MUSIC TECH

There is always a tendency when new ideas come along for them to be seen either as a panacea for all previous problems, or the dawning of a brave new world that will render all that went before obsolete. This can be especially true in education, where you have old fogies trying to make learning 'happening' and 'cool'. ICT is too often seen as an easy way to reach youngsters as we oldies trail in the computerised wake of a younger generation who seem to be permanently on-line. The truth is of course somewhere between the two extremes. It is vital that we think through the educational impact of anything we do with ICT. There have to be sound reasons for its introduction, and relevant to our delivery of the National Curriculum, otherwise we risk getting distracted from good teaching practices by flashy gizmos that offer little of educational value in the classroom.

Music teachers are entering a revolutionary era, where ICT, used thoughtfully and purposefully, can open up the world of music to a significant group of children who would have otherwise been excluded due to their lack of a *classical* music education. The playing of the flute, the piano or some other 'proper' instrument is advantageous, but no longer essential. Musicality and desire is now all that is needed to be able to produce music of worth.

At the other end of the spectrum, how often has a Head of Music lamented that some musically talented youngster gains their musical education away from the school's music department? Now perhaps, with music technology, the entire range of ability and experience can be hooked into the music curriculum throughout KS3 and KS4. New software is turning the world of music education on its head.

There are a plethora of music packages now available: Logic, Cubase, Logic Education, Logic Hit Kit, Cubasis, Garage Band, Sibelius, and Sonar are just a few of the options available to schools. This list illustrates one of the main problems with trying to incorporate music technology into the classroom; what software do we buy? And that's not even the first issue that needs addressing; should we use Macs or PC's?

Every expert you go to for advice will probably contradict everything you have been told previously. Just remember, this is a tribal issue. People who use Mac's would rather eat their own legs than be seen advocating PCs, and visa versa. However, one thing to bear in mind when asking for advice is most school-based computer-support is given by people who are only PC literate. Naturally they will favour what they are comfortable with. They may come up with problems such as integrating Macs into a PC network. If they tell you it can't be done, how are you to know that they are wrong?

There are, however, integrated networks that work faultlessly. The problem is that support staff either don't know how to do it, or they feel they don't have the time. As a working composer I have used both PCs and Macs. I would advocate the use of Macs for several reasons:

- they are more stable
- they are the professional musician's computer of choice
- they are now affordable

The best software, in my opinion, is the Logic series. This is Mac based software and is in itself argument enough to invest in Macs rather than PCs. With Garage Band you can do simple hard-disk recording. With Hit Kit you can afford to have several computers licensed to run it and with Logic Pro you have a system powerful enough to fulfil all the requirements of AS/A level music Technology.

Of course there are other routes that can be chosen. The most common is Cubasis to Cubase. Cubasis has historically been the cheapest piece of software available, and it runs on PC. The high-end software is powerful and popular, but I would question whether the low-end software offers enough flexibility for pupils to understand the potential of computers in music.

Whichever platform and software is chosen, there is no way round the fact that schools will have to make a major financial investment in music technology. It cannot be done effectively on the cheap and the issue has become all the more pressing as Ofsted are now highlighting failures in music technology provision.

If inclusion is to be at the heart of our educational philosophy, then within music education we have possibly the greatest advantage of all the curriculum areas. Music is becoming a computer-based art form. Brass bands, choirs, and orchestras will always remain a part of music education, but there is a massive groundswell of desire from pupils to understand more about how music of their culture is produced. Some music teachers may see this as a threat to how they have traditionally taught, but hopefully they too can be shown the advantages of becoming computer literate.

When I was at school, our music room had a box with some bits of percussion in it, a gramophone player and an old piano. Sometimes I hear myself going on about how lucky pupils are these days, but in truth it's not only they who are lucky. We music teachers are also on the doorstep of the ultimate musical 'sweetie shop'. Pick and Mix!

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