EDITORIAL

CAN TECHNOLOGY TEACH?

Radio was the hottest technology of the '20s, and Radio Corporation of America (RCA) was the hottest stock on the New York Stock Exchange. In a 1926 interview in *Music Trades*, David Sarnoff, RCA president, outlined the future of radio. In addition to providing news, sports, and music entertainment, he predicted that radio would be the perfect vehicle for presenting music lessons to the masses. A generation of kids was mesmerized by the radio, so it was only natural, he reasoned, that they would be thrilled at the prospect of tuning in for a weekly piano lesson.

This ancient history was called to mind the other day when gushing press releases from three different Internet startups crossed my desk. With the backing of some combination of private investors and venture capitalists, each of these ventures independently concluded that offering music lessons online would transform music-making into a near-universal activity, and they would get seriously rich. "Music Making Revolutionized," declared one. "The Internet has the capability to create millions of new musicians," promised another.

The Internet is still evolving at such a rapid pace that we withhold final judgment on any predictions; however, there are numerous precedents for using technology to try to shortcut the time-consuming process of mastering a musical instrument, and none of the stories has a happy ending.

RCA's radio music lessons bombed quickly, but that didn't stop others from reviving the idea with the birth of television. "It's not enough to hear lessons; you have to see the teacher on the screen," they reasoned.

In the '60s pianist Roger Williams lent his name, as well as some money, to the creation of a Roger Williams Music School franchise operation. With a combination of closed circuit television systems and a "scientific teaching method," the schools promised to make it possible for anyone to learn to play like a professional with no time and even less effort. Williams ended up personally losing several hundred thousand on the venture, two executives went to jail for stock fraud, and it's not clear whether anyone ever learned anything with the Roger Williams method.

With the development of the VCR in the early '80s came the belief that instructional videos would transform the way people learn music. Startups rushed into the market with a flood of videos, only to be disappointed. Today, at under $10 million in sales, the video market is a nice niche for a few players but hardly a "learning revolution."

The creation of the MIDI standard in 1983 sent educational "visionaries" into overdrive. Sizable numbers reasoned that with millions of MIDI-equipped portable keyboards out there and millions of PCs, music teaching software would be a surefire hit. Nearly 20 years later there are more computers and keyboards out there than ever, and we're still waiting for "hit" educational software. Reading through enthusiast magazines, we're also waiting for some great player to say, "A great piece of software was what inspired and taught me to play."

Most recently, Software Toolworks, a game manufacturer, attempted to use advanced technology to enable anyone to play with its "Miracle Keyboard." Backed by an excellent $15.0 million ad campaign that stressed the benefits of music, the keyboard was a big seller during the 1994 Christmas season. The next year it was off the market. Parents obviously concluded that the product didn't live up to the hype.

Amidst the industry's scramble to move boxes and make money, it's easy to forget that music is an exalted art form, and the satisfaction of any art comes from the fact that it requires commitment and effort. If technology made playing as easy as, say, flipping on the television, would people describe the activity in spiritual terms? Even the most wired Internet enthusiasts describe their online experiences as "virtual," but in the case of music and education, who would chose a virtual experience over a "real" one?

We're not out to bash technology here, but we would submit that as good as the microchip has become, it's still no substitute for human interaction, and, short of an even bigger technological revolution, we remain skeptical of claims about using the Internet, or anything else, to dramatically expand the market.

Brian T. Majeski
Editor