
In this article Airy and Parr, educators in New Zealand, report the perspectives of 24 students on the usefulness of MIDI hard- and software in creating music. Half of the students had previous experience with MIDI; half had little or no prior experience with it; all were in the process — albeit at different levels — of utilizing MIDI in their post-secondary educations in music production at a polytechnical school in New Zealand.

The uniqueness of this study lay in the findings gleaned from interviews with the students themselves about their experience of using MIDI. The soft- and hardware was overall representative in kind of what I have personally seen in secondary and post-secondary institutions: dated and underpowered computer hardware, medium to high quality keyboard controllers, medium to low quality sound modules, and respectable, easily accessed sequencing software.

Among their findings, Airy and Parr found that:

- A majority of the students in the study had received no education in the use of MIDI in their secondary schools, even when a computer and hardware to support such study were present in their secondary classrooms. The authors credited this to 1) the divide between ‘the student’s music’ (popular music) and ‘school music’ (traditionally classical or folk genres); 2) a possible lack of teachers themselves knowing how to utilize and integrate MIDI technology into their classrooms, or a lack of interest in doing so; 3) the students themselves feeling marginalized in music classrooms because their genre preference did not match that enshrined in the curriculum.

- MIDI sequencing gave students ‘a musical voice,’ and empowered them to ‘explore their own ideas independently of both the teacher and other students.’

- Use of a MIDI controller keyboard, although a step towards providing entry into the world of music making, was also found to be a limitation by many due to a lack of keyboard training and experience. The traditional keyboard, it was discovered, was not the ideal instrument for the inputting of drum, bass, guitar, violin, or woodwind tracks. In some cases, the imperative of using the keyboard was a genuine limitation upon the students’ creative energies. A majority of the students, the authors report, were critical of the presence of the keyboard as the only type of controller available to input MIDI information into the computer.

- MIDI sequencing software proved to be a valuable tool for students to create their own music, with some features of the program — such as the matrix editor, quantization, and step-recording — proving especially valuable.
The quantity and quality of the sounds available to the students through the MIDI sound modules was a factor both liberating and limiting. For those students with more 'acute hearing' the low quality sample playback modules limited their ability to realize their ideas because of the synthetic nature of the sounds. For others, the sounds, though synthetic, unleashed their creativity and led them down avenues they would otherwise not have taken.

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Airy and Parr's belief is that the power of MIDI can be used to 'democratize' the music creation process, extending the capability of making music to those typically estranged by standard music curriculums built around learning of standard notation and traditional performing instruments. The study supports their belief: with the help of MIDI, students were able to create and explore the world of music in ways some had not thought possible. For those of us schooled in teaching music via the traditional route emphasizing 'the classics,' this is both a significant (and painful) reminder that the standard curriculum in our school systems has the unwanted side effect of sidelining those who resonate to the popular music they hear outside of the classroom. More importantly, their study also gives us direction and hope that the use of MIDI technology can be one of the tools that we as music educators can use to reach these students and help them tap their creative potential within the school setting.

While this is not a 'hard research study' as such, it offers key insights from the persons we educators ultimately serve: the students. A number of their responses are things I myself — as a person not only classically-trained but one who has a great deal of experience with music technology and popular music genres — have sensed in my time in educational institutions. Like many, I love and cherish the 'classical tradition,' and want to devote a good portion of my professional life to keeping that tradition alive. But, unlike unlike some music educators, I believe we in music education must find ways to open the pathway to the enjoyment of music to significantly more students. That will lead to, what for many music educators, will be difficult — perhaps even repugnant — choices within the generally-accepted music curriculum. Refusal to take such steps will result in the elimination of music departments in high schools and colleges across the country, while electing to take such steps will be both aesthetically upsetting to highly-educated and -skilled faculty, and costly in terms of schools' commitments to an ongoing investment in faculty and technological infrastructure to support a widening of the curriculum. The well-deserved rewards of the schools that do so, however, may well be a delightful broadening of musical horizons within the music buildings of American academia, and the presence of a new breed of student that will surely enrich everyone's musical experience.