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Does Miso Music Have Its Place In Music Education? Part I

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Introduction

Featured in ABC’s television show the Shark Tank, Aviv Grill caught the attention of one of the show’s investors while pitching his innovative mobile application called Miso Music.¹ The application was launched in May 2011 just months after it won the People’s Choice Award at the 2010 TechCrunch Disrupt.² After gaining more

1 http://abc.go.com/shows/shark-tank
publicity on the Shark Tank, the creation of Miso Music may just be the tip of the iceberg in creating more educational music technologies. The application is different from being a music video game such as Guitar Hero or SingStar in that it establishes a constructive, educational mode rather than a competitive environment based on achieving high scores or winning a game. Grill, who founded his own company Miso Media that develops music technology and mobile applications, came up with the idea of doing something new with teaching music through Miso Music. According to the company’s website, Miso Media’s aim is to revolutionize music education and music notation, and to teach people how to play music in creative new ways. With the application being fairly new, Miso Music’s implication for music education has yet to be seen. Music video games, on the other hand, and their potential in the traditional music education curriculum have already been studied to some extent. A study has shown that interactive music technologies are changing the ways traditional music activities are approached in secondary education. Ultimately, Miso Music may have some potential in bridging a traditional music education with digital technologies in the secondary classroom. This article will provide a short user review of the Miso Music application on the iPhone and discuss how its technology might revolutionize music education and music notation as the company has claimed.

User Review

The application in question is officially called Miso Music: Plectrum. A plectrum, commonly known as a pick, here refers to the various virtual instruments that the application offers, including several plucked string instruments such as guitars, ukuleles, and banjos. The application brings the experience of learning how to play an instrument to a new level. The application enables users to hold the iPhone horizontally as the touch screen displays an interactive fretboard. Holding the iPhone in the same orientation as a guitar makes learning music very intuitive and interactive. The size of the iPhone, however, does make chords and strumming somewhat odd compared to playing on a real instrument. As an alternative, the application can be used in synch with a real guitar, ukulele, or banjo, utilizing its polyphonic note detection and real-time feedback technology. In other words, Miso Music will listen to the notes being played on a real string instrument. The accuracy with which Miso Music listens can also be adjusted. This technology is very helpful when trying to learn a particular piece of music because it will always make sure the correct notes

4 http://www.misomedia.com/
5 Ibid
or chords are played. Different levels of music are offered through Miso Media’s online store and vary in genre. Once a piece of music is downloaded, it is stored on the device and ready to be learned.

Traditionally, music is read on a five-line staff littered with notated pitches and rhythms. Miso Music, on the other hand, employs a unique notation resembling that of a guitar tablature and that of Guitar Hero. The notes that are to be played on certain strings scroll across the screen and can be read horizontally. To finger a particular chord, the fretboard will highlight areas where the fingers belong. At the same time, the scrolling notation indicates which string is to be played by scrolling down the respective string and indicating which fret that the particular note belongs to on the fretboard by displaying the fret number. Overall, this unique music notation is more interactive than traditional notation, as far as guitar tablatures go. The visual scrolling of the notes gives a sense of rhythm and tempo, which is not that obvious when looking at a black and white piece of sheet music. If the wrong note or chord is played, the scrolling will not continue until the application hears the correct pitches. The notation, while interactive and informative, challenges users to play the correct notes the first time rather than skipping over them. So far, Miso Music seems to have improved on the intuitive, scrolling notation concept seen in Guitar Hero, perhaps revolutionizing music notation overall. (See following page for pictures)
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Personally, I think Miso Music lacks the capability of teaching significant musical skill or knowledge other than simple placements of fingers on a fret. Very little is taught in terms of hand position, frame, form, or technique. The application cannot completely replace the role of a music instructor if users really want to know how to play an instrument. For what it is worth, however, the application seems very valuable in developing a sense of rhythm and pitch. Miso Music seems more appropriate as a tool which teachers may use during instruction, using its alternate form of notation.

**Miso Music and Music Education**

Although Miso Music’s place in the music education curriculum has yet to be explored, a study done in Australia indicates that similar music technologies might have potential in the secondary classroom. The British Journal of Music Education recently published an article discussing the effects of interactive music video games on a group of children aged 9-11 years old from a music education perspective. The two specialist music teachers who were also involved in the study allowed their students to use music video games such as Guitar Hero and SingStar. These two games, which particularly focus on pitch and rhythm, are just a few of the many other common games presently available. For instance, Rock Band, Dance Dance Revolution, Wii Music, Karaoke Revolution and Lips are examples of other pitch- and rhythm-based music games. Even though the Miso Music application does not really operate like a video game, it does offer different levels of difficulty in the type of music one can learn. In this case, the user is in complete control in terms of what difficulty level they want to choose. This offers a sense of motivation for users, especially if the piece they are learning is familiar or of interest to them. Ultimately, the findings of the study suggest that there may be a place for these types of music technologies in music education if further developments of the games are made. This is partly due to the fact that no single game is able to teach all aspects of music and its various elements. Some of the aforementioned games, although having freestyle modes, lack any compositional or other creative way of manipulating sound elements. Essentially, music technologies such as Miso Music may serve only as an introductory or supplementary tool in the music classroom.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
According to one of the music teachers involved in the study, the video games instill knowledge about music rather than teach how to play musically. The teacher was aware that arguing whether playing the video games is music making or not is a completely other debate. Nonetheless, there are fundamental transferable skills learned in these music video games. The games also keep the students engaged, learning about music that is relevant to their daily lives. The teacher also mentions that a high level of coordination skills and rhythm is needed to play games like Guitar Hero.\(^9\) Using Miso Music also needs some level of coordination. More importantly, the ability for someone to learn directly on a real instrument while using the application eliminates any need to transfer skills learned on the mobile device to the real instrument.

If used for the purpose of learning about different genres of music, developing a sense of rhythm and pitch, and some level of coordination, Miso Music may possibly serve as a valuable music educational tool in today’s secondary classroom. Therefore, Miso Music looks very practical from a music education perspective.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, Miso Music has the potential to make the music education curriculum relevant and to keep students engaged. If used in the classroom, Miso Music can bridge music, creativity, and technology in one place. Introducing polyphonic note detection, feedback technology, and a unique scrolling music notation into the secondary-school music classroom could perhaps be the next way of facilitating music education for young people. Miso Music’s implication on secondary music education, however, has yet to be seen. Further discussion will continue in an upcoming article and include another review of Miso Music on the iPad.

\(^9\) Ibid.