

MiBAC music review John Svetlik October 10, 1991

The computer, particularly the Macintosh, has changed the way musicians make music. The first step in this change were analog electronic synthesizers, capable of making new (and what some claimed were *ugly*) sounds. Acoustic instruments, because they are complex physical systems, make complex (and apparently mostly pleasing) sounds (Not everyone agrees: Some say, for instance, that a saxophone is an ill wind no one blows good). But analog, and then digital, synthesizers were irresistible to musicians because they promised *total control* over a sound's timbre.

The advent of music sequencing gave composers even more control. Now a musician could lay down tracks, just like with a multi-track tape recorder, but without some of tape's limitations. For instance, a sequencer enables a musician to record a drum track who physically might be somewhat inept with the sticks. Any movie soundtrack today is more likely to be laid down by one musician working with keyboards and a computer than created by a composer and orchestra in a Hollywood studio.

For those who revel in the sheer pleasure of working with other *human* musicians, it's heartening to see the computer co-opted for some old, as well as new, purposes—training musicians in the theory of that old-style Western music (and I don't mean Garth Brooks, in this case). I'm familiar with two similar programs: *Music Lessons* by MiBAC Music Software and *Practica Musica* by Ars Nova. Since I think fewer people are familiar with music software than, say, with spreadsheets or word processors, I've decided a comparison between these two will be more illuminating than a review of one or the other.

*MiBAC Music Lessons* is published out of Northfield, Minnesota, where apparently students still get some music education. It's a new entry to the music software rolls, and is copyrighted 1991. *Practica Musica*, on the other hand, has been around since 1987, and has been updated every two years. It comes from the state of Washington. Both *Music Lessons* and *Practica Musica* teach skills essential to a keyboard musician, and go quite a bit farther than that. Both programs are MIDI compatible, which means if you have a MIDI compatible keyboard, your keyboard and your computer can have a truly synthetic time sending signals to each other. Both programs teach music reading and listening skills, aiding both the novice and advanced musician to increase their musical prowess. Both offer scoring sections so you (and your family and friends) can determine what kind of progress y'all are making.

In some ways MiBAC is better for the beginning musician. MiBAC is essentially a sophisticated drill program. Its first drills are on note reading—"Ah, there's an A on the treble staff, and I'll punch the A on the keyboard." It breaks down the process of learning the note names into quite easy steps—first the spaces, then the lines, or in whatever order you prefer. It also offers the curious a chance to learn the alto clef, and even though I've read music for years I found I wasn't very quick with that one. It then goes on to the "Circle of Fifths," teaching the student the correct sharps and flats for each individual major and minor scale on the keyboard. A beginner would learn their scales very quickly given some time with *MiBAC Music Lessons*.

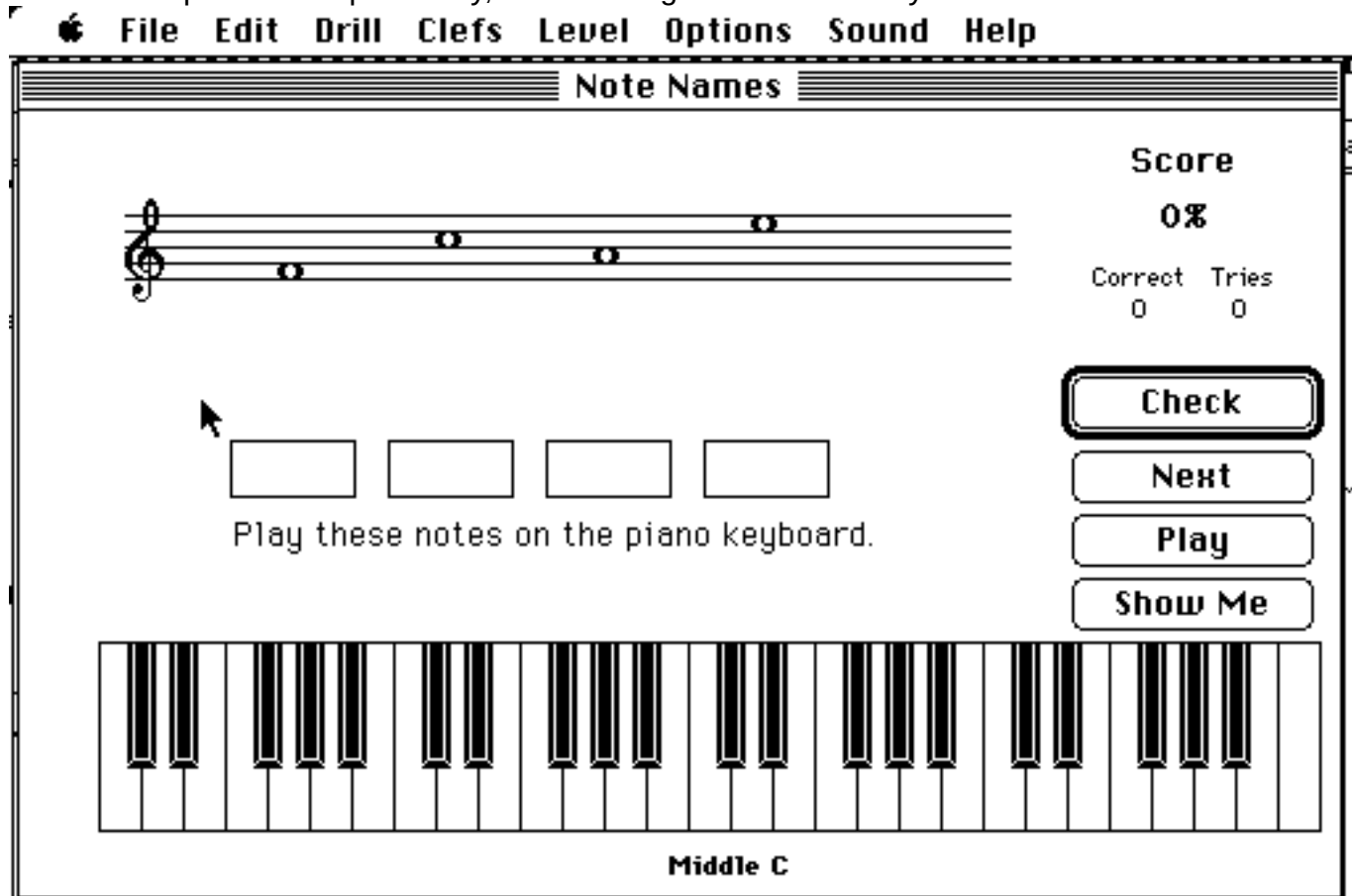
But *Music Lessons* doesn't stop there. For the esoteric, the curious, or the scholarly, *Music Lessons* offers to teach you all of the modes, types of scales that went out of fashion in the 17th century but now are enjoying a

renaissance among contemporary composers. Modes arose out of the particular tunings of instruments used in the Middle Ages—the logarithmic distances between the tones were not equal, as they are now on any standardly tuned piano, but tuned to provide particularly harmonious intervals (between C & G, for instance) and rather ugly intervals (C & E). Modes, then, were scales that started on some note other than C and rose in a different pattern of whole and half steps. These different modes were believed to convey different emotional contents, just as the today’s minor scales are considered “darker” than the major scale.

Oddly, though, MiBAC offers no alternative tunings (obviously through the Mac sound output, and not through your MIDI instrument), and so in some sense learning the Lydian, Phrygian, Locrian, etc. modes is something of an academic exercise. One might quickly become adept at playing these variations, but without receiving the original sonic impact. *Music Lessons*’ “Help” section is also rather odd. While it explains, for instance, that a particular jazz scale consists of a certain pattern of whole and half steps, it doesn’t explain why these patterns exist—namely, because of certain natural patterns of overtones that exist with any vibrating wire or column of air. The physics of music can go a long way towards explaining the theory, and yet there is little evidence that the author of *Music Lessons* knows much of the history or physics of music.

MiBAC also offers a section on timing—teaching the number of beats for each note for each time signature. Unfortunately, MiBAC offers no way to input one’s answer through an accompanying keyboard, or even through MiBAC’s screen keyboard. Instead, one must click one of a number of radio buttons to respond. Again, while a student will be able to say, for instance, that in 3/2 time a dotted sixteenth note is worth 3/16 beat, it’s not clear that

that student would be able to clap out the rhythm of a measure of music. Unfortunately this is one piece of evidence adding to a general impression that the interface needs more work. In reading notes and playing them at my keyboard, I had to turn back to the keyboard or mouse to ask the computer to check my answer. This is rather inefficient, and it's too bad the author didn't figure out a way to say "answer complete" though the keyboard. Oddly, too, the record of progress section is less than intuitive, and MiBAC does not keep a running total of your previous results as you play—instead, the results have to be updated independently, either during or at the end of your session.



In my general impression, *Practica Musica* is richer and more fun to use. While it lacks some of the variations of scales that *Music Lessons*

offers, and gives one a smaller on-screen keyboard (and, simultaneously, less range on a real keyboard), it has other strengths. Among these is an included workbook entitled *Windows on Music*. This book, written by Jeffrey Evans, the programmer, is exhaustive, interesting, and charming. Evans' depth of knowledge is that of the truly enthusiastic scholar, and he communicates as well as Ronald Reagan.

*Practica Musica* roughly takes up roughly the same amount of memory as *Music Lessons*, but it seems to contain more. In addition to different sorts of scales, its ear training capacities are greater. It allows inputs of rhythm through the keyboard, for instance. It also has a store of familiar tunes that you can use to test and improve your ear training. *Practica Musica* thus tests one on real melodies, a natural activity. It also trains on ear recognition of chords—minor, major, sevenths.

Its scoring system is also innovative. *Practica Musica* accumulates a running total for each testing section, based both on accuracy and speed. When you reach a sufficient total, *Practica Musica* tells you you're sufficiently masterful. This, of course, is all we can hope for in music—who can play a passage perfectly every time? Horowitz's Moscow concerts a few years ago were riddled with errors.

*Practica Musica* also has four different sounds—harpsichord, organ, piano, and drums. These sounds are particularly revealing when one takes advantage of *Practica Musica*'s alternative tunings, showing how dead, for example, the harmony of C and G is in a Pythagorean tuning. A relatively pure sound, like that from a pipe organ, makes the dissonances and consonances more obvious.

*Practica Musica*'s MIDI interface seems to work pretty well, most of the time, except that it's difficult to get it play chords on your MIDI

keyboard and have it play through the Mac's speaker—though it does fine with a series of notes. When sound is routed exclusively through an external keyboard, the interface is excellent.

The Mac interface is also very good, with the exception of the small keyboard. There is also an innovative set of displays: It is possible, for example, to display a staff superimposed on the keyboard, or the entire set of alternate (flatted and sharped) names for the notes.

All in all, *Practica Musica* is both useful and fun. I have no doubt as I continue to work with it that I will learn a lot about the composition and deep theory of music. But both programs have much to recommend them. As I said, I believe that *Music Lessons* is good for the student who wishes to become lightning quick with the various scales and modes in the musical canon. For the student who wants more complete training on harmony and ear training, *Practica Musica* is the clear choice.