A Guide to Using Technology in the Piano Studio

By Michelle Sisler
Featuring Maestro Max
Introduction
First, I would like to introduce you to my friend, Maestro Max, star of the Music Ace Maestro education software. Maestro Max is an animated conductor who teaches the lessons and games in the Music Ace Maestro software and is my new lab assistant. While I am teaching one student at the piano, Maestro Max is teaching and reviewing concepts with another student at the computer. Max and I will be sharing with you ways to take advantage of and implement educational software, specifically Music Ace Maestro, in your studio, how to set up a lab, and how to integrate it into your traditional teaching methods. While the computer will never replace what we are doing in lessons, we are always looking for ways to make lessons more effective and enjoyable. Music Ace Maestro is an excellent way to supplement the music education you provide your students.

Why Use the Computer to Help Teach Piano?
While continuing the use of traditional teaching methods and repertoire, we can add new lesson activities using the computer. In the process, students will enjoy strengthening their skills and abilities in an innovative way.

As a piano teacher myself, I see the weekly impact of using technology to help me teach piano. Technology is quickly becoming a part of private studios. Many teachers already require a lab session each week along with a student’s private lesson. It is one of the best investments I have made in my studio. Have you ever had a student NOT want to leave their piano lesson? With a technology lab, this may happen! Maestro Max works so well with students in the lab that they often don’t want to leave! There are a wide range of benefits to students and teachers, including:

♦ **Cover Concepts You Might Not Always Have Time for During a Lesson**
It seems a half-hour lesson is not enough time to cover all the concepts we would like to cover each week. One topic I wish I had more time for during a lesson is ear training. With a lab, students can work on ear training exercises such as hearing intervals, melodies, pitches and scales using the computer.

♦ **Reinforce Concepts Learned and Provide Additional Practice**
Without adding extra time to your schedule, you can reinforce concepts covered in lessons in a new way while giving students immediate feedback and assessment of their work. Students can work through lessons and tutorials to practice playing rhythms or complete ear training exercises. This will allow you more time to teach technique, artistry and expression during a student’s lesson.
Note reading is a great example of using this time to practice skills. It seems students need to be drilled over and over in order to recognize notes quickly. A computer program such as Music Ace Maestro can help students review and practice this skill. Maestro Max makes this exciting, and turns note reading into fun! I am amazed at the note reading abilities of my students after completing the primer book and related computer activities. Using technology, this generation of students is already familiar with an amazing way to help them learn a lifelong skill - making music.

♦ Individualized Instruction and Assessment
The computer helps teachers reach a wide range of learners with multiple learning styles. Students improve their skills by independently using the computer to work through the self-paced lessons and exercises. The computer immediately tells them whether the answer is correct or incorrect, and they have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes instantaneously. Most programs include student tracking or assessment reviews with scores, and are great tools to help you measure what students understand as well as identify concepts you may need to spend more time on during lessons. These scores are great feedback for parents and can be useful for assessing transfer students.

♦ Motivation
“Can I do lab first?” is a common statement I hear from my students. The lab programs are fun and hold the students’ interest while reinforcing and practicing the skills learned in lessons. Students build confidence in their abilities without realizing they are really learning. They will have stronger skills, progress faster and many choose to continue lessons longer because they enjoy the entire lesson format.

♦ Benefits to Your Studio as a Business
When you add a lab to your studio, you will differentiate your studio from those that do not. You will attract and maintain students more easily, and you will soon find yourself with a waiting list of students who can’t wait to benefit from lessons using this technology. When parents call for lessons, they are impressed and excited their children will have the opportunity to use the lab. With this lab, you can increase your tuition rate. Parents are more than happy to pay the extra money for the added benefits.

Map Out Your Route
Now that we know the benefits of using computer software in music lessons, let’s get started implementing these new activities!

Scheduling
In my own studio, students come for one hour lessons. Half an hour is spent with me working at the piano and the other half-hour is spent on the computer working on programs such as Music Ace Maestro, with Maestro Max. I have two students come for the same hour, one student works in the lab independently while I teach the other. When a student is finished with either their lesson or lab, they change places.
What to Charge

If you have a half-hour lesson and a half-hour lab, your tuition rate should increase by 50%. For example, if you currently charge $25 for a half-hour lesson, you should now charge $37 for the new hour lesson. Even if you decide to charge a lesser fee, (although not recommended) you will be able to cover the cost of your software, keyboard and computer in less than a year. Let’s do the math: If you charge only $12 additional per lesson, in an average size studio of 30 students with 35 lessons in a year, you will increase your income by $12,600 each year.

Communication with parents is essential in this process. Parents will be more supportive of your program and new tuition rate if they understand the benefits and what students will be doing. Consider having an open house to show them. As a parent myself, I am interested in knowing what my child will be doing and how they will be learning. This also helps me to be supportive of the longer lessons and increased tuition. Details on common questions asked by parents and reproducible letters that you can send to parents can be found in Studio Makeover: Technology “Addition”, which can be viewed at www.keystoimagination.com.

Setting up Your Computer

When possible, set up your lab in the same room in which you teach. While you may not be closely watching your students while they work at the computer, they are more likely to stay on task. I recommend having a separate computer, either desktop or laptop, for students to use.

In many programs, having a digital piano or keyboard attached is optional, but recommended, and is attached to your computer with a USB cable or MIDI Interface cable.

Students will greatly benefit from a program by actually playing keys on a piano keyboard. A keyboard from 61 to 88 keys with MIDI capabilities will work for entering answers on your computer. If you do not have a keyboard attached, students can use the mouse to click on the picture of the keyboard on the computer monitor.

Software

Next, you will need to load some software programs on your computer. When I help teachers set up a lab in their studio, the first program I always recommend is Music Ace Maestro. Music Ace Maestro is a keyboard-based program that is perfect for piano lessons. It is preferred among both teachers AND students and fits a wide variety of ages and abilities. Music Ace Maestro was the first program I used in my own lab, and it is still one of my favorite.

In Music Ace Maestro, Maestro Max teaches students a series of 48 lessons and 48 corresponding games designed to develop and reinforce fundamental music skills and an understanding of traditional music theory and ear training. It covers many of the same topics we teach in our traditional piano method books and can be used in addition to our teaching to reinforce skills and provide additional practice.
The Route to Your Destination: Using Lessons of Music Ace Maestro

Your student walks in for their first lesson of the year. What do you do?

Your method book most likely starts out with sitting at the piano, LH/RH, finger numbers, hand position, high and low and groups of two and three black keys. Whew! What a lot to cover for a first lesson! I take time in the lesson to ensure students sit up straight, form rounded hand positions and cover basic keyboard geography. We have learned about groups of black keys, played songs using these keys and have also completed a short ear training exercise in their theory book. Teachers have often suggested students immediately review what they have learned in order to retain it and be successful at what they just learned. Fortunately, you have a computer program that can do that before they even leave their lesson.

While other programs are available to review finger numbers, LH/RH, I typically use Music Ace Maestro, Lesson 2, at this first lesson to reinforce the concepts we just talked about. Maestro Max, can you please tell all the teachers what the students work on with you?

“Hello! Welcome to Music Ace Maestro!”

“In each lesson, I start out by sharing a well-known classical music excerpt sung by my choir of singing notes. Students enjoy hearing this music, and when they learn one of those songs in lessons, they often tell their teacher they remember it from Music Ace Maestro! In all lessons, I speak the instructions and lessons to students, so no reading is required. A voice balloon appears with these instructions as well, in case a student missed what I said.

To correlate with what Michelle was just teaching, we will be working on Lesson 2, Introduction to the Piano Keyboard during lab. I start out telling students that the keys on the left-hand side of the keyboard have a low pitch, and the keys on the right have a high pitch. Then I ask them to play some low pitches, and then high pitches. Students play the notes on the attached keyboard, and the computer recognizes what keys they play.

Next, I show them how the keyboard is made up of white and black keys and how the black keys are grouped into two and three keys. They play all the keys in the groups of two, then three. Students love my encouraging words, especially when I say, “You are a genius!” They also respond well to “You are getting close,” or “Try again,” when they are incorrect.
Then, we work on ear training. My singing notes sing them a pitch, and they match the key with the pitch heard. If they get it right, the notes smile with their big white teeth showing, and we move on. If they don’t answer correctly, the notes pop and disappear, and we try again. As students finish exercises correctly, we continue to move on, but if I see they are answering questions incorrectly, I will generate new, random exercises for further practice. Once students have completed a lesson, you as the teacher know they have a better understanding of the concepts presented.

Immediately following the lesson, a corresponding game allows students to practice what they have learned in a game. My singing notes are back again to challenge students to match pitches, this time in a little faster way. If they get the answers correct, they earn bonus points, trying to achieve a personal or overall high score.”

Maestro Max must have read my mind! He covered the same concepts I did during the lesson in a fun, entertaining, visually appealing way. I couldn’t make my black notes in the book sing for fun ear training practice, but he also couldn’t help students with the rounded hand position. Together, we make a great team!

Because the lab is one half-hour, students will most likely complete the entire lesson and game without any trouble. If there is time, they can work on the Doodle Pad. The Music Doodle Pad lets students create their own music compositions, even at an early age. Although students have not yet learned the staff in this lesson, they can still use doodle pad to create music by dragging colorful singing notes onto the staff, using a variety of instruments such as piano or trumpet. Simply by having students drag notes up and down on the staff, they experiment with high and low.

**Another Example of a Typical Lesson.**

This time, the lesson we will be completing in the students method books is Unit 8, the Dotted Quarter Note. Here, I am working with students on dotted quarter notes, how to count them, clapping the rhythms, playing songs using the dotted quarter note and feeling the beat. Since students are often used to playing on count two, and not waiting until the “and”, this rhythm takes additional practice to master. Max, can you help me out with providing students additional practice?

“Sure – we’ll cover Music Ace Maestro lesson 24, Dotted Quarter Notes. We start with learning to count by placing the counting under the notes.

The method book started out by counting a quarter note, two eighth notes pattern. It then showed them how the quarter note can be tied to the first eighth note. Finally, it explains that the quarter note tied to an eighth note can be written as a dotted quarter note. In both the method book and program, students practice counting and playing all three patterns, and they tap out the rhythm in a song.

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Now that the students and I have worked on counting rhythms, let’s practice them and complete ear training exercises in the corresponding game, in each of four sections:

♦ First, perform rhythms you hear.
♦ Next, select a Tic Tac Toe Square and decide if the rhythms played are the same or different.
♦ Now, look at the notes on the staff and play the music. The computer will not play the rhythms or music for you first.
♦ Last, notate the rhythms you hear.

If students have time, they can use the Doodle Pad to notate familiar songs, by ear, such as “America,” using a quarter note tied to an eighth note. They can also create an original composition, using dotted quarter note rhythms, to correspond to an upcoming holiday. They will enjoy making up a song about Halloween or Valentine’s Day.

As you can see, I have now reinforced what they have learned in lessons by counting rhythms, playing rhythms and even completing ear training exercises using the new rhythm.”

Music Ace Maestro and the Piano Methods

To simplify your planning, correlation charts of Music Ace Maestro and several method books can be found on the Harmonic Vision website, www.harmonicvision.com. You can also find a correlation chart for Music Ace Maestro and other programs in Studio Makeover: Technology “Addition” (Keys to Imagination 2008).

When students come into lab, I have their assignment written in a book, the Lab Log (Keys to Imagination). They simply open up the book, find their page and see what lesson to do. When they are finished, they can write in their accomplishments, with a score if applicable. The computer will track student progress, but it is sometimes nice to have a log of what they have been working on week to week, especially when planning their next lab assignment.

Piano Methods Covered in Correlation Guides from Harmonic Vision

- Faber/FJH
- Kjos/Bastien
- Hal Leonard
- Alfred
- Thompson

www.harmonicvision.com/pianomethods
Arriving at Your Destination: Measuring Outcomes

Music Ace Maestro keeps track of lessons completed and a game progress score. New in Music Ace Maestro, Maestro Manager is an easier way to manage your students, create custom syllabi to match your specific goals, move students from group to group, set their game level to novice or advanced, or set clef instruction. It is also easy to print their progress or scores for your own records or to give to parents. In one screen, you can now easily manage all of your students and print progress reports.

For further details on setting up a computer lab, the book Studio Makeover: Technology “Addition” is a fantastic resource. Visit www.keystoimagination.com for more information.
About Michelle Sisler

When I was little I used to sit down at my toy piano and play songs, by ear, along with the jukebox. This was how my parents discovered my talent and love for music and enrolled me in piano lessons at the age of seven. During my years of study I was fortunate to have a teacher who encouraged me and helped me become a piano teacher in Owatonna, MN where I currently teach 35 students, ages 7-83, each week. From the start, I knew computer technology would play an important part of lessons in my studio.

Along with teaching, I am the founder and owner of Keys to Imagination, a resource for teachers adding technology to their studios or for students using music technology at home. I have presented sessions at The National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy, Music Teachers National Association conference and various state conferences. I currently write for Keyboard Companion, Clavier and American Music Teacher. I can be reached at Keys to Imagination, 875 Lee Street, Owatonna, MN  55060, michelle@keystoimagination.com.
310 Robin Pkwy
Madison, WI 53705
800.474.0903
www.harmonicvision.com