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IMAGINE THE IDEAL PIANO LAB

By Shane Cadman

When Dr. Oscar Macchioni, pianist, author, and music educator, began teaching class piano at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP), he found a piano lab that was a bit worn-out and behind the times. "[UTEP] had a Roland piano lab from around 1980. Probably one of the first labs with MIDI. Most of the equipment did not work right anymore."

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Imagine the ideal piano lab

Instead of keeping quiet about the state of the current piano lab and simply dealing with it, he had a different response: "I knew I couldn't teach with such...outdated equipment, so I started to design what I thought would be a great piano lab."

Dr. Macchioni's personality is the type that makes things happen, so he immediately started moving forward with the idea of designing a new piano lab. However, he didn't do it on his own; he sought advice from his colleagues. "I got advice from Martha Hilley at the University of Texas, Austin. She said, 'Ask for the biggest thing you can get. When you are designing, don't think about it being too expensive. Just design the best piano lab.'"

Why Roland?

Because the existing piano lab was a Roland lab, it made perfect sense to contact Roland for the new one. But Roland wasn't the only company he looked into for the new lab. "I called Roland and their biggest competition, and Roland was the first one to get back to me with current information about the piano lab." Once he had all of the information he needed, it was time to make a decision. "What made me buy one instead of the other one is that I like the sound of the Roland [pianos], and I got all of the information that I needed right away, and it was all current."

So what does the perfect piano lab look like?

While Dr. Macchioni originally wanted two piano labs with 12 pianos in each, he had to settle for one larger piano lab due to



space restrictions. The piano lab would have 20 digital pianos along with the instructor's digital piano and an acoustic upright piano. While most would think that at this point the planning was done, it was actually only the beginning. In addition to the instruments, there would be three video cameras: one camera pointing down from above the instructor's hands, another one on the side of the keyboard, and one focused on the foot pedals. There would also be a SMART board, a computer and monitor at the instructor's keyboard (connected to the internet), and monitors at each of the students' keyboards. And how would all of this be controlled? With a touch-screen control panel, of course.

I'm sorry, how much did you say that was?

While everybody would agree that this sounds like the ideal piano lab, everybody would also ask the same two questions. One: Is this even possible? And, Two (and this is the big one): How much does all this cost? It turns out it was possible, and as for the cost, "I came up with a budget that included all of the technology I wanted to incorporate, and it ended up at a quarter of a million dollars." That's right: \$250,000.00! At that point, most people would probably just give up, or at least scale things down considerably, and he was prepared to negotiate down to get it to a workable amount.

Now imagine that you get it!

However, all of Dr. Macchioni's plans for his piano lab were about to become a reality. "Fortunately, the University got a grant from the Brown Foundation Inc. of Houston for the full amount, so I was able to buy absolutely everything I planned on from the beginning." And so, a state-of-the-art piano lab was born."

So how does this all work?

"Once you have all the technology, you need to be able to use it. You need to educate yourself as a teacher how to use that technology." Fortunately for Dr. Macchioni, he was up for the task. Not only did he do all of his product research when planning for the lab, but he has a natural inclination towards technology. "I'm very into technology. Somehow I not only like technology, but I get around very well without reading much. It is natural to me to push a button and do things."

As mentioned above, everything is controlled by a touch-screen control panel next to the instructor's keyboard that can select cameras, the computer screen, or a combination of these. The projection screen can be divided into one to four sections, showing various combinations, such as the score and the instructor's keyboard, the score, keyboard and pedals, etc. There can be up to 150 pre-set combinations, but they only use eight or nine, which are named and saved on the console and can be changed at the touch of a finger.

Where do I put my music book?

Since the students work in a large classroom, each student has a monitor on top of his keyboard. This way they can easily see everything that is projected on the SMART board on their monitor. As for music, they are usually looking at PDF files or music shown via a document projector. One of the advantages of using a SMART board is that an instructor can use a special pen to "write" on the board and have it show up on the projected image, so it is very easy to communicate this way with the students. Dr. Macchioni also uses the technology when it comes to sight-reading. "I can pre-record anything, and save it [as a Standard MIDI File], and load it into my keyboard, and then show the score of that. You know that function that Roland has [on the digital piano] where you can show the score with the little bouncing ball? We use this with the students—not with the book, but with exercises I can make up on the spot and put it through that function on the keyboard, and the students will see the score on their monitors, and they can sight-read it."

What does internet access have to do with a piano lab?

The piano lab is also connected to the internet. While this may seem unimportant to some, Dr. Macchioni understands the value of having information from all around the world readily available. "The other day we were looking at whole-tone scales, so of course I show them Impressionistic paintings, and I have them watch a pianist playing Debussy preludes. All of this can be accessed within seconds. At the same time we were playing whole-tone scales and trying to understand the aesthetics of the whole-tone scale in music, and relating it to art."

Music is just one thing

While the technology is important, it's not what's most important—it's all about the music. While talking to Dr. Macchioni, it is evident that though he is excited about technology and his piano lab, he is passionately committed to music and music education.

"Music is just one thing. Unfortunately, we have to divide it into theory, history, lessons, etc. But when you are playing an instrument, you are applying theory concepts, you are applying technique concepts to the particular instrument, you are applying history-of-music concepts. So what the students don't know or don't realize—and I think this is the job of a teacher—is to [teach] them how to integrate all these things that they learn in the different classes. When you play a piece of music, you are playing theory. And I mean this: You are playing theory because that piece of music has a chord progression, it has certain characteristics that make it sound how it sounds, and if you don't understand that, how can you perform? If you don't understand what you are playing, how can you really take all the juice from the music? If you don't do that, you're just a monkey. If you don't understand the music you play at the theory level, at the history level, at the aesthetic level, you are really just a monkey, just repeating certain motions to make that key sound. But you don't really have any idea or concept of where that music is coming from, where that music is going, all the different chords and chord progressions, why it sounds like it sounds."

Talking about music

Dr. Macchioni understands that for someone to truly comprehend something, they need to be able to explain it, and that includes music. As a result, he continues a technique from his younger days as a piano student. "My job, what I do, is we analyze all the music. I ask the students to verbalize, because just to write Roman numerals, finger numbers, and letters on the score doesn't mean anything for anybody. But can you explain what is happening with words? If you can explain with words what is happening in the music, you really understand what's going on with the music. Then, you can write all the Roman numerals you want. But can you explain what's going on with the music verbally—the form, the harmonies, the intervals and all that? And, of course, I also have them do solfege because being from Argentina and being trained in the French conservatory system, you solfege every single thing you play in your life. Over here in the States you teach solfege as a curiosity, but for me it's the basics of music. I don't know how I would do without solfeging my music. Students learn solfege also in theory [class], but what a great opportunity to solfege the music you play, and not just an exercise in a book."

A teacher's job is to influence and inspire

"I'm trying to inspire students to be able to see music at a different level. They get caught so much into either trying to move their finger the right way or trying to write the right Roman numeral on the score, but what about both? You need to be able to do both. You need to be able to perform both ways. I am lucky that I had those type of teachers that showed me and they taught me how to do it. With the students in class piano, we cover a lot of keyboard skills. It's a great opportunity for me to try to influence that way."

It's about teaching and learning

While Dr. Macchioni is obviously passionate about his work and takes it very seriously, he understands the importance of balance and having each thing in its proper place. For example, when asked about the role of technology in the classroom, he has a very healthy viewpoint: "As we progress with more technology and all that, we're still teaching the same things. The music didn't change—it's the way we teach, and the way we see things, and the way we learn. I'm not teaching anything new. I'm teaching in a different way, but the basics of music are all the same. All this technology is great to have, and these students are born into this type of technology, but...it's just a tool, and it needs to be taken as a tool—to improve, to teach, or improve the teaching—but not as the only way to do it."

Does having all of this technology really make a difference?

The new piano lab has been in use for a while now, which has given Dr. Macchioni the time to assess the effectiveness of the lab. "The level of engagement of the student is superior, because we are a visual society. I needed this technology to teach a large class like the one I have. I need to reach all of the students, even the one who is at the last keyboard, sitting in the back of the room. Visually, that's what keeps the students' attention." However, he understands that the greatest technologies in the world are no substitute for human interaction. "Different students learn different ways, and of course I have all of the visual tools, but I still walk around the lab and help students one by one. I'm not at my keyboard all the time and using my

headset constantly. I'm walking the room constantly."

Final words for technophobes

"With some teachers, they are afraid that this is going to replace them, but they don't understand that this is a tool. It's a tool and we need to use it. It's like you have all these theory programs in the computer, right? Well, that's a tool for the teacher, but you're not going to learn theory by sitting and looking at the program. You're not going to learn piano by putting in a DVD called 'How to Play the Piano in Two Days.' It could be a tool to be more motivated, but you won't learn with that by itself. You still need the human aspect. You still need the teaching, the teacher, there to guide you. So, some of these people are afraid of the technology because they think it will take over, but it will never take over the human aspect."

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Links to website and student samples:

<http://www.keyboard.utep.edu/>

<http://www.oscarmacchioni.net/>

<http://utminers.utep.edu/omacchioni/SkillCheck6SeasonalSong.htm>

Contact Us

EMAIL

rolandmusiced@rolandus.com

PHONE

323-890-3700

MAILING ADDRESS

Roland Corp. US

5100 S. Eastern Ave.

Los Angeles, CA 90040-2938

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