

Getting Into Music Technology? Wondering where to begin?

RACHAEL WILLIAMS tells us how she started her Year 8 students using the new tools, to turn the integrated curriculum into reality.

Using technology in the music curriculum can make Year 8 music more accessible and engaging for students. As an addition to proven, traditional learning methods, technology gives students the opportunity to create and enjoy their very own music. This not only reinforces their theoretical knowledge, it gives students the opportunity to prove and showcase their creative skills. The benefits to self-esteem follow.

As students are completely 'in tune' with contemporary popular music and current technology, they readily relate to tasks that encompass both. Furthermore, music technology is so well developed that it is immediately accessible to students regardless of their musical development. It creates a level playing field, especially in the area of composition. The flexibility of the technology allows it to accommodate different learning styles empowering many students to be creative in ways that previously were not readily available to them.

I have found through my teaching at Lilydale Heights Secondary College that you don't need the latest and greatest equipment to start achieving fantastic results with technology, just enthusiasm and passion for learning-the students do the rest.

Starting Out

Music technology started at our school with one Department-supplied laptop computer, a copy of MicroLogic AV (Emagic's MIDI sequencing software), a microphone and a general MIDI keyboard. This enabled Year 8 students to work in small groups recording soundscapes that accompanied short story scripts. Horror stories always go down well! Of course, this was a difficult way to start and I wouldn't recommend it. However, from this we have developed a music department with ten computers and keyboards in the music room. Students use these machines before school and most lunch times and I regularly receive by email, songs that students have composed and are proud enough to pass on. (See below for a link to hear an example of LHSC students' songs.)

Having a lab or a pod of computers with MIDI keyboards is definitely the ideal way to start students in music technology. Sequencing software and a general MIDI keyboard are powerful tools that can be used very successfully in the Year 8 music classroom. Short achievable activities to become familiar with the software are positive ways to engage the students initially as they get instant feedback on how to use the technology. Students become so involved with this work that they learn without regarding it as study. Having them working in groups produces some amazing results, especially if students with little computer knowledge are mixed with students who have more.

Using and developing skills

Once students have some familiarity with the software they can be given curriculum tasks, and will take them as far as their creativity allows. The level of excitement and enthusiasm is always heightened when students are given the freedom to create their own compositions. As well as individual and group creative tasks, teachers can use the technology to enhance other aspects of the music program.

Class performance pieces can be arranged by students and printed, or you can use the latest chart hits or even some 'golden oldies', -all available in MIDI format. Midi files can be downloaded and ordered from the Internet, and are small enough to put on a floppy disk, (however copy right laws must be complied with, so consult AMCOS for further information - contact details in the April 2003 issue of Music in Action).

Instrumental students can also take advantage of MIDI and access backing tracks to accompany solo performances or play other students' pieces. Aural games can also be played with the whole class using MIDI files. For ensemble performance situations you can use MIDI files to compensate for instruments that are not available in the ensemble, muting the other parts.

Another way to use sequencing packages is to save compositions as AVI clips. Students can either make their own video clips using a digital camera, or download animated files from the Internet. Voices and sound effects can then be added. This is a nice way to introduce students to film scoring.

Theory lessons can also be presented in a new way by using multimedia software such as Harmonic Vision's Music Ace, a drill and practice theory program. Students can challenge each other using this program, and there are various levels of games and composition tools available.

Another Way

Year 8 students are very aware of the latest popular music and I have found that they cannot get enough of Sonic Foundry's ACID music program. This is 'pick, paint and play' style software that does not need MIDI keyboards just a sound card-and, to keep your sanity, headphones! This is a good alternative way to start using music technology.

The enormous capabilities of this software mean that students don't need prior theory knowledge for them to immediately create music. Various elements, such as style, form, balance, texture, rhythm structures, chord progressions and pitch, can be incorporated in your teaching while using this program. The styles available with ACID include dance, hip-hop, techno, pop, rock, jazz and orchestra. Students' work can be burnt to CD and played at home, saved as MP3's, or even published on the Sony Web site. Teachers can develop cross-curriculum projects that spring off the capabilities of the software. Music could be devised to accompany a PowerPoint presentation in another subject area, or a link with a drama class or school musical could be developed with music students. With these tools the integrated curriculum can be a reality.

If you haven't ventured into music technology yet, but want to incorporate it into your teaching, here are some suggestions based on my experience of starting from scratch.

- First, start to play around with one piece of music software, such as ACID, using your own computer. Consult your IT technician about how to get up and running with the software.
- Second, expand your skills. Do some PD courses on music technology-the best way to see how accessible and flexible the software can be is to try it out yourself, or have someone demonstrate it to you. Then decide on the strategy you will use: will it be first with computers and software, and later MIDI and keyboards, or will you start with MIDI?
- Whatever you decide to do, make sure you provide students with the avenues to achieve music learning outcomes-develop some 'walk-through' notes about the software to enable students to get into the program and start being active.
- If initially you can afford only a small amount of software and hardware, develop group exercises so that all students will be able to access the technology.

The main aim is to engage students in authentic tasks that have real world outcome of which they can be proud. A completed CD of original material is valued by all. Once at this stage, you are ready to design appropriate activities for your classes. The students will very often be the stimulus for development of activities, and their capability to take a creative pathway can often be inspirational. Go with them where it's appropriate.

These are just a few basic ways in which a music technology program might be started. There is an enormous world of amazing technology available, which is impossible to describe in a short article, but I urge colleagues to look into what is possible. Help is available too at places like SoundHouse and elsewhere. Some resources are shown below. Wonderful possibilities can emerge as students become familiar with the technology, especially in cross-curricular areas. These can even include mentoring programs and links with feeder primary schools... The way into music technology is not difficult-in fact, it's rewarding and exciting for everyone. Let your imagination go!

What They Say

Comments by students about using music technology at Lilydale Heights Secondary College.

'The best part of writing music is the fact you can start with nothing and build it up to something that sounds good. But, other than that, what was good about doing it on the computer with programs like ACID, Sonar etc. was the fact that mistakes are just so easy to correct, and it's good to make good sounds.'-Simon Lilburn.

'Using ACID and its pre-recorded tracks to create songs that vary from person to person, and even though there are only pre-recorded tracks to choose from, the combinations are endless, and it all depends on the user on what the final outcome is. Using the Groove Box to remix and edit pre-recorded tracks was also fun. The electric drum kit was a good investment too. Everybody liked that. Talk lots about that.' Rochelle Koppel.

Rachael Williams

With professional qualifications in both music and computer education, Rachael Williams has combined two passions. Her positions at Lilydale Heights Secondary College, Victoria, are as KLA (Key Learning Area) Coordinator-Arts, Music Director and SoundHouse Manager. She established and manages a SoundHouse at the school, coordinates instrumental and classroom music programs for Years 7-12, and oversees an instrumental music program in Grades 5 and 6 at six feeder primary schools. Rachael also directs various College-based ensembles-concert bands, stage bands and choir-and teaches woodwind. She sees the arts as integral to education and the wider community.

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Micro Glossary

AVI file

An AVI (Audio Video Interleaved) file is a sound and motion picture file requiring a special software player that may be included with your Web browser, or need downloading. AVI files (which end with an .avi extension) conform to Microsoft Windows standards. Apple computers use QuickTime, which plays a wide range of files including AVI.

MIDI

Musical Instrument Digital Interface, a computer system used to control synthesisers and music recording equipment.

MP3

The file extension for MPEG audio player 3, one of three coding schemes for the compression of audio signals, applies compression techniques to remove superfluous information not normally heard by the human ear. Other MPEG schemes similarly compress moving images.

