## Jonathan Savage asks

# WHAT'S SO SCARY ABOUT MUSIC TECHNOLOGY?

Let's start this month's column with a question or two. What's the first thing you think of when you hear the term 'music technology'? What do you think counts as a piece of music technology?

For the majority of us, images of synthesisers, computers, samplers, processors, wires and plugs come to mind almost immediately. But how many of us think about the more traditional types of music technology – clarinets, pianos, trombones and the like? Aren't they types of music technology too?

Throughout history, performers and composers have had to face up to the challenge of dealing with new instruments and their resultant impact on musical expression and understanding. Often these challenges have led to remarkable performances and compositions, precisely because they have taken the artist or composer out of their comfort zone and demanded new ways of thinking.

But in the world of music education today, technology has a divisive role: teachers and learners are divided into those who can use it and those who can't. I help run a large PGCE course at Manchester Metropolitan University, where many of the students cite music technology as an area of weakness within their subject knowledge. Perhaps this is the result of a whole suite of music technology qualifications that have emerged over the last 15 years, making it now possible to specialise in music technology from the age of 14 right through to doctoral study. Equally, such qualifications have also made it possible to opt out completely, sticking to 'tradition' and viewing music technology as an entirely separate subject. But are the two camps so fundamentally different?

Perhaps some of the beliefs underpinning the divide relate to how we perceive the 'technology' bit. Technology, the argument goes, is about making life easier. Why bother with long division when you have a calculator? Why waste time map-reading when you have a satnav? Similarly,



> **"THE ISSUE ISN'T THE TECHNOLOGY – IT'S WHAT YOU DO WITH IT"**

why learn the piano when you have a 25GB sample library of Steinway patterns and loops to manipulate? Why worry about notation when you have MIDI and a digital-audio sequencer at your disposal? For those who put themselves in the 'music' camp, such shortcuts can make life in the 'technology' camp seem just too easy.

Composing with Cubase is indeed different – whether or not it is quicker – from composing with a pencil, just as teaching with an interactive whiteboard is different from teaching with a blackboard, and playing around with an RC-50 loop-station is a different experience from jamming with a band. But all can be valuable. The issue isn't the technology – it's what you do with it and the degree of authenticity your tools afford you.

If divisions between creative practices with and without technology are artificial, qualification frameworks need reworking in order to set things back on an even keel. To this end, we all need to commit to broadening and deepening our understanding of the potential of new technologies, wherever we stand as music educators. Darren Henley, in his recent review

of music education, acknowledges this. Henley's 33rd recommendation urges the government to commission further work in the area of embracing technology. The government's response is positive but non-committal: it states simply, 'We agree'.

Perhaps it would be best not to wait around for a government music technology initiative that may or may not happen. Why not commit to developing your use of music technology right now? It need not be expensive: there are numerous guides, support materials and interactive learning environments on the internet, and YouTube is full of training materials. While professional-level hardware and software can be expensive, there are many lower-cost, free or open-source pieces of software that can be imaginatively used within your teaching. And, importantly, it need not be difficult: technology is often intuitive to use, and colleagues or students will often help out with anything that might seem at first to be confusing.

Indeed, it is vital not to be afraid to ask for help – especially from your students. The ways in which they access and create music may be very different from your own, but given the chance they will doubtless be willing to open your eyes to something new.

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> ✳ **NEXT MONTH**
> **Paul Harris** on practice for music teachers