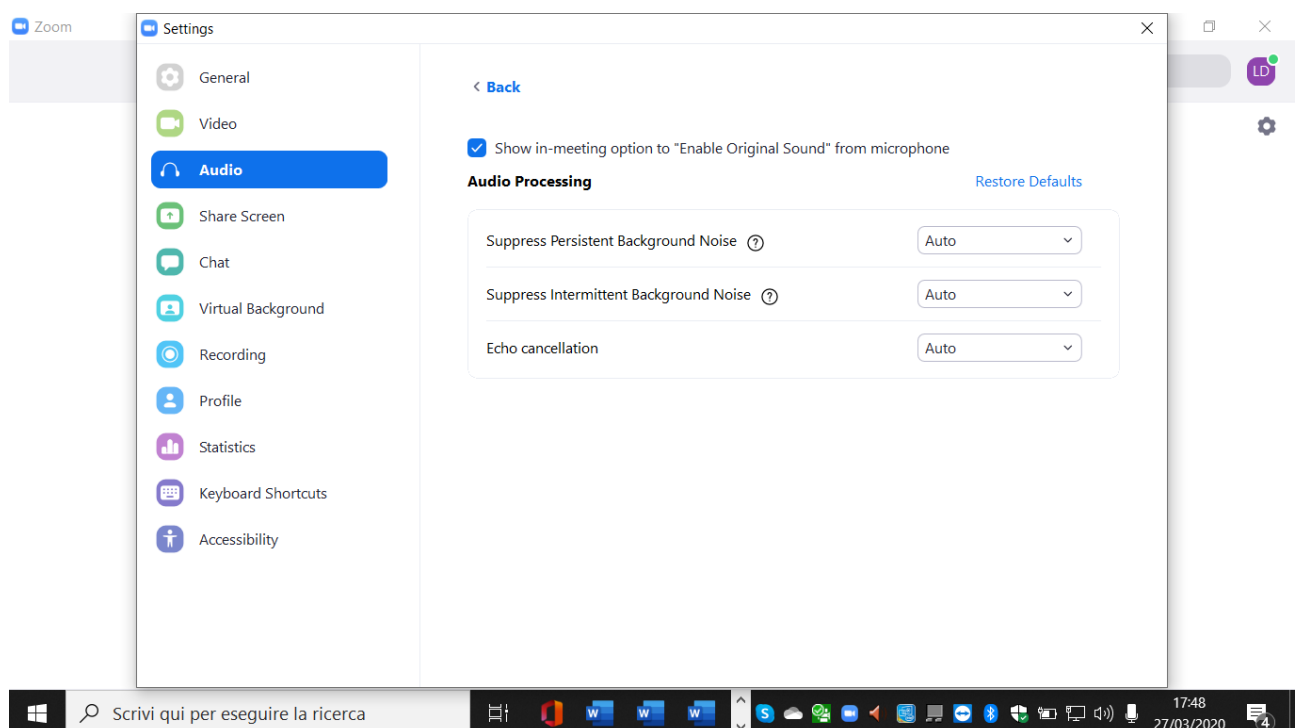Click on the wheel in the upper right corner *(Settings)* and open the Settings page:

Click on *Audio*:

Unclick *Automatically adjust volume* (the box needs to be blank).

Then, click on *Advanced* (bottom right)

Click on *Show in-meeting option to 'Enable Original Sound' from microphone.*

This will allow a box with the caption *Turn on Original Sound* or *Turn off Original Sound* to appear on your screen during your lesson. You can change settings by clicking on it.

To try to improve the quality of the video (but keep in mind that you cannot do much as the network is overloaded), click on *Video* and then on *Enable HD* on the settings page:
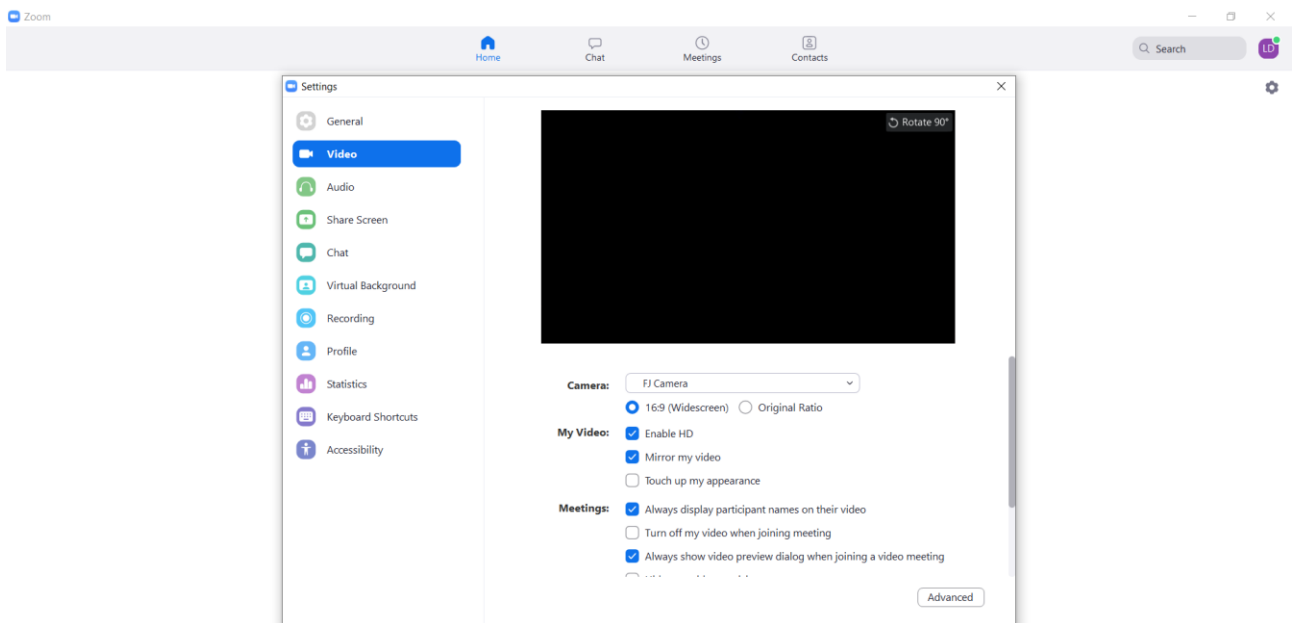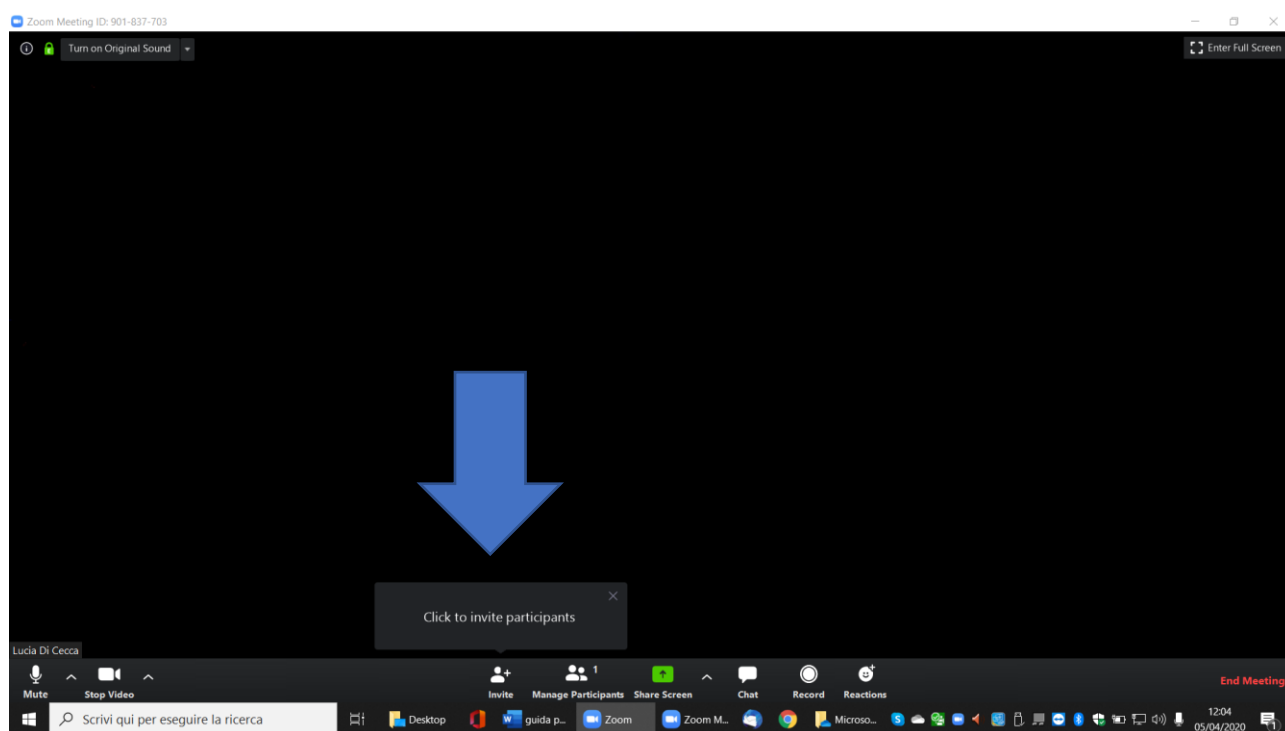

Get your students do the same things you did, downloading Zoom and changing the settings just as you did.
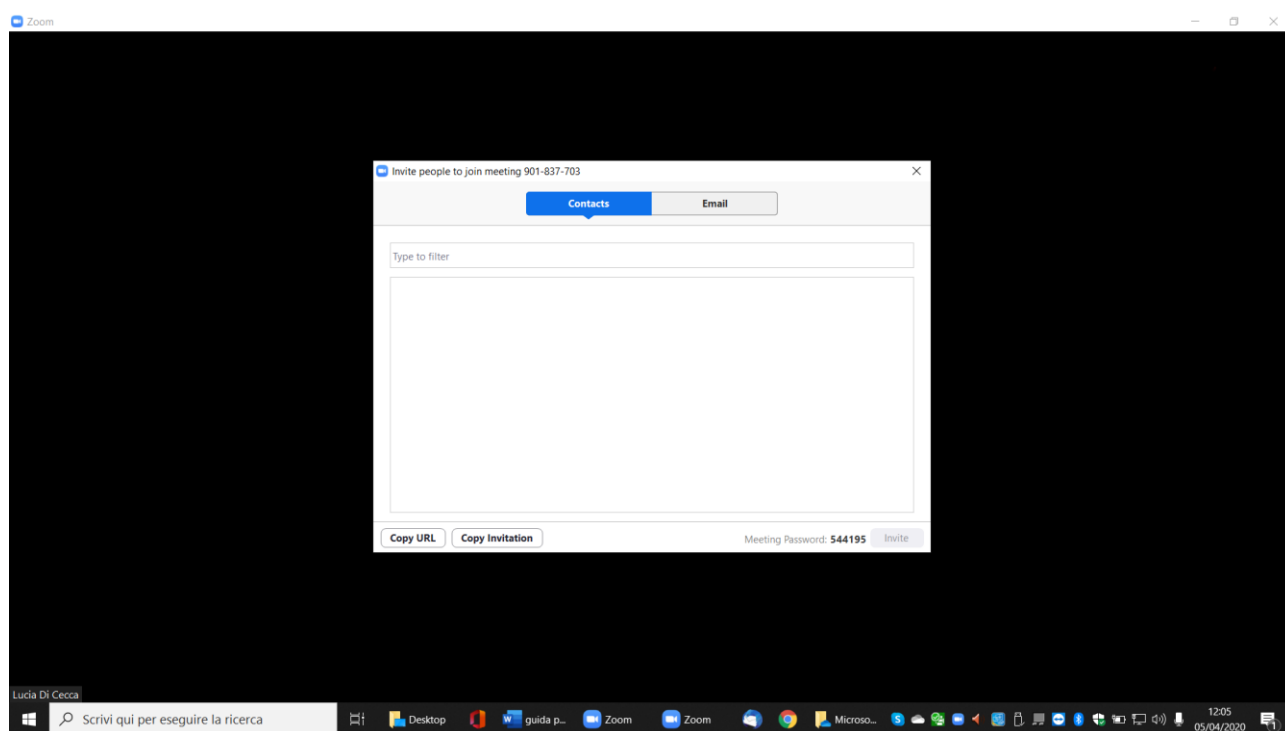
Now you can start your lesson. Enter Zoom and click on the orange box named *New Meeting*:
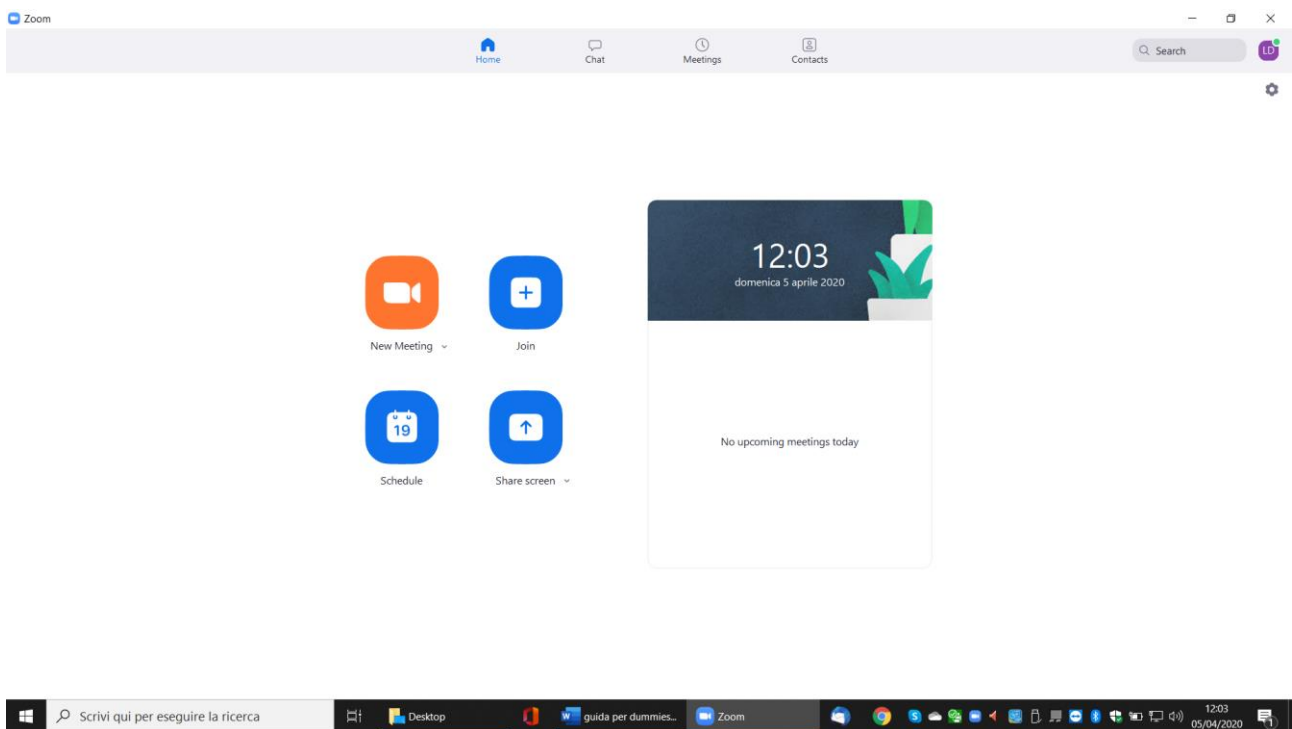
Then, on *Click to invite participants*:

You'll see this screen:

Click on *Copy invitation* and in this way the access link is automatically copied.
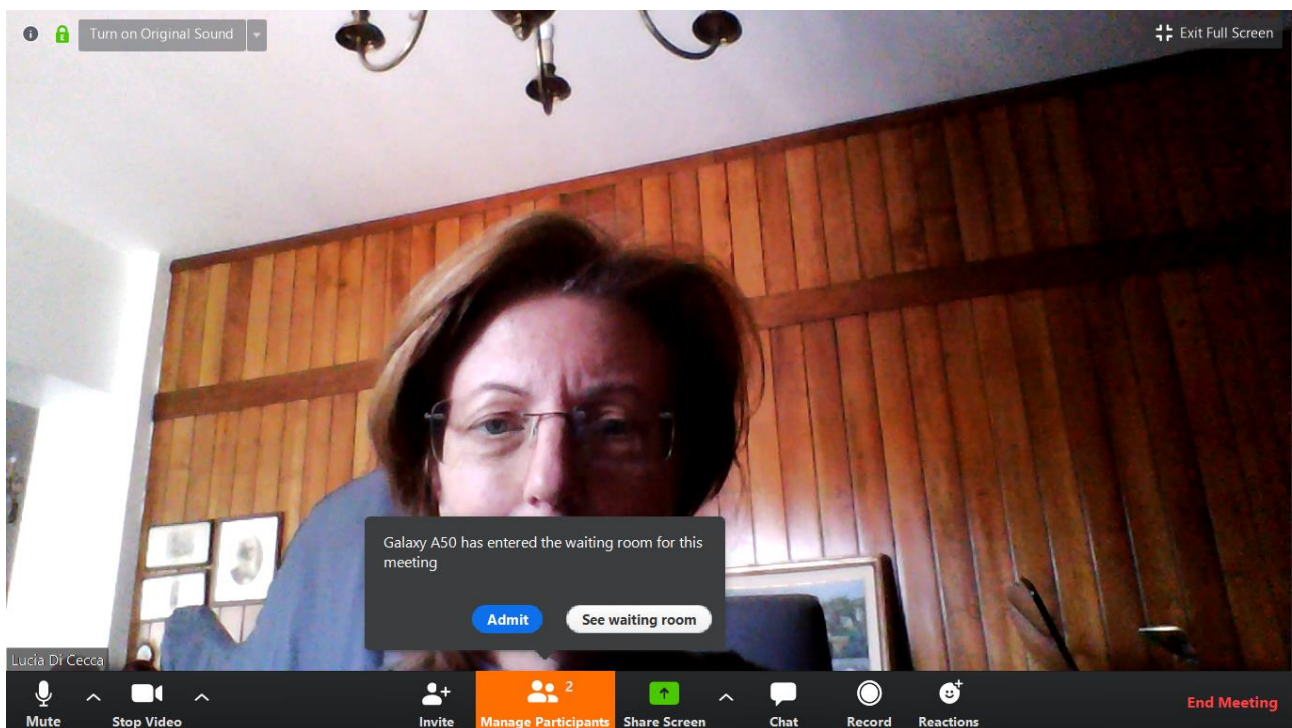
At this point, go to your email or WhatsApp, paste the link and send it to your student.

The student will receive this message:

Please wait, the meeting host will let you in soon

Lucia Di Cecca's Zoom Meeting

On your screen a box will open, informing you that there is one person in the waiting room:

Click on *Admit* and your student will be able to start the lesson.

Zoom's free connection with more than 2 participants lasts 40 minutes. If you want a group lesson to last more than 40 minutes, once the 40 minutes are over you need to exit the group lesson and start over by clicking on New Meeting, etc. However, if the participants of the meeting are only 2 (i.e. you and your student, as in one-to-one teaching), then the duration is unlimited.

I always teach one person at a time, so I don't have any problem.

Remember, before you start playing, make sure that the platform uses *Original Sound.* To make sure this setting is correct you need to see the button *Turn off Original Sound* on the left up corner (see below).
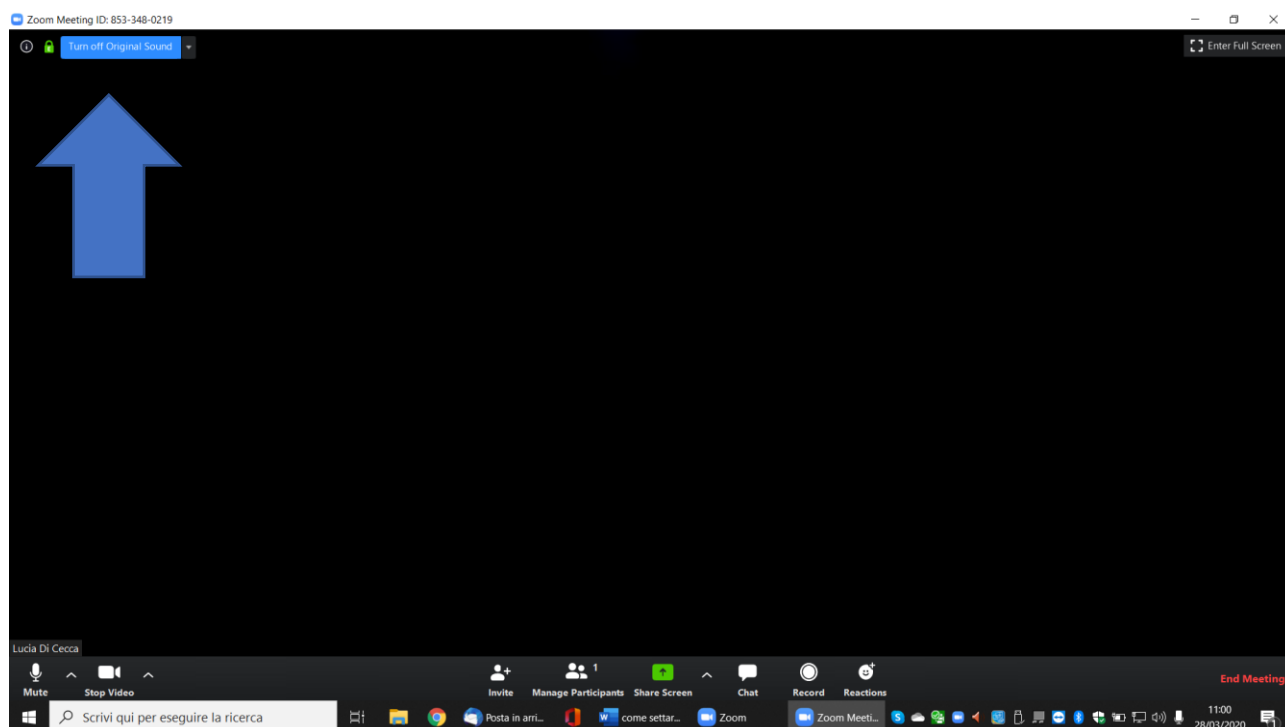
If you want to talk to your student instead, it might be convenient to adjust the audio automatically. In this case, you need to change the sound options by clicking on the button on the up left corner so that the wording *Turn on Original Sound* appears.
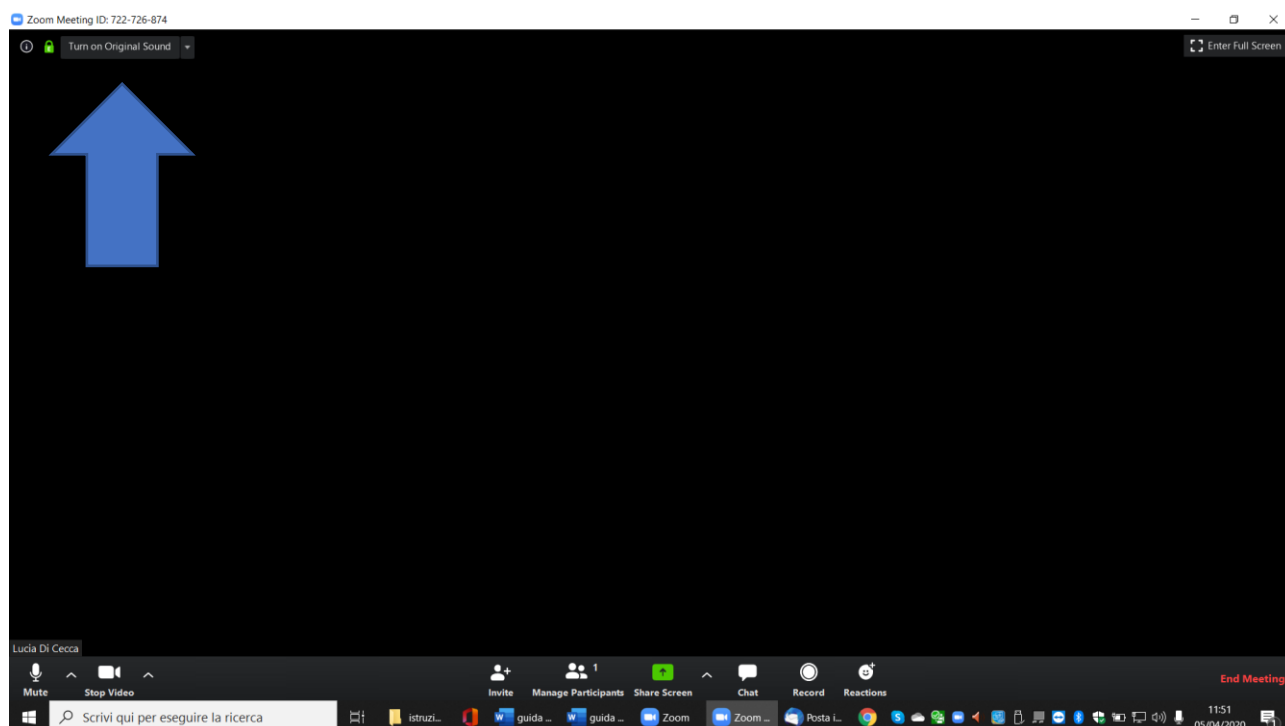

At the bottom left, there are icons of a microphone and of a camera. If you don't want to be heard, click on *Mute* (the microphone icon will appear crossed-out; to unmute you just click on the same icon); if you don't want your video image to appear, click on *Stop Video* (the icon of the camera will be crossed out). Normally,

during the lesson both you and your student should have audio and video activated (and therefore microphone and camera icons should not be crossed out).

If during the lesson you want to watch a video with your student (perhaps from YouTube), you can share your screen with him/her.

To share your screen, so that the student can see what you have on your screen, click on *Share Screen* (the green square at the bottom center).

In the window that opens, click at the bottom left on *Share computer sound* and then on the blue box at the bottom right, *Share*.
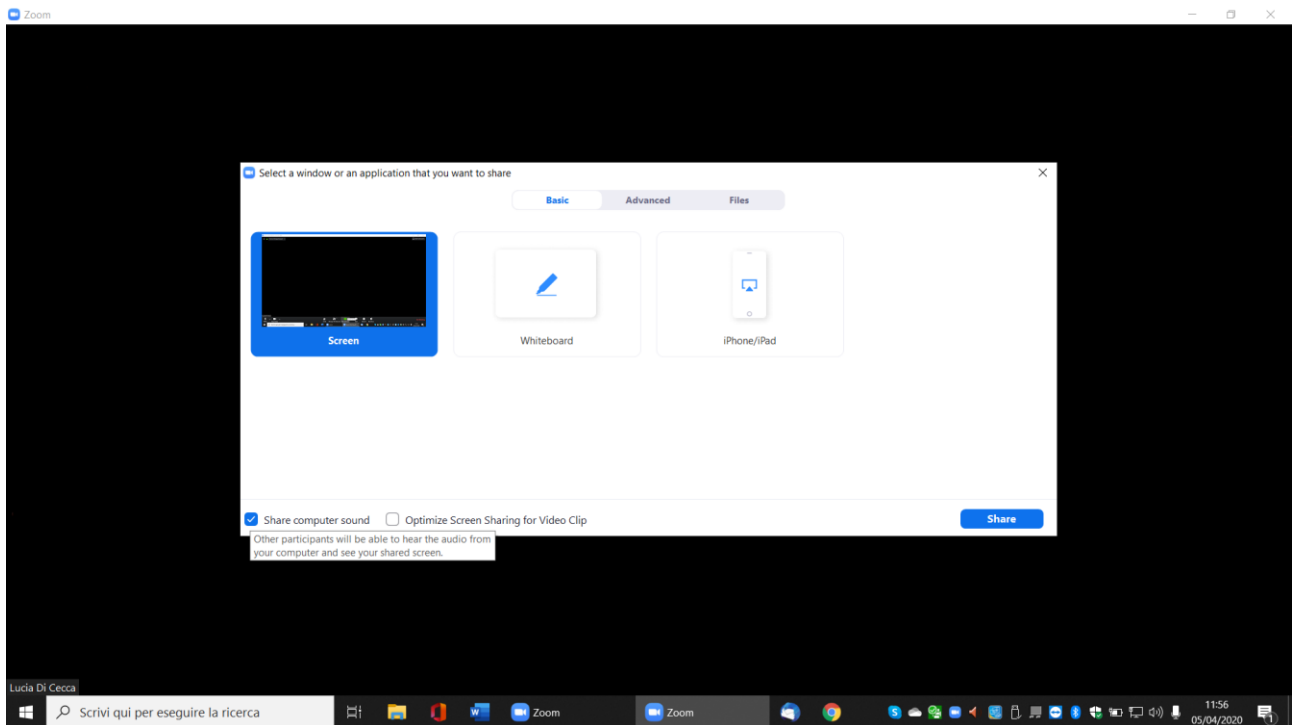

From this moment on, those who are connected will see what you see on your screen and listen to what you are listening to.

When you want to stop sharing your screen, click on the red box at the top center, *Stop Share.*

If you want to record the student while playing, click on *Record* (bottom), and then on *Stop Recording* when you want to stop the recording. Please note that only the person who created the meeting (host) can record what happens during the meeting. So, if you created the Zoom meeting and sent the link to the student, you are the only one who can push on the Record button.
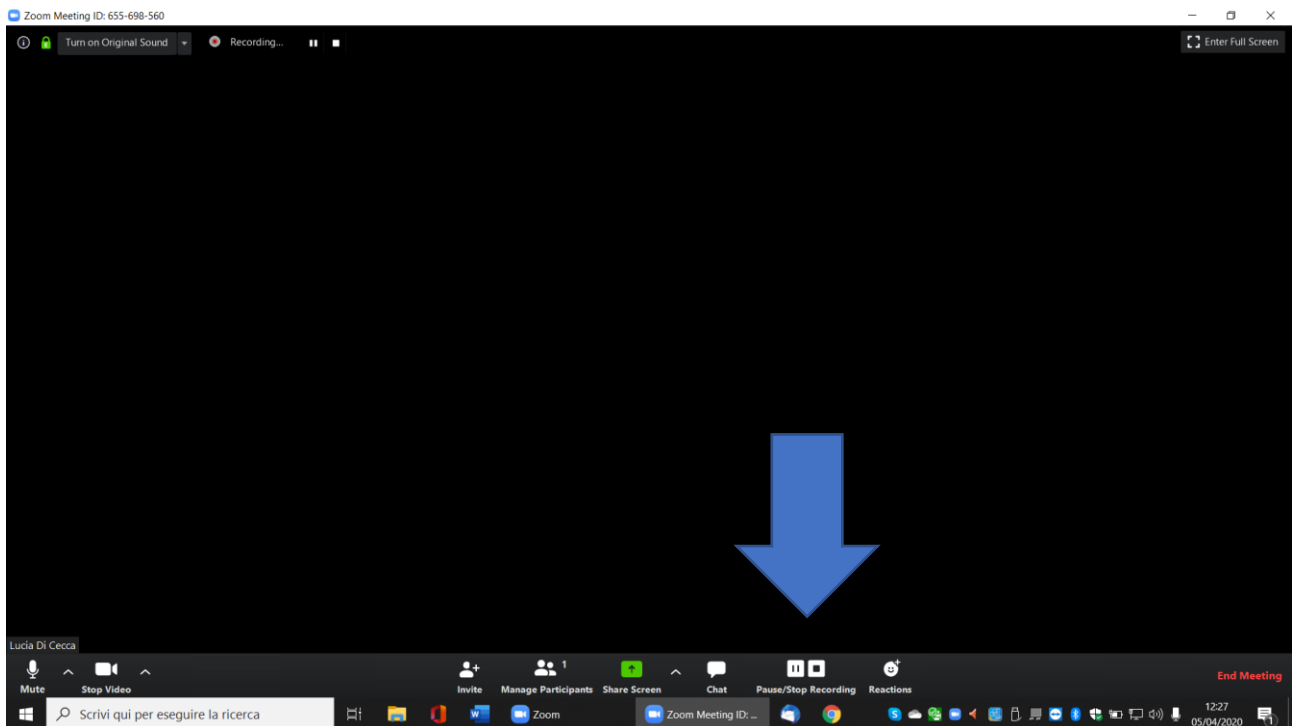

When you click on *Stop Recording* you will see the screen below with the warning on the top right that the video will be processed when the meeting is finished:
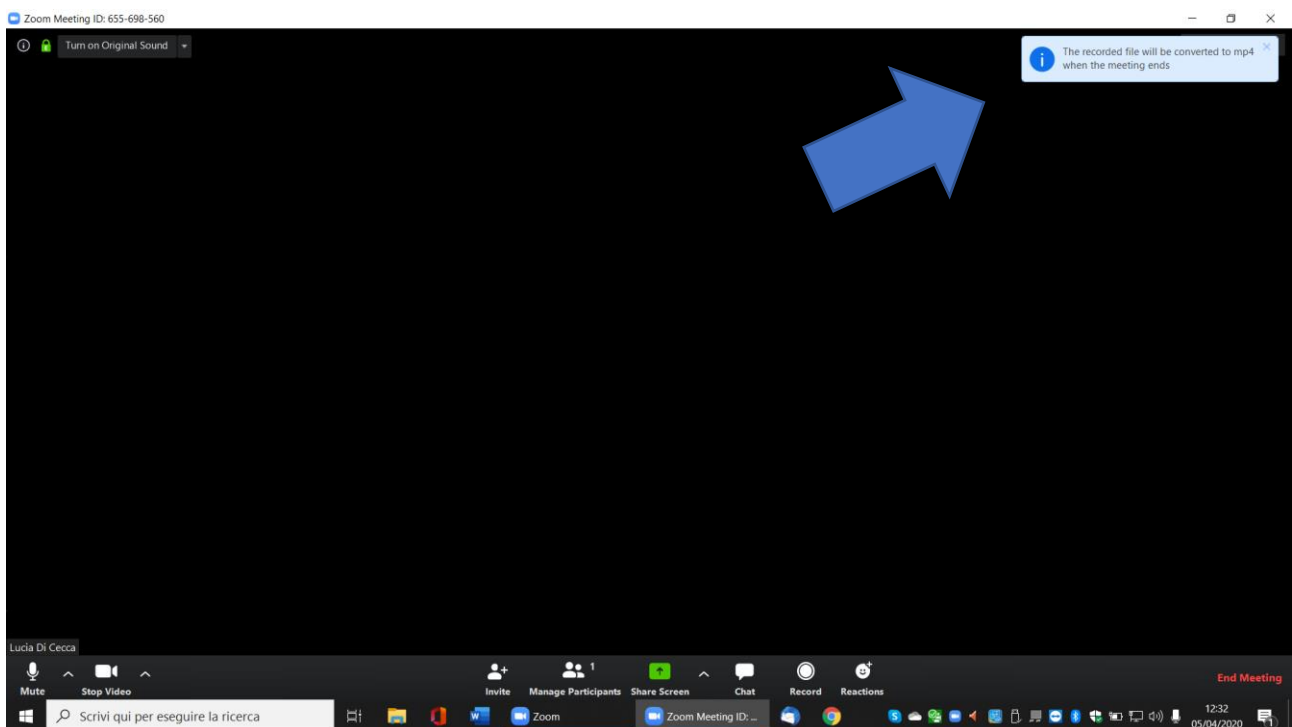
At the end of the Meeting, Zoom will process the recordings you have made:
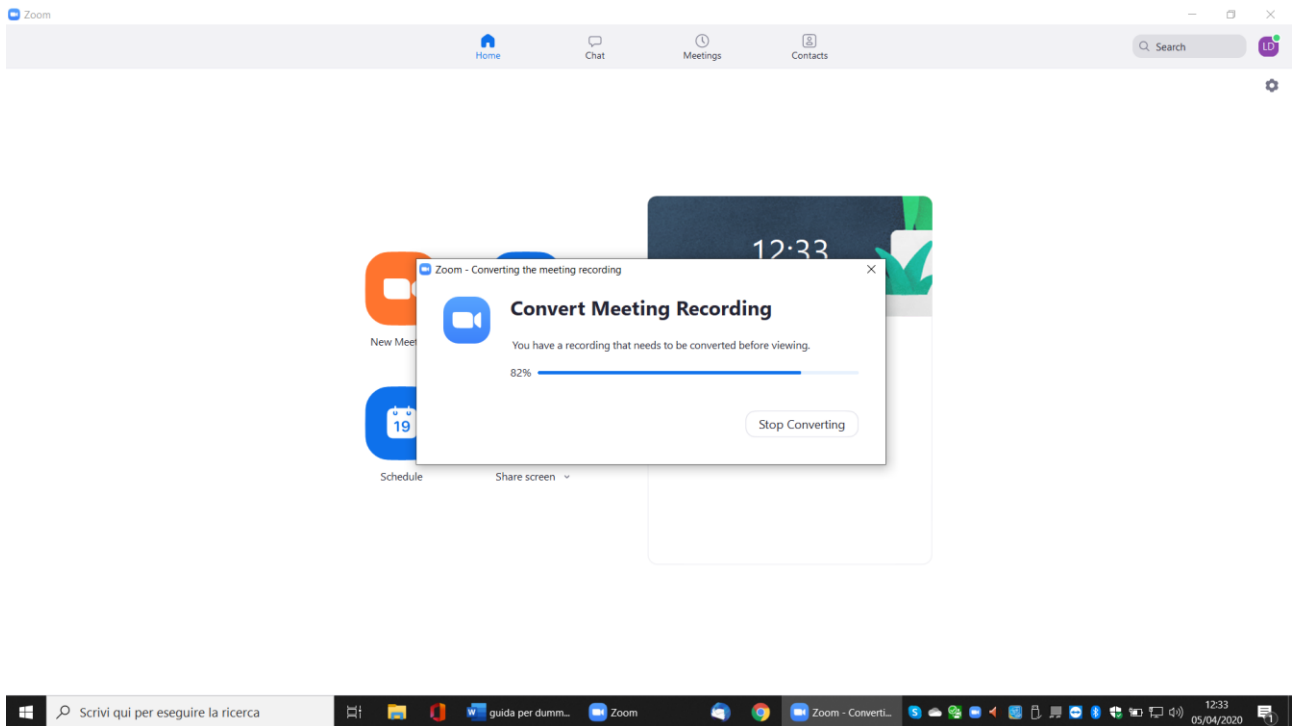
The videos of that Meeting can be found in a folder that the system automatically adds to your PC within the folder *Documents*. For each recorded meeting, the system creates a folder where you can find the videos of that meeting:
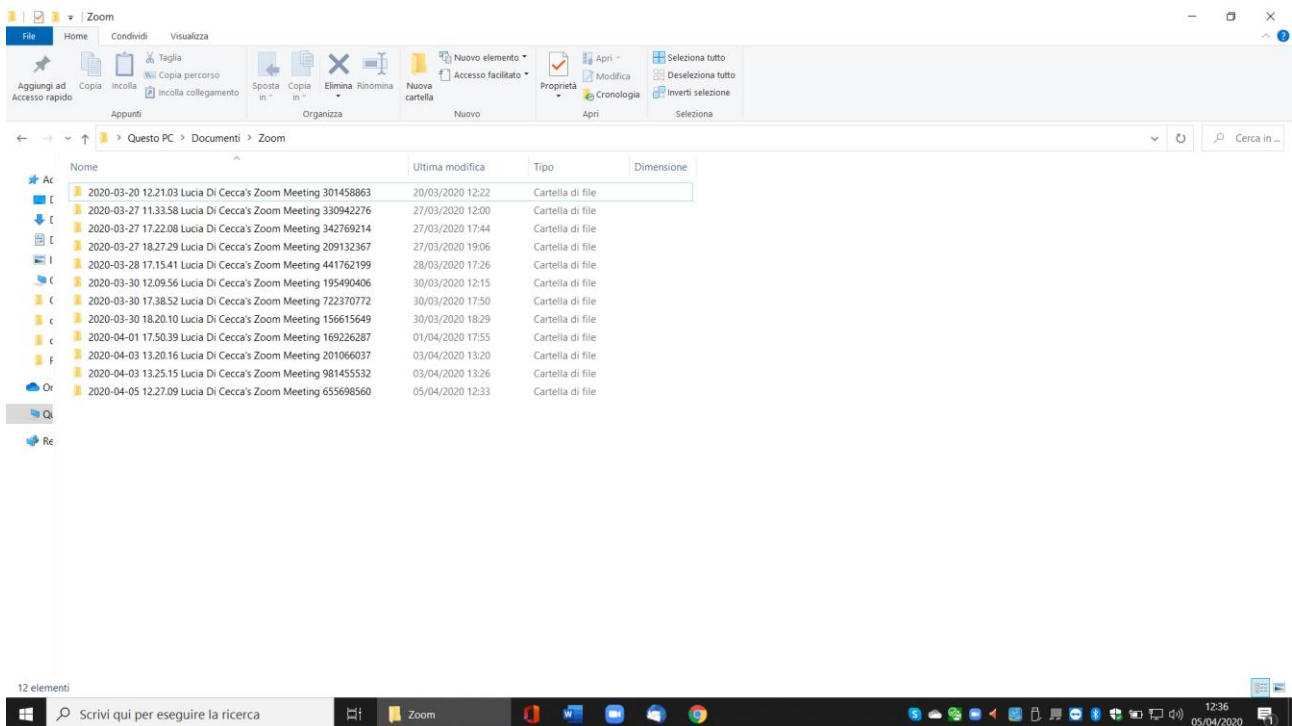
A few more suggestions:

- When connecting with Zoom, try to keep the PC plugged to electricity (charging) and connected with cable internet (i.e. avoid using Wi-Fi if possible);
- Zoom can also be used on a smartphone but on this device you cannot change the settings and therefore the sound quality (when playing) is considerably worse;
- If you are lucky enough to have an external microphone, remember to select it as audio source in the audio settings of your PC instead of your internal microphone, which is normally selected by default;
- I prefer to work with headphones, I am more focused and the audio is better.

3. My Distance Piano Lesson

Since the sound quality during the meeting with Zoom is still much lower than in real life, I always ask the students to **send me, before class with Zoom, videos** of what they want to work on during the lesson.

I created a **YouTube Channel** for the class, which is owned by the students and myself, so that everyone can upload their own videos. It is a private channel so only my students and I have access, no one else can see what we upload. Some students prefer not to share their videos with their fellow classmates and upload their videos on **Dropbox** or **Google Drive**.

The lesson always starts with the student's video (using screen sharing with audio sharing). We usually listen to it twice. The first time, I make sure that on my screen there is also the score (Piano Street and IMSLP are inexhaustible sources of scores) so that we can follow together the performance with the score in front of our eyes; then we listen to it again by commenting the performance, stopping when something needs to be pointed out, suggestions need to be given, etc.
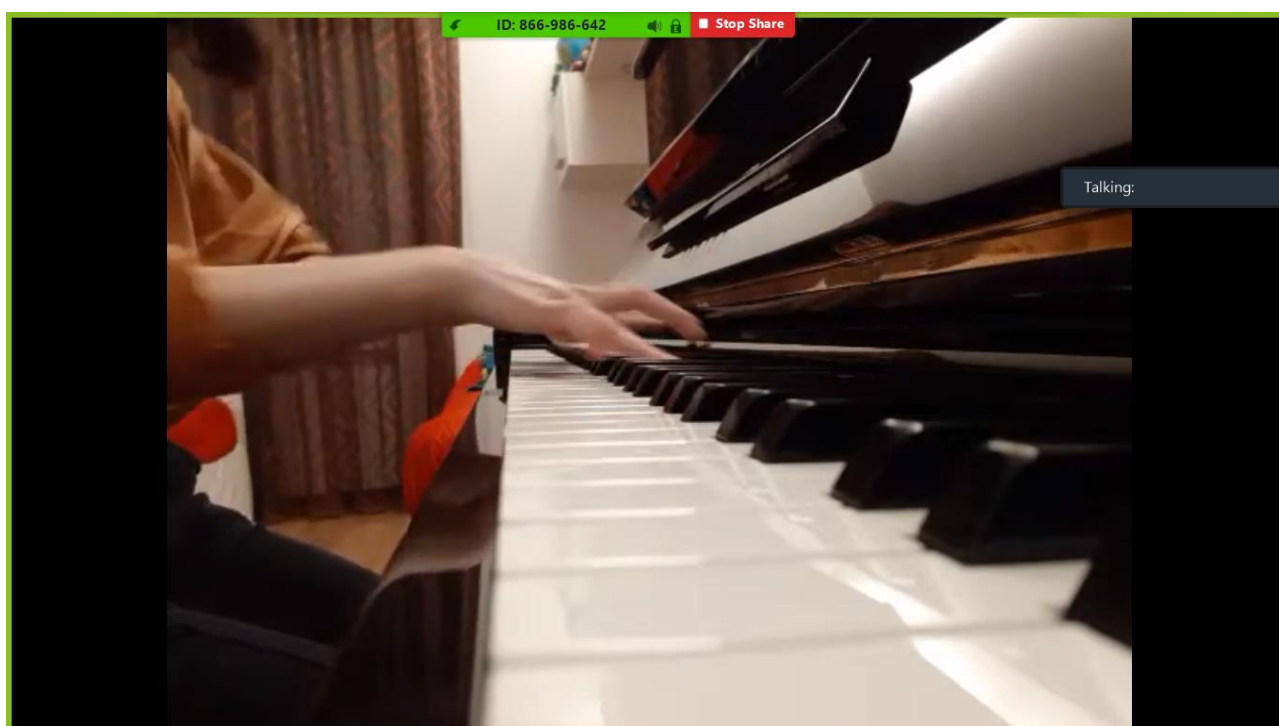
Then I click on *Stop Share*, switch on the *Original Sound*, so that we can work on the piano on some specific parts.

Sometimes we record the performance afterwards, which I then send to them after the lesson. I did it especially at the beginning to make them understand the difficulties I was experiencing in teaching this way. It was important to make them understand that they had to do their part too by committing to find a computer to use for the lesson (instead of their smartphone on which it is impossible to intervene on the settings of Zoom), learning how to change the settings, and preparing the video of what they wanted to work on before the lesson.

Sometimes we listen to interesting performances of the same piece (there are some on YouTube but also on Piano Street) and comment them (again in Share Screen mode with audio):

Now our distance lessons make sense. Nevertheless, this method cannot and will never replace live lessons in the classroom. Above all, there is no possibility to work on the hand technic. However, there are also some advantages. Working together on their videos forces them to realize how they actually play (usually student's perception of their own performance is very distant from reality). Furthermore, we are building an archive that will allow us to check after a while if there has been an improvement.

4. Acknowledgements

Before concluding, I have to thank those who helped me the most in this adventure:

The first thanks go to Claudio Allocchio (GARR), dear friend of mine since a long time, always available to help. I turned to him during the desperation of the first days, and he gave me the tools to understand the differences between the various platforms, helped me to buy a microphone, and he even made himself available to play for me so that I could understand the differences in the sound quality by changing platform or setting.

Thanks also to Jim Daus Hjernøe (RAMA, Aalborg) for making me understand how to best utilize Zoom.

A special *thank you* to my students, who, during the first two weeks of remote work, tested with me the different platforms and different settings, recorded each time the audio result and commented on it. Together we decided the best solution for each of them, taking into consideration the devices and tools they had at disposal (pc and/or smartphone, operating system on the PC, possible microphone, etc.):
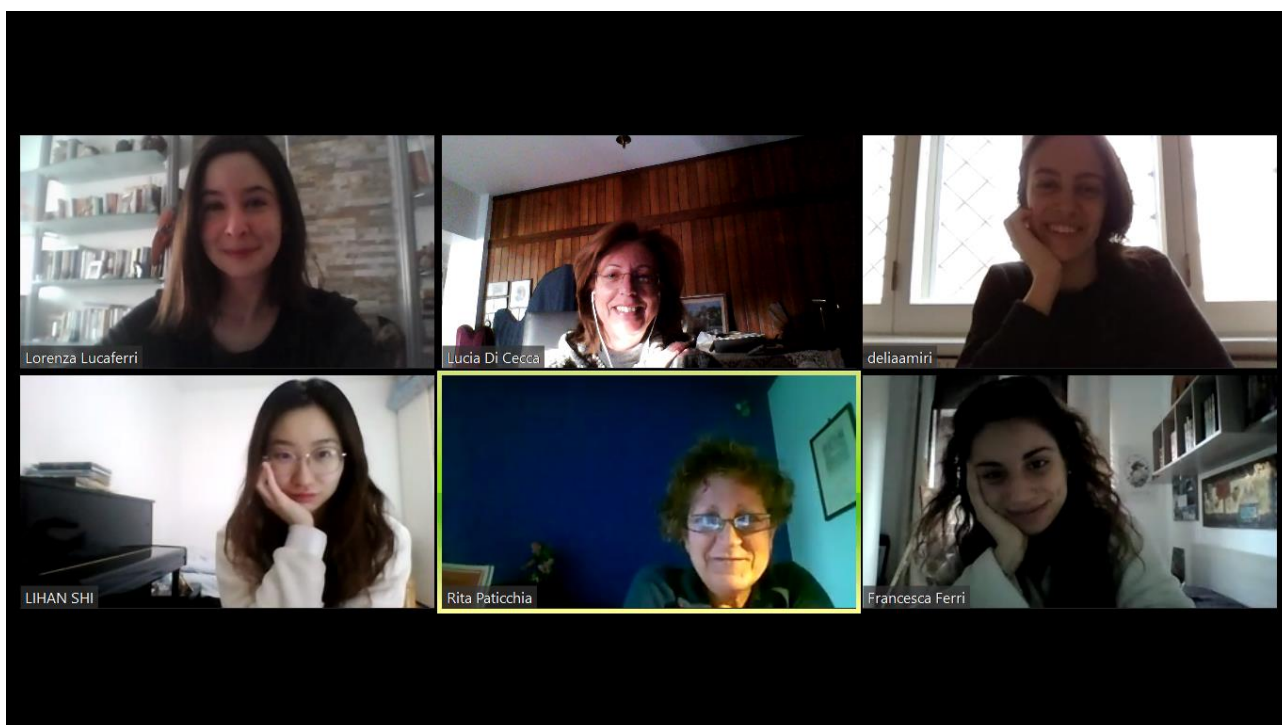
Good job everyone!

Lucia Di Cecca

lucydicecca@hotmail.com