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Blessing of Curse? Fine Arts Cope with Technological Advances

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DAYTON, Ohio — Damon Sink waved his hand in a sweeping gesture around the University of Dayton lab, pointing to the computers that filled the room.


Indeed — pressing the ‘c’ ‘a’ and ‘b’ keys on any of these boards won’t yield a ‘cab,’ just a strange musical chord. For they are quite literally keyboards — piano-like, music-producing instruments — plugged into their processors. And Damon Sink is not an instructor of management information systems but of music.

In the last two decades, advances in technology have dramatically altered the way we live, work and learn. They’ve also affected the way we play — right down to our enjoyment of fine arts, such as music and literature.

But are these changes for the better or worse? Reactions from experts at UD are mixed.

Sink and Phillip Magnuson, a professor of music at the University, agree that technology has made music far more accessible to performers, composers, listeners, students and teachers. “From a music education standpoint, everything you teach can be reinforced with software — from music theory to sight reading,” Sink said. “Drills software especially provides opportunities for guided practice that students couldn’t otherwise have without hiring an individual tutor.”

A computer language unique to music and commonly known as MIDI (Music Instrument Digital Interface) has greatly aided the process of composition as well, Sink said. A composer can build an orchestral composition one “instrument” at a time simply using the computerized keyboard. The computer records each layer of music in the designated instrument sound, then will play back the individual layers or entire score for editing or additions.

“The process works so well, it actually takes the thrill out of hearing an orchestra play —over—

OFFICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
300 College Park Dayton, Ohio 45469-1679
(937) 229-3241 (937) 229-3063 Fax
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your music for the first time," Sink said.

“Yes, but you also get to avoid those really awful mistakes that previously weren’t evident until that first live performance,” Magnuson added with a laugh.

Computerized composition has eased the process of producing sheet music as well. Instead of embarking on the tedious, time-consuming chore of handwriting pages and pages of notes, a composer can turn the task over to the computer — which translates what it has “heard” into printed notation. Not only does its programming tell the computer on what line of a staff to place each note, but it also dictates how long each note will be played, where to insert rests, etc.

Is there any concern then that computers could take the place of human artists?

“Absolutely not,” Magnuson says. “The whole thing about art is that it is a human activity. A computerized music program will only be as creative as the person who devised it.”

As for performing, Sink and Magnuson again agree technology poses no threat.

“There’s something special about a live performance — a humanizing effect that can’t be injected into a computer or recorded disc,” Sink said.

“And with a computer, everything is precise and mistakes are made right,” Magnuson added. “But that human feel is important, and a bad live performance is better than good recorded music any day.”

Technology is, however, improving the music production climate — at least for the musicians.

“The technology is now available for anyone who wants to be a composer and producer. It’s becoming very easy to compose and record your music and offer it on the Web.”

“As more music becomes available that way, we’ll have to wade through a lot more junk to get to the good stuff — but you have to wade through a lot of junk now at record stores, which may actually become obsolete,” Magnuson said. “Besides, the wading could be a treasure hunt. There may be pearls of music out there by some young composer who wouldn’t have otherwise been able to produce or sell his music.”

At the opposite end of the technology tolerance spectrum comes James Farrelly, professor of English, whose concerns about technology’s effect on society and its consumption of literature range from the potential demise of libraries and bookstores to a lessening of human interaction.

“IT appears to me what’s happening — since the age of television — is that students and people in general are zoned out on graphic images. They have to be watching something,” Farrelly said. “The attachment one has to books and bookstores and libraries — we’re seeing it alter itself right now. I’m fearful that eventually technology could rise to the level of replacing —more—
Farrelly is also concerned about what he sees as an alarming trend — a condition he’s coined as “imagination deficit disorder.

“We’re allowing young people to focus on machines, and they’re beginning to suffer from an inability to get their imaginations up and running,” he said. “They don’t want to engender imaginative images on their own, they want those images to be provided for them. Then, when they have to read something, we find they don’t know how to visualize the characters for themselves.”

Farrelly’s apprehensions about the rise of technology and fall of reading for pleasure — and the impact that dynamic may have on society — are extensive.

“Books aren’t just reading, humanity is involved,” he said. “Young people, now attached to the computer, are missing out on the wonderful childhood experience we enjoyed when our mothers and fathers read to us. And people in general are missing out on fundamental human interaction as they talk more and more to their computers than to each other. There’s something very positive about sitting around and talking to others about a book and sharing the various interpretations people bring to the table.

“I believe the civility of our civilization is in question because I think we’re becoming very impatient with things that don’t move quickly. We allow ourselves no quiet time, no reflection time, and we’re replacing activities that are relaxing with high-stress hobbies. Students today want fast food and fast reads, so I deliberately assign books you can’t find Cliffs Notes for. I’ve discovered over the years that if students learn how to take time to read, they’ll keep reading after they leave class. I view it as a kind of missionary work.”

In spite of Farrelly’s concerns, he’s not without hope — but action must come from parents and teachers in the form of a re-emphasis on the fundamentals of absorbing literature the “old-fashioned” way, he said.

“We can avoid the loss of our bookstores by inculcating a desire to have them in our young people. And there needs to be a re-emphasis on taking time to fully absorb a book — especially in the world of education, but among adults as well.

“I have a sense of a chapel-like resonance in a bookstore, as if I’m in the sacred presence of great ideas. That kind of feeling comes to us not by indoctrination, but simply by being with the books. I want to sit quietly and read, then take moments to reflect on what the book means, what aspect of the human element it represents and how it ties to me. That’s what it’s all about.”

The opinion scales are more balanced in the visual arts department, simply because it
encompasses such a wide variety of disciplines — from painting, which has seen little
technology-influenced change, to photography in its constant state of technological flux.

Technology has truly been a mixed blessing in the world of photography, said Joel
Whitaker, an assistant professor of visual arts who has taught photography for six years at
UD.

“The problem is that, as technology becomes more and more advanced, we’re starting to
lose sight of the art — what we’re doing and why,” he said. “The process is taking place more
in a virtual realm than in a physical realm — and the more we’re able to artificially enhance the
quality of an image, the less ability we have of looking at what was really there.”

The virtual realm Whitaker refers to is the collective plethora of photo-enhancing
computer equipment and software — programs that alter or enhance images, from the simple
correction of “red eye” to the addition of objects not originally there.

“With traditional photography and film processing, you have the opportunity to learn
from the mistakes you made at the time of the shot and correct for them the next time. But
when you can simply correct your mistakes in the virtual realm, you lose the opportunity to
learn how to do it right in the first place.”

“Technology has made image making more accessible to a larger group of people,
however, and that’s a real benefit,” said Mat Rappaport, assistant professor of visual arts in
visual communications design. “Digital video and editing systems have allowed a lot of people
to become videographers without spending $25,000 on a system. It’s great for people who
don’t aspire to be a Spielberg or a Scorsese but are looking for a creative outlet.”

“Technology allows us to become more efficient, and in the commercial industry that’s
not a bad thing,” Whitaker said. “But I don’t think we’re at the stage yet where that’s useful in
an artistic realm, because by making equipment cheaper and more efficient, you often degrade
the quality of the product.”

“All in all, technology has opened up and will continue to open up many different ways
of producing artwork and has facilitated many different aesthetic possibilities — not
necessarily better, but different,” Whitaker added.

“The ability to distribute information over the Internet is one of the biggest changes
occurring,” Rappaport concluded. “I’d like to see more good art and a wider distribution of art
through that medium — putting technology to work to build a stronger community.”

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For media interviews, contact Phillip Magnuson at (937) 229-3907 or
magnuson@yar.udayton.edu, Damon Sink at (937) 229-3937 or sinkd@yar.udayton.edu,
James Farrelly at (937) 229-3435 or farrelly@checkov@.hm.udayton.edu, Joel Whitaker at
(937) 229-2207 or whitakej@mccoy.as.udayton.edu, and Mat Rappaport at (937) 229-3886 or
matrapp@hotmail.com.