Music Teachers

A growing number of software programs let you tap your inner Mozart—or Jimi Hendrix

By Jeanette Borzo

WE KNOW: You always dreamed of playing like Jimi Hendrix, but your parents put the kibosh on your teenage longing for a Fender Stratocaster. Or you once enjoyed pounding away at the piano, until your college studies derailed your practice schedule.

One benefit of getting older is that you probably have the time, resources and patience to indulge your musical aspirations. Better yet, your home computer can serve as your music teacher. A growing number of software programs allow you to learn at your own speed, at any hour you choose—and without reliving any painful music-lesson experiences from your youth.

We thought it would be fun (for us) and helpful (for you) to test a few of these programs and the instruments they come with. After checking with several experts, including the team at Apple Computer Inc. that developed Garage-Band, which allows you to write music on your home computer, and with Antoinette Follett, editor in chief at Making Music, a magazine targeted at amateur musicians and published by Bentley-Hall Inc. in Syracuse, N.Y., we settled on a keyboard-and-software package for piano, a guitar that actually shows you where to put your fingers, and a computer program that can train your voice.

Results were good across the board. Each piece of equipment and related software got us further than we expected. None of the applications are likely to make you an instant virtuoso, but for dipping your musical toes in the water, these products did fine.

Keep in mind: Our choices represent only a fraction of what is available, and in each instance we tested only the software level for beginners. Many music stores let you try out these keyboards, guitars and software programs before taking them home, so we recommend some hands-on time before making a selection for yourself.

PIANO

We started with a digital piano keyboard, the new Yamaha E403. (Yamaha Corp. of America, a unit of Japan's

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Yamaha Corp., and Casio Inc., a unit of Japan's Casio Computer Co. Ltd., are two of the most popular keyboard makers.) The keyboard, a little over three feet long, was easy to set up. Just be sure you have a table or desktop somewhere near your computer on which to rest the keyboard. You'll need a standard USB cable, along with driver software, that will let your computer communicate with the keyboard.

Our keyboard package included a disk with driver software for a Windows-based PC. Drivers can also be downloaded for Mac or Windows: Go to music.yamaha.com, select products, digital keyboards on the left, the specific keyboard, in this case the PSR-E403, then downloads.

Once you're set up, it's impressive how much the E403 sounds and feels like a traditional piano. All the buttons and knobs can be overwhelming, but once you get a few pieces under your belt, it's a hoot to play a Verdi aria and use the keyboard button that makes it sound like a chamber group. In fact, the piano has many more such features than we had time to test.

The first software we tested was Seattle-based eMedia Music Corp.'s Piano and Keyboard Method. The lessons, which you read on your computer screen, are compact and digestible; in as little as 20 minutes, you can get through several lessons. Or go slower, if you like. You start with an introduction to the software and its various icons, along with background on the piano and finger position. You don't really play a note until Lesson 6, and then not again until Lesson 14. So no one rushes you, and there are short interactive quizzes along the way that test your ear, your understanding of notation and so forth.

We found the software well planned and effective—progress was quick. We liked how the software keeps your place when you come back to your lessons. The option to click and drag over troublesome spots in the music you're playing is also a plus; this feature puts a section of music into a loop so you can play along with the accompaniment repeatedly until you feel up to moving along.

One small complaint: Many of the music pieces are divided into short sections, in order to fit into eMedia's small instruction window. When you play with accompaniment, the sheet-music page automatically turns at the right moment, which is great. But if you just want to practice on your own, you have to stop and use the mouse each time to turn the page. There is no way to resize the screen to see an

entire piece of music, if it spans several pages, in one screen.

Still, it's important to focus on results: We couldn't read music written for the left hand (the bass clef) before starting our lessons, but were doing so in just a matter of days.

Given that music can provide a great intergenerational bridge, we also tested Miami-based Allegro Multimedia Inc.'s Piano Wizard, a software game you can play with your children or grandchildren.

Piano Wizard works either with a special color-coded keyboard you buy bundled with the software, or with any electronic keyboard onto which you put the program's color-coded, removable stickers. Rather than overwhelming kids with sheet music, Piano Wizard lets them choose from a variety of songs and fantasy backgrounds (outer space, the deep sea, and so forth). Color-coded fantasy creatures then move across the computer screen onto a color-coded piano keyboard.

The idea is to earn points by playing the key with the same color as the fanciful creature just as it passes onto the on-screen keyboard. Eventually players can progress from fantasy worlds to sheet music. The software can be a lot of fun, putting you at ease with pieces such as Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer." That said, we did hit a few bugs that Allegro says it is

fixing; at times, the software would disregard the settings we picked.

GUITAR

Here we picked an instrument called a Fretlight guitar, along with the accompanying software, from **Optek Music Systems** Inc., based in Windham, N.H. What's special about the Fretlight is the small red lights along the fingerboard's frets that light up and show you where to place your fingers.

The first step is to load the Optek software on your computer. The guitar comes with a cable that connects to your computer. One catch: You'll need an amplifier and amplifier chord before you really can do anything. Oh, sure, you can pluck the strings plenty (if you want to sound like our nephew playing the ukulele). But the Fretlight software instructs you not to even tune the guitar without an amplifier.

Once the guitar is plugged in to both the computer and the amp, a Lesson Player takes you on a tour of the instrument, demonstrating how the lights along the frets light up. You may also want a small stool or box where you can rest your foot, in order to better support and position the guitar.

As with the eMedia software, Lesson Player starts with an introduction to the various features and options in the software, followed by an introduction to the instrument—how to tune it and how to count out rhythms. By Lesson 12, you get your first taste of "tablature" (a notation system for guitar music), and by Lesson 14 you are introduced to the musical staff. One lesson later, you are plucking out the primary theme in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony ("Ode to Joy").

Results were impressive: Frequently when returning to practice time each day, we were surprised to find that things that had seemed so impossible the day before were now suddenly working. Sure, barring a miracle, we'll never play like B.B. King, but at least there was evident progress.

Lessons vary a lot in length; we spent days on the 16 playing exercises in Lesson 13. But we liked Optek's approach of leaving chords until late in the lesson plan. Picking out melodies on individual strings helped boost our confidence before confronting the seeming impossibility of playing chords in lesson No. 23 of 31.

Our least favorite thing about the software was all the reading required in the lessons, and much of it with very small type (even though we tried it at the three possible screen resolutions). There are some audio files that emphasize key points, but there are still pages of text to digest.

Ironically, the fret lights—which light up in time with the notes in the accompanying audio file—didn't help us much. When playing correctly, we never saw the lights; our fingers were already covering them as they came on. Optek says the lights are important for learning rhythm and counting, and so must light up precisely in time with the music. But figuring out the right note to play was more challenging for us. We suspect the fret lights may be more valuable for intermediate or advanced work on scales, chords and improvisation.

SINGING

Of everything we tested, SingingCoach from **Electronic Learning Products** Inc., Tampa, was certainly the most straightforward. You load the software, plug in the headset/microphone that comes with the software and begin.

First you set up a user profile, setting volume levels and vocal range (several people can use the software, each having their own profile). This lets the software adjust the key in which you'll be practicing. Once that is done, you can go directly to singing or can start with lessons.

We strongly recommend starting with the lessons, which carefully walk you through the basics of breathing, phrasing, posture and the rest. The animated characters that walk you through all this (including an operatic octopus) are a bit juvenile, but it was nice having everything explained rather than having to read and study.

We tested the SingingCoach Unlimited version, which comes with 24 songs on the CD (twice as many as the basic version), and allows you to download a dozen songs free from the online store. This is a relief because we eventually tired of singing the lesson basics, such as "Hot Cross Buns," "Home on the Range" and "Jingle Bells." And while a few dozen songs may not sound exactly limitless, the Unlimited library features more than 10,000 songs, compared with about 500 in the basic version.

SingingCoach works by using pitch-recognition software to analyze what notes you are singing. It then gives you visual feedback. When practicing or going through the lessons, you see a grid representing the notes you should sing (on most songs, you can select to have sheet music displayed instead of the grid). A metronome keeps the beat and the music starts.

You sing along and watch your pitch line travel across the grid or musical staff, showing what notes you are actually singing, compared to the notes as they are written. This way, you can instantly correct flat notes and other major blunders. When the song is finished, you get a score based on how often you hit the correct notes. You can also replay your singing to judge your performance for yourself.

If you like to sing, SingingCoach is a blast. ▦

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