

TALKING TECH

Software for the Primer Level

BY SANDRA BOWEN

I pride myself on having an exhaustive library of music education software, yet every time I start a new student, I stop to think. When it comes to creating an appropriate lab assignment for a beginner, I am reminded that only a teacher can demonstrate hand position and get the little tyke correctly situated at the piano. I'm not suggesting that software can in any way replace the teacher, just that it can reinforce some concepts better than others. Computers become our assistants, not our competitors.

So what can software do to help beginning students?

Starting Your Library

While a number of programs drill notes and teach note values, very few address the early concepts of finger numbers, high/low, up/down, and the pattern of black and white keys. **MiDisaurus** (www.town4kids.com/us_ecom/) does. This charming program is engaging, thorough, and gives lots of reinforcement. After you and the Fabers have shown the student proper piano posture and hand position, MiDisaurus will help drill those first concepts. To follow Piano Adventures® Primer Level exactly, you'll have to skip around a little, but generally it follows the progress of the books quite well, gradually introducing such elements as note and rest values, beginning hand positions, and dynamics.

Pianomouse (www.pianomouse.com) is available in two age groups: **Pianomouse Goes to Preschool** (ages 3-5) and **Pianomouse Theory FUNDamentals Preparatory Level** (ages 6-12). Both programs are cleverly animated and constructed around a story featuring two mice (Pianomouse and Clara the concert violinist) and an opera-singing cat named Puccini. The first four chapters of FUNDamentals drill high and low, key names, steps and skips, and the grand staff.

Music Ace (www.harmonicvision.com) and **Alfred's Essentials of Music Theory** (www.alfred.com) do not integrate with the Piano Adventures® Primer Level as well as the previous programs. While they both introduce the staff, keyboard, and pitch, they are generally aimed at a slightly older crowd and introduce some concepts earlier than does Piano Adventures® Primer Level. I wait and introduce these programs with Level 1 as a review and move quickly to the material of that level.

One program drills a small but critical area of the Primer Level better than any other. **Early Music Skills** (www.ecsmedia.com) addresses line and space notes, notes moving up, down, and repeating on the staff, and notes stepping and skipping up and down on the staff. It has an unusually clean look, and students using it will indeed master the concepts. My only hesitation is that the program is a poor buy given how little material it covers.

When the student in the Primer Level reaches note reading on the staff, I enthusiastically recommend **Piano Is Fun** (www.pianoisfun.com). While it addresses only this one con-

cept, it does it well both from the standpoint of the teacher (completely programmable—you assign the notes to be drilled) and the student (lots of kudos for completion of each level and printable certificates).

Maestro Music has a pedagogically sound program addressing the pre-reader. **Fortune Cookie** (www.wrldcon.com/maestro), while not visually appealing, provides vocalized instruction.

Edutainment Programs

Largely because of the dearth of programs specifically addressing Primer issues, I use a number of more commercial (as opposed to educational) programs to accompany the first few lessons. **Menlo the Frog—A Musical Fairy Tale** tells an interactive story in which the student's curiosity leads to various musical discoveries. **Jumpstart Music** introduces the student to rhythm and beat. In **Sesame Street Music Maker** the student accompanies Bert and Ernie to various musical venues. My youngest students are addicted to **Lamb Chop Loves Music** where they learn about different musical styles and instruments. One of my oldest programs, **Lenny's Music Toons**, features a seriously competitive note identification game. Each of these titles, though they don't quiz finger numbers, ignites the child's interest in music. While not generally still in production, these programs can be readily located through a quick "Google."

Creative Gems

Composer Morton Subotnick has written a trio of programs for young children. Each one sparks the composer in the child and gives him or her appropriate tools to create. Subotnick believes that waiting to teach composition to a child is like depriving him of crayons until s/he has proper art instruction. **Making Music**, **Making More Music**, and his new ear-training program **Hearing Music** (www.creatingmusic.com) would all be worthwhile additions to your Piano Adventures® Primer library.

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