

**Making  
Musicals  
with  
MIDI**

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# **Making Musicals with MIDI**

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### **I. Intro**

- A. Goal: Encourage the incorporation of musicals into the classroom and choral program
- B. Goal: Develop an awareness of MIDI as a source of accompaniment for musicals
- C. Goal: Provide educational justification and suggestions to facilitate the production of original musical theater works
- D. Definitions
  - 1. What is a "musical"?

Any presentation that incorporates vocal music (solo or choral) and some kind of staging. It may include some sort of drama, set, costumes, lighting, or dance. It could take any number of forms - opera, Broadway-type shows, revues, variety shows.
  - 2. What is MIDI?

Musical Instrument Digital Interface  
(a standardized computer code/language that allows all MIDI devices to work/interface/communicate together)

    - a. Input devices
    - b. Processing devices
    - c. Output devices

(Each of the three things above could be a stand-alone unit, within a keyboard, or as a computer/software package)

### **II. Why ... Musicals?**

- A. Affords students:
  - 1. Opportunity for self-expression
  - 2. Format for the presentation of individual talent
  - 3. Healthy release for emotional energy
- B. Helps students develop:
  - 1. Stage presence/etiquette
  - 2. Performance skills
    - a. Facial animation
    - b. Body language/movement
    - c. Performer-to-Audience communication skills

### C. Ultimate Art Form

Incorporates:

1. Music
  - a. solo vocal
  - b. choral
  - c. instrumental
2. Theater
  - a. acting
  - b. staging
3. Visual Art
  - a. set
  - b. costumes
  - c. lighting
4. Dance

### D. It's a medium that can involve everyone

(There can be a job/place for anyone interested)

1. From tickets to technical
2. From sewing to singing
3. From P.R. to painting

## III. "Live" vs. MIDI accompaniment

### A. What is "live" accompaniment?

One or more living, breathing instrumentalists accompanying performers

### B. Why ... "live"?

1. Allows a more interactive performance
2. Allows more spontaneous expression/nuance
3. Easier to "cover" for performer error
4. Can be a more enriching experience

### C. Why not ... "live"?

1. Finding/Paying players
2. Limited by availability of players and budget restraints
3. Rehearsal time/scheduling
4. Performance space limitations
5. Transpositions are difficult
6. Lack of consistency (never exactly the same twice)
7. Tuning and balance problems

### D. What is MIDI accompaniment?

Any use of MIDI equipment as a source of accompaniment

#### E. Why ... MIDI?

1. Fewer, if any, performers to find/pay
2. No tuning or balance problems
3. Usually, very little performer-space required
4. Sequenced (prerecorded) accompaniment is always the same (consistency and security for inexperienced performers)
5. Sequenced accompaniment can be taped and duplicated for individual practice
6. Unlimited orchestration possibilities
7. One-time equipment investment instead of recurring expense
8. Transpositions are simple
9. MIDI "orchestra" is easily portable
10. MIDI "orchestra" can attend more rehearsals
11. Fatigue is seldom a problem (the computer doesn't need a break; the operator might)

#### F. Why not ... MIDI?

1. Sequenced accompaniment is inflexible for spontaneous expression/nuance
2. With sequenced accompaniment it's difficult to "cover" for performer error
3. Occasional technical glitches (Know your equipment!)
4. It's hard to make it really sound like "live" instruments

### IV. Copyright, Musicals, and MIDI

#### A. The 1976 Copyright Act grants to copyright owners the five exclusive rights that follow:

1. The right to reproduce the copyrighted work in copies or phonorecords (any aural recording)
2. The right to perform the copyrighted work publicly (There are "Fair Use" exemptions which allow public schools and colleges to perform copyrighted material.)
  - a. Face-to-face teaching activities are exempt
  - b. Live performances without commercial advantage of anyone are exempt
  - c. Performance of any dramatic works such as plays, musicals, or operas ARE NOT exempt
3. The right to prepare derivative works based on the copyrighted work.  
(The copyright owner has the sole right to make:)
  - a. Arrangements
  - b. Transcriptions
  - c. Simplified editions
  - d. Adaptations

- e. Translations of texts
  - f. Parody or altered lyrics
  - g. Orchestrations
  - 4. The right of public distribution of a copyrighted work.
  - 5. The right to display a copyrighted work publicly
- B. Sequenced accompaniment must have permission from the copyright owner. (It IS a recording of someone else's legal property.)
- C. MIDI "orchestrations" or adaptations must have permission from the copyright owner.
- D. Fines for copyright infringement range from \$100 to \$50,000 per work and/or not more than one year imprisonment for each work.

A very good source of information:

Copyright: The Complete Guide for Music Educators by Jay Althouse  
ISBN 0-939139-01-4

Music in Action  
c/o Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.  
P.O. Box 10003  
Van Nuys, CA 91410-0003

## V. Legal MIDI

(What can be done?)

- A. Anything you have specific permission to do
  - 1. From the copyright owner
  - 2. In writing
  - 3. Before you do anything
- B. "Live" MIDI
  - 1. Using rented orchestral parts
  - 2. Using MIDI keyboards
  - 3. Performing/accompanying "live" with the stage performers
- C. Creating original music theater works
  - 1. From music in public domain
    - a. Folk songs
    - b. Spirituals
    - c. Children's songs
  - 2. From scripts/lyrics/tunes created specifically for your particular project

## VI. Why... Original Musicals?

### A. Artistic Expression

1. We all have students who:
  - a. Make up/write stories
  - b. Write poetry
  - c. Make up tunes / write songs
  - d. Are interested in clothes / costume design
  - e. Like to design things / Are taking Drafting
  - f. Dance / Choreograph
2. They need:
  - a. An outlet / an avenue for expression
  - b. A platform to showcase their talents
  - c. A chance for their work to be seen by the public

### B. Involvement/Ownership

(It's like giving birth)

1. It's part of them
2. They feel responsible to nurture it
3. It's a source of pride/accomplishment

### C. Deeper understanding of Music/Theater

1. They'll learn so much more by creating rather than regurgitating
2. They'll discover that they need more knowledge to accomplish their goal (hopefully they'll go after it)
3. They should begin to see music from an insider's (creator's) point of view rather than as an adversary (something they have to learn)
4. They'll see "theater" from "the ground up" (as professionals do when creating a new show)

### D. More economical

1. No royalty or rental fees
2. Ticket money is yours
3. With MIDI there's no orchestra to pay

### E. Written specifically for your circumstances

1. "Tailor made" for the kind of talent you have
2. Designed for your particular facilities
3. "No hassle" edits/additions/deletions (no legal obligations to copyright owners)
4. Designed for your particular occasion or theme
5. With MIDI - the "band" of your choosing

## VII. How... Original Musicals?

### A. Script

1. Where to get it
  - a. Student-written short stories
  - b. Folk tales/legends/myths/Biblical stories
  - c. Make it up / write it yourself
  - d. Plays/stories in public domain (classics, old obscure works)
  - e. Be careful to avoid copyrighted material unless you don't mind getting permission and paying
2. What to do with it
  - a. Adapt - convert to dialogue and stage action
  - b. Expand - give greater detail; include elements of a fully-developed "backstory" (character and/or plot history); develop secondary plot lines

### B. Lyrics/Songs

1. Where to put them
  - a. Scenes that need extra emphasis or focus
  - b. Moments of reflection
  - c. Places that need to be prolonged or expanded
  - d. Wherever you need more character development
  - e. Any place where the drama needs to be heightened or sustained
  - f. Wherever you feel the show needs one  
Note: Spoken lines tend to be interpreted as existing in "real" time and songs seem to make time stand still or slow down
2. How to create lyrics
  - a. Draw from the context before and after the song and/or from major themes in the show
  - b. Use/repeat/expand spoken lines/thoughts/ideas
  - c. Don't "force" the rhyme - let the line rise and fall like natural speech
  - d. Try to write with a sense of musical phrase/flow
  - e. Keep a Rhyming Dictionary and a Thesaurus close
  - f. Buy a book with more ideas and techniques than I have to offer! (Even read other people's lyrics to see what they do, but don't steal)
  - g. Have someone else do it!! (But you can't complain about how it turns out)  
Note: In my opinion, this is one of the toughest jobs-allow lots of time to "think and experiment"

3. Writing tunes
  - a. Work very closely with the lyricist (I believe it helps if the same person writes both)
  - b. Try to work the melody so it rises and falls naturally with the lyrics - don't "force" one on the other
  - c. Sing it! Write it down later, when you have something that "feels" or "sounds" right (it helps to record yourself while you work it out, then rewind and listen)
  - d. Work for something memorable (I don't like the word "catchy")
  - e. SIMPLE is O.K.!
  - f. Keep the harmony "logical" but don't be too predictable
  - g. Try to let each tune be unique (unless you're developing some thematic idea)
  - h. Listen and analyze what other people have done (Don't use their stuff, just draw and learn from it)

### C. MIDI Accompaniment

(Each of the following elements have an infinite number of variations and can be used collectively or in any sort of combination.)

1. Harmony
  - a. Sustained
  - b. Arpeggiated
  - c. Rhythmic
2. Rhythm
  - a. Percussion
  - b. Harmonic
3. Bass
  - a. Sustained
  - b. Arpeggiated
  - c. "Walking"
  - d. Melodic
4. Melodic Doubling
  - a. For "drama"
  - b. For strength / support
  - c. For clarity / "brilliance"
5. Counter melodies
  - a. For added interest
  - b. For added movement (fill "dead" spots in melody)
  - c. For thematic "overlying"

## **VIII. Conclusion**

- A. Musicals are beneficial and rewarding - DO 'EM!
- B. MIDI can make productions more accessible - TRY IT!
- C. Original shows are well worth the effort - GO FOR IT!  
(...but they're habit-forming!)