



Andy Nathan assists students with the new MIDI at Holy Comforter Episcopal School. AMANDA THOMPSON

‘Digital paintbrush’

Holy Comforter students dip into language of music with keyboards

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Holy Comforter Episcopal School was founded in 1955 with 25 kindergarten students and one teacher. It now boasts an enrollment of more than 525 pre-kindergarten through eighth graders. A lot has changed in the last 65 years and though HCES has retained many long-held traditions, it has modernized to meet changing needs of its students. ■ The latest addition is a newly constructed space called “The Commons” which will house an auditorium, art gallery and dining area. ■ Andy Nathan explained, “unlike a lot of these spaces which are really cafeterias you can perform and show artwork in, this really is an art space that you eat in.” Nathan is one of the music teachers at HCES and he is especially pleased about the acoustics in the space as well as state-of-the-art lighting and sound capabilities. The specialized technology is matched by a unique program he recently introduced to this middle school music students.

Nathan applied for and received an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. With the grant funds, he was able to purchase five musical instrument digital interface (MIDI) keyboards for students to use for both digital composition and digital performance.

MIDI is a language that allows computers, musical instruments and other hardware to communicate. A MIDI set-up includes the interface, the language that MIDI data is transmitted in, and the connections needed to communicate between hardware.

“The keyboard doesn’t make any sound in its own,” explained Nathan. “It’s basically considered a controller. Any musician can take their training and use that to control a sound bank.” The MIDI keyboards are connected to an existing set of school iPads and students use a software system called Ga-

rageBand which features a complete sound library of instruments.

“It’s like an orchestra. Imagine if Mozart could be writing his clarinet parts on piano and spitting it out this way as opposed to dipping quill in ink. And if he didn’t like clarinet, let’s try an oboe instead. The palette is endless. It’s like a digital paintbrush for music.”

Though Nathan doesn’t intend for the MIDI to supplant traditional music making skills, he pointed out that the keyboards offer a “plug and play” instant gratification and an opportunity to explore harmonic sequence and musical literacy.

Computers and music are similar in many ways. Nathan said with music, “you’re learning a symbolic language, the most universally written language, historically and, at any given moment. It’s a really neat way to interact locally and globally. Whether it’s digital or ana-



Will Winsor believes everyone should have an understanding of music. AMANDA THOMPSON

log, live performance or sending your piece halfway around the world, that’s the language.”

Ray Hounshell is an eighth-grader who has experience with a few different musical instruments but enjoys playing bells most. Several years ago, he started developing programs or “code” for his own original computer games. “I noticed that I didn’t have any music for the game, so I found BeepBox and I started making music.”

BeepBox is a free online tool for sketching and sharing chiptune melodies. Chiptune is a style of synthesized electronic music often found in vintage arcade machines, computers and video game consoles. “It’s very simple music. Kind of mechanical beeps,” explained Ray.

That experience has led Ray to start composing other types of digital music and he’s especially enthralled by

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Music

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musical patterns. “They can be super dynamic, unique and varied. It can be ominous, intensive or calm and soothing. Music can be whatever it wants to be. You can make anything.”

Will Winsor shared similar sentiments and said “there’s so many different types of music and there are a lot of different things you can pursue with it. It’s just nice trying different things.” The eighth-grader plays piano and guitar and he’s observed that the “transfer between the two instruments is a good way to make music.”

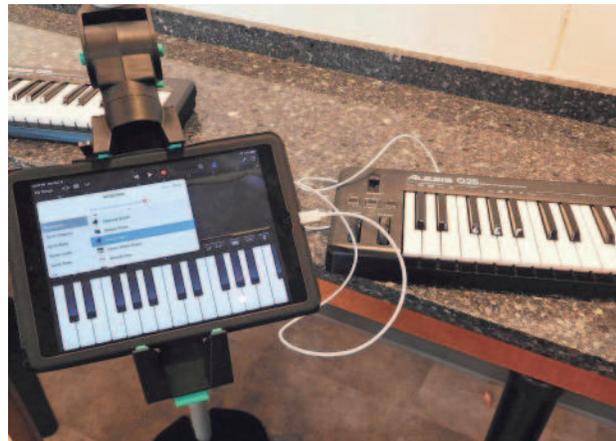
Because the MIDI keyboards allow students to access dozens of different instrument sounds, there are countless possibilities to discover the intersections between them all. Will believes that exploring music “helps you with every aspect of your life, even if you can’t really tell or understand how. It’s a good thing to know, even if you’re not super dedicated, it’s good to have that basis in the back of your mind. It’s important that everyone has an understanding of music.”

Nathan agrees and said “there’s music flowing through kids’ minds and hearts probably before they can even speak. The question is, how are they going to, as middle schoolers, translate that into the music making environment. Regardless of what skill level students are coming in with, what particular genre they’re interested in, or how much historical knowledge of musicians or composers they might have, it’s important that they have a place. There’s no reason why we can’t sit down and do this. We’re supposed to meet the world and our students where they are. This technology helps us do that.”

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



Ray Hounshell is eager to expand his digital composition skills. AMANDA THOMPSON



An MIDI setup ready for musical exploration by HCES students. AMANDA THOMPSON