

Using the Computer as Your Accompanist

by Dick Frantzreb (6/22/08)

If you're a good pianist (or organist) you're in great shape because you can perhaps accompany yourself while you work up a solo (or select it in the first place). Most importantly, you can find any places where the accompaniment might present surprises for the soloist, and you can practice difficult sections of the solo with the accompaniment to learn it more quickly and generally be more confident about the ultimate performance.

But if you're not much of a pianist, you may find yourself facing a certain amount of anxiety with new or difficult pieces. You may feel that you need additional rehearsals with your accompanist. And if you have a hand in selecting solos, you may find yourself steering toward the easier material and sticking with familiar pieces whenever possible.

This limited, fearful thinking can be a thing of the past.

Music-Reading Software

I was thrilled several years ago to learn about a new kind of software that reads printed scores and turns them into music. If you're familiar with optical character recognition (OCR) for the printed word, this is the equivalent for music.

The first programs to perform this function were a family of software systems from Neuratron Ltd. (in the UK) (www.neuratron.com), called PhotoScore. Now there are competitors on the market, but I use PhotoScore Ultimate 5, and frankly, I'm thrilled with it. Here's how I work with the program.

I start PhotoScore on my PC (they have a version for Macintosh, as well), and place my sheet music in my scanner. If I happen to have an Acrobat (.pdf) version of the music, that can be read directly by PhotoScore, bypassing the scanner.

As the music is scanned, PhotoScore "reads" it with remarkable accuracy (depending, of course on how clean the original copy is). Even while the reading is going on, you can view the first page and begin correcting any mistakes (in note placement, note value, etc.) or oversights (such as missing key signature, missing bar lines, etc.). I have found, though, that this version of PhotoScore make very few mistakes when reading a reasonably clean score.

I'll confess, it takes a bit of work to learn to use the editing tools. But they have been well designed, and I really believe the learning effort is worthwhile. When you've finished editing the whole composition (vocal line and accompaniment), you can play it through your computer. What's more, you can transpose it, export it as a MIDI file, or export it to other music software (e.g. Sibelius or Finale) for more sophisticated processing.

As of this writing the cost of PhotoScore Ultimate 5 is \$250. There is a version with fewer features called PhotoScore MIDI Lite 5 which sells for less than \$50. And Neuratron offers a free, downloadable demo version to allow you to get the feel of the fundamental system and test out its features before you make a purchase.

To me, this capability is truly amazing. I've gotten to the point where I can scan and edit a reasonably clean, 5-page score in less than a half-hour. And when I'm finished, I have my accompaniment in my computer, for rehearsal whenever (and as long as) I want.

Music-Processing Software

But am I satisfied? Not quite. PhotoScore Ultimate 5 allows me to save the music that has been read as a MIDI file. (That stands for "music instrument digital interface," and the file typically has a .mid extension.) This file format preserves all the information for a musical performance, and it is generic enough to be read by nearly all music editing, music-processing programs.

Although there are many, many choices for the next step, the program I use is Cakewalk Express. I open the MIDI file created by PhotoScore in Cakewalk Express, and it's available for immediate playback. I can alter the tempo, transpose the music, assign different instrument sounds to the accompaniment (e.g. church organ) and vocal scores (I often assign a clarinet sound), change the relative volume of accompaniment and vocal line – the potential for adjustment is amazing. I make the playback comfortable (key and tempo) and work on the piece until I begin to feel I've learned it. Then I mute the vocal track and see how I do singing just with the accompaniment.

I'm sorry to report that my Cakewalk Express is no longer being marketed. It's been replaced by numerous products that I'm sure are better in many respects. You can find Cakewalk's current offerings at www.cakewalk.com. However, I did a quick internet search, and another product, MIDI Maestro (www.midimaestro.com) offers very similar capabilities to those I've been using. It's priced at \$100, and a trial version is free.

Final Words

I'm sure that there are, or will soon be, other products on the market that will support the kinds of procedures that I'm increasingly using to learn difficult music. The important thing to keep in mind is that it's possible, without an extraordinary expenditure of money and time, to create accompaniments to your weekly solos on your computer.

Dick Frantzreb
frantz@vocal-works.com