

SMARTS

Music education software is making the learning process more accessible—and more fun.



For kids learning how to play, and for parents and teachers who want to see students succeed, the idea of picking up an unfamiliar instrument for the first time can be intimidating—and sticking with an instrument if you begin to struggle can be frustrating.

But another instrument familiar to kids, the family computer, can help. Increasingly, teachers and parents are turning to music education software to enhance their child's learning experience.

Kirk Kassner, Ph. D., has been teaching music for 35 years and has been combining music and technology since the 1970s. Currently, Kassner teaches general music to grades K-5 and runs the select chorus and the composers' club at Panther Lake Elementary School in Federal Way, Wash. He first brought technology into the classroom in 1981. He had computers but created his own software because there wasn't any on the market. In 1982, aspiring to get more girls interested in working with computers, the district gave him a grant to design a full lab.

The results have been fantastic. "There are a number of ways in which software helps students. It helps them during my presentations, making class more interesting and interactive. They can manipulate the computer and feel more in control," Kassner says. He believes software can help students excel regardless of their place on the learning spectrum. "The brightest students are challenged to organize their thoughts and are stimulated by possibilities. Software like Carry-A-Tune listens and provides feedback so it's good for children who need extra practice matching pitches. Music Ace helps with

the cognitive things they need to learn."

Popular among teachers and students, Music Ace also is a fun way for kids to learn. It teaches beginning and intermediate music theory ranging from basic note recognition and rhythm all the way to ear training and moderately complex harmony concepts. Music Ace and Music Ace 2 offer a series of 48 interactive lessons taught by the kid-friendly character Maestro Max.

"In any group of kids, you're going to have some that can go faster than others. Music Ace is great for self-paced learning," says Steve Auditore, marketing director for Harmonic Vision, makers of Music Ace. "Learning traditional music theory is a fairly rigid process and we're able to use the computer to soften it a bit and rely on Max to help walk kids through."

Sarah Randolph is in her 27th year as a music teacher and finds that her Milne Grove (grades K-3) and Kelvin Grove (grades 4-8) students in Lockport, Ill., respond positively to the software. "I have always felt computers should be accessible to everyone and have dreamed of the possibilities of using computers in teaching," Randolph says. "When I found Music Ace, I was extremely excited and purchased one program. Students crowded around the tiny screen; they were thrilled."

Building a lab from donated computers and grants, the schools have become test sites for a variety of software programs. "The software helps students learn basic theory, note reading, ear training and composing while exposing them to classical literature," she says.

One of the most appealing aspects of incorporating software to lessons is the ability to track a student's progress, says Randolph. Like many products, Music Ace quizzes users throughout lessons and games and tracks scores to determine how successfully students are

TEACHERS' PICKS

Software should be intuitive, easy-to-use and have a high success rate. Most importantly, it should be fun. When selecting the right software for your musician, take advice from teachers who have been successfully using these programs for years.

Kirk Kassner, Panther Lake Elementary School, and Sarah Randolph, Milne Grove and Kelvin Grove Schools, suggest:



Carry-A-Tune

Displays your pitch as you sing, automatically adjusts songs to your vocal range and allows you to edit and compose songs.



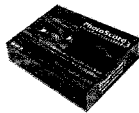
Music Ace and Music Ace 2

Self-paced lessons including pitch identification, note reading and keyboard basics.



Making Music and Making More Music

Features 16 instruments, 23 tools and numerous games to help students learn composition.



Neuratron Photoscore

Scanning software allows you to transpose and playback files.



Band-in-A-Box

Accompaniment software lets you type in chords, choose a style and hear your song played back.



Professor Piccolo

Teaches fundamental skills, including music theory and music history, using a character called Professor Piccolo.

mastering the material. Seeing just how much they have improved and determining exactly where they need more practice can inspire students to stick with their lessons.

Choosing Software

If you are interested in supplementing your child's classroom or private lessons with software, there are numerous products on the market—and choosing the right one can be overwhelming. Start by determining where your student is in her learning process, says Warren Buckleitner, Ph.D., a trumpet player, educator and editor of *Children's Software Revue* magazine.

When incorporating software into your child's musical education, Buckleitner says to focus on fun. While he too is a fan of Music Ace, he believes parents should resist restricting themselves to the label on a box. "Look for something that's on your child's level and works with their computer," he says. "Don't be limited by words like 'educational.' There's a video game called Karaoke Revolution PS2 that can

be a wonderful pitch and ear training exercise, and Donkey Conga for Game Cube is a great experience in beat and rhythm. These are a great deal of fun and the learning is there as well.

"If your child has musical ability, interest and pitch, you can do a lot by providing them with both high- and low-tech tools. I always encourage parents to learn along with their child. I'm doing that with my daughter on the piano."

In addition to involving themselves in the learning process, Kassner advises parents choose software that has a wide range of offerings. "That's one reason I like Music Ace: It is so full of ideas," he says. "And Carry-A-Tune is good because it is expandable—you can download additional songs from the Web." Expandability is a key component to today's software because of the rapid pace with which new tools are introduced to the market.

Maintaining a student's interest also is important to parents who have invested in lessons or an instrument. Robert Miller, CEO of vmusicssystems, developed GuitarVision on the belief that many guitar students show up at their first lesson determined to play a specific song. "There are a lot of new players every year, and the abandonment rate is astronomically high. If they have basic skills, like knowledge of chords and an understanding of how to hold the guitar properly, our way is the fastest, easiest, best way to learn how to play a song," Miller says. "We believe if people can learn how to play a song they choose they're more likely to stick with it."

GuitarVision also can help teachers supplement their lessons. After they teach certain skills, teachers can advise students to go online and download specific songs (for about \$4.95 each) that will demonstrate how to use what the students have learned. "The software is free and you only need to purchase songs you want to play—you don't have to buy 'Greensleeves' if you really want to play Eric Clapton," Miller says.

Software as a Teacher

There's a consensus among teachers and software makers that no matter what instrument children are trying to master, technology should be only one part of the learning process. An electronic teacher isn't a replacement for in-person lessons. "It does a great job of helping kids understand the basics of music theory but you do have to augment software with performance and instructor-led discussions," says Auditore.

Buckleitner agrees. "If you're serious about music, you're going to need humans," he says. "There's no shortcut. Tech software is fun and it can help a great deal, but at the end of the day, it doesn't replace the need for a real, human music teacher who says you have to practice. Nothing can replace practice."

Some people are reluctant to mix technology with tradition, but Kassner believes incorporating traditional methods with software can help break down the barrier. "Music always has been highly involved with technology, starting with the first instrument. We need to get over the notion that making music with technology is somehow inferior and begin to view the computer as another instrument. I'm sure if Bach had access to a sequencing program, he would have used it," he says. *