

Using Technology to Enhance and Grow Music Programs

John Mlynczak

Keeping up with today's tech-savvy kids is essential in education. For students, technology is a natural extension of music listening and creation and they will quickly take ownership of classroom technology and become leaders in its effective use in your program.

This article will explore four phases of music-technology integration that all programs can use to enhance the student experience and attract more students to music courses.

Phase 1: Record and Playback in Class

Listening is essential to musical growth at all levels, and the quality of the listening experience is important. Whether we are listening to rehearsal recordings to mark the score or are listening with the students, it is imperative that we record and listen in a manner that allows us to hear all the nuances of timbre, balance, intonation, and dynamics.

Unfortunately, an iPhone, iPad, or MP3 recorder does not give you an accurate representation of the ensemble. The compression used on these devices cuts frequencies, dynamic range, and timbre which is counterproductive to what we teach in the classroom.

For this reason, I recommend recording at a 44.1 kHz sample rate, with 16- or 24-bit resolution, using condenser microphones. Some handheld devices, such as those made by Zoom or Tascam, record at this quality and have small condenser capsules built in. When using these devices, do not use an auto-level setting. Always set recording levels manually so that the dynamics are not altered.

However, using a stand-alone recorder means transferring audio files to a computer for editing and distribution. To save this step, I recommend using a stereo pair of condenser microphones and a USB interface to record directly into the computer.

PreSonus makes the only complete recording kits on the market. The company offers three such kits. For stereo recording, I recommend the AudioBox Stereo bundle, which includes two microphones, an audio interface, recording software, and all cables.

Phase 2: Share and Distribute Recordings with Students

Once you are comfortable recording daily, it is important to share the sound files with students so they can listen and make informed decisions about ensemble improvement. This practice also incorporates 21st Century Learning

Skills and Higher Order Thinking Skills by having students communicate improvement ideas based on their own assessments of the music ensemble. Instead of just telling the trombones that their sound is too loud and edgy, let students hear what it sounds like from the front of the ensemble. This helps them better understand why you are asking them to blend.

High-quality audio playback in class is just as important as high-quality recording, so I recommend using studio reference monitors, which are much more accurate than consumer speakers or large sound systems. Brands like KRK, M-Audio, and PreSonus are all great for this.

For more on using music-technology solutions, attend the clinic "Teaching with Technology" Sunday, July 27, 2014 3:30 p.m. CC Room: 214AB

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For musical file sharing I prefer using Dropbox, and I always share recordings as Wave files. True, there are file-size limitations in some required school communication tools and through email, so you may have to use an MP3 file. However, when recording you should use the highest possible audio quality. Compressing a high-quality recording still provides a far better listening experience than a low-quality recording.

Phase 3: Create a Marketing Campaign

What if your school ensemble kids were the “rock stars” of the school? Musical artists are promoted on social media, have fan pages, release EPs and full albums, and do media appearances, all in an effort to build PR for themselves and increase ticket and album sales. By taking some of these steps in your own program, you can build community engagement around the ensemble and add yet another dimension to student learning.

Students can learn about marketing, sales, and artist relations, while enhancing their written and oral

communications skills. You can promote this by forming committees in the ensemble and encouraging skill-building honors or AP projects. This also adds elements of differentiating instruction and career readiness.

There are many online tools for music promotion, such as SoundCloud or ReverbNation, but I prefer using Nimbit. A basic Nimbit account is free and provides all the tools needed for marketing, promotion, and music distribution. Adding this element to a school program will serve as a great recruitment and retention tool, while enhancing the ensemble experience for both students and parents.

Phase 4: Start a Music Technology Course

Numerous studies have shown that on a national average, 20% of a school’s student population at the secondary level participates in music education. But we all know that more the 20% of students love music. That’s why the Technology Institute for Music Educators (TI:ME) advocates for “the other 80%.”

A music-technology course can cover digital composition, recording, and production and can

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expose students to opportunities and careers in the music industry beyond performance. These courses are arising across the country, and we have seen immediate success and program growth.

Companies like PreSonus Audio Electronics are making great strides in providing turnkey lab solutions for schools. The PreSonus Music Creation Suite and curriculum is the first complete school music-lab package that makes this course affordable and accessible by providing all hardware and software needed to supplement a Mac or PC, as well as online tutorials and videos.



Many other software and hardware options are available for piecing together your lab. I recommend starting right away. Do not wait for a grant for the full lab; instead, create a single learning center or a

few stations. Let students explore music technology during class and start a club. The popularity of this opportunity and the amazing products students produce will help you advocate for more technology because stakeholders can see the benefits of the course.

The Big Picture

As music teachers, we educate not only future performers but also future audiences and arts supporters. Most students will not pursue careers as musicians, just as many will not pursue careers as mathematicians, scientist, or historians. The broader goal is to expose as many students as possible to the nuances and intricacies of musical expression, composition, theory, and timbre in order to gain a better appreciation for the music that surrounds them everyday.

A music-technology course, along with recording and promoting the traditional band, choir, and orchestra ensembles, completes a well-rounded music department. With this approach, you can educate students about the entire musical process from conception to performance to distribution, as well as expose students to the thousands of careers available in the \$17 billion worldwide music industry.

As Education Market Manager for PreSonus Audio Electronics, Inc., John Mlynczak provides music-education technology professional development and training resources for educators. Mlynczak taught music and music technology at both the elementary and secondary levels, is an active performer, maintains an extensive schedule of music-technology clinics, and is chairman of the Marketing and Communications Committee for the Technology Institute for Music Educators. A resident of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with his wife Nicole, he served as chairman of the Creative Arts Assessment Committee for the Louisiana Department of Education from 2011 to 2013. For more information on PreSonus music-education solutions, contact him at: musiced@presonus.com.