

Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience

by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

Seymour Papert tells the story of a mid-nineteenth-century surgeon magically transported through time into a modern operating theater. That doctor would not recognize a thing, would not know what to do or how to help. Modern technology would have totally transformed the practice of surgical medicine beyond his recognition. If a mid-nineteenth-century schoolteacher were carried by the same time machine into a present-day classroom, except for minor subject details, that teacher could pick up where his or her late-twentieth-century peer left off. There is little fundamental difference between the way we teach today and the way we did one hundred and fifty years ago. The use of technology is almost at the same level. In fact, according to a recent survey by the U.S. Department of Education, 84 percent of America's teachers consider only one type of information technology absolutely "essential": a photo copier with an adequate paper supply.

Nicholas Negroponte
Being Digital

Sobering thoughts, for our column this issue. Can we say the same for music teachers? There we sit at our piano, using sheet music printed in imperial sizes, probably in a tonality that would not have sounded amiss three hundred years ago. Even those brave members amongst us performing pop, gospel, or rock will still find that the good old diatonic scales make up the bulk of our repertoire and if we throw in pentatonic and modal scales, we'll be reflecting even older pre-equal temperament traditions.

Our music department has been fortunate in receiving a facilities update in a new property bought by our school. We now have an ensemble performance space, a 20 station computer lab, a recording studio and a classroom. Interactive whiteboards are on their way. All the computers have the complete MusicAce suite as well as the iLife suite including Garageband, LogicPro 7 and much more. The new facilities have had their teething pains, but we are now utilising more individualised music theory learning, composition and keyboard (piano type) instruction as part of our middle school and high school classes. The music teachers have also been supplied with laptops and iPods. Now we carry our music libraries with us, as well as syllabi, teaching materials, and worksheets - ready for projection. Our learning curve is a little steep, but we are mostly coping.

We can now use computer programs for notating music - automatic transposition, extraction of parts, arranging page breaks - all the drudgery taken out of the task. Copy and paste repeating patterns, play the parts in in real time or enter using the mouse or the mouse and MIDI keyboard. It's your choice.

I was making a rehearsal CD for a student, transferring mini disc recordings to the computer, editing them using a graphic wave form editor to remove excess dialogue (and in one case copying and pasting a section where I made too many mistakes!) As I was burning the CD, I suddenly realised that five years ago, this was emerging technology; ten years ago it was the province of recording studios and expensive editing suites; and that twenty years ago, the CD format was being introduced to consumers in the US and Europe. Today we assume that everyone can record and edit CD quality (or better) audio on their home computers.

This is the age of the iPod and the virtual instrument. We are now encouraged to get beyond playlists and screen displays and enjoy a random dip in our music library. At least that's the principle behind the new iPod shuffle. If you want it to, it will automatically load itself by making selections from your digitised music library. It will then play the tracks in a random order. Buffalo, my 1 gigabyte iPod shuffle, holds 250 songs - sixteen and a half hours of music in a package the size of a whiteboard marker. As one online wag claimed, "It's like listening to the radio - except there is no annoying DJ talking and you like all the songs."

Our tunings and tonalities may be traditional diatonic or modal, but our method of delivery is getting much closer to twenty-first century. The distance between the creative mind imaging a sound and the written or recorded transmission of that realised idea grows shorter and shorter. Were he to walk into the computer lab, Mozart might be a little confused. But I bet he would quickly grab a mouse, select a track, sidle up to the USB MIDI keyboard and let rip with even more beautiful and breathtaking music.

Rick Hein
rahein@mac.com