Gaylord Richardson has been turned on to music education since he, as a seventh grade ensemble member, was part of a live recording session. He still remembers the titles of the songs included on the album produced by his music class. Now, 20-some years later, he is inspiring his students to compose and record their own pieces, supported by a MIDI keyboard lab.

Richardson’s classroom contains a dozen MIDI keyboards, networked together to a master control teacher workstation. Much of this equipment was purchased through a VH1/Soundtree grant in 2001. The Toledo Public School district was selected during this grant competition, with four schools in the corporation receiving funding to incorporate digital technologies into the music classrooms.

A visit to Richardson’s classroom reveals students engaged in musical composition. As students don earphone/microphone headsets and pull out staff paper, he patiently sits at his computer station, listening to individual student performances and providing technical and artistic feedback.

“That’s good. Now you need 8 bars. How many do you have now? ... Remember, a half note is getting how many counts? ... That’s right. Now play it again from the top.”

As students develop their melody lines, they share their musical ideas with others in the class using the networked systems. Richardson can invite all students to listen or play together, or combine smaller groups of students into an ensemble with just a few clicks of the mouse.

Once the students establish their melody lines, they select the instrument sounds (or voicings) that they will use for their composition. Before MIDI technology, this required the actual particular instrument—and, of course, a musician who had mastered it. Now a student can play a violin, French horn, or electric guitar sound on the keyboard. These melodies are then paired with an accompaniment style (reggae, blues, ballad, and so on) that enables a student to create a piece with full orchestration—again, with just a touch of a few buttons.

With all this technology, are the students really learning anything about music? Richardson can answer with an affirming “Yes!” He has found that students are becoming more fluent in notation reading, are more adventurous and creative in their compositions, and have a deeper understanding of orchestrations because of their work in the MIDI lab. As the student pieces are finished, students export them from the keyboards as .aif files and burn them to a CD. These students, at the end of the school year, will travel to a local recording studio and participate in a live studio recording session, reminiscent of the field trip Richardson experienced as a seventh grader. The inspiration continues.

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