

On Quill & Ink and Music Technology

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / December 13, 2008

Some end of year considerations for both customers and developers.

As we close out the year and look forward to 2009, I'm feeling troubled inside at trends I'm seeing in this tight economy as it pertains to the music technology sector. So in true Don Quixote fashion – some windmills I think need to be tilted, or at least considered over coffee.

THE NEED TO READ SOME MARKETING BOOKS

I know, this sounds snotty, but it's offered as an encouragement. The downspiraling economy has proven that composers are not recession proof. Only a statistical few are getting by on royalty checks. Where there is no cash, or credit cards are maxed out, sales slide. Yet various government statistics point out that 30% of US adults 15+ are amateur musicians. If you apply that stat against the number of homes with computers, that's tens of millions of potential customers.

Boomtown. Potentially. But it's not.

I've published these numbers before. One year Steinberg posted on their web site that they had 60,000 installs globally of Cubase 5. When Vision went out of business, they had 30,000 installs worldwide (as published long ago on Harmony Central).

In 1999, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that [half of all US homes](#) had a personal computer. Again, that was in 1999. Today the figure is even higher.

You can guess this story without a calculator – music technology is not getting broad sales breakthrough.

In a small vertical industry, these are big numbers. But when examined from the viewpoint of the number of amateur musicians in the U.S. alone, they're disturbing because they strongly suggest at some point there's a bottleneck that's blocking musically driven customers from making the “dip” into working with music technology programs.

A comparison. According to the [New York Times](#), in its first week of release beginning October 26, 2008, *Guitar Hero: World Tour* moved 534,000 units. A year previously, *Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock* sold 1.4 million units opening week.

Granted. It's a game. But consider the cost of the technology needed to run the game and to see the game in order to play the game.

Are we getting to a place where people would rather spend hours *pretending* they're making music rather than actually learning *how* to make music?

For our segment, some facts to consider. And they're important facts to consider about the health of the music technology industry because one morning, none of us wants to wake and discover that a major developer is out of business. Then where would be with thousands of dollars of hardware supporting thousands of dollars of programs that are suddenly gone? Remember the announced cancellation of GigaStudio Summer 2008?

Fact. Virtual instrument sales follow sequencer sales. This is an ugly sales fact.

Fact. With rare exception, a customer cannot operate a virtual instrument (or software instrument as Apple Logic calls them) without a sequencing program. So until a customer learns to sequence, these other programs sit.

Fact. Even with 30% of U.S. adults being amateur musicians, music technology programs are not mass market items like Microsoft Word or Adobe Photoshop.

Fact. The sequencing recording program with the largest base is GarageBand which comes with every Mac. In Q3 2008, according to [Apple Insider](#), Apple sold a projected 2.7 million Macs.

Out of curiosity: Where is the instruction set on each developer's web site showing how to implement their program with GarageBand?

Question: *So where's the music technology broad based sales breakthrough?*

The answer is pretty obvious. It's not there. So what to do?

A suggestion.

I don't possess the answers. But I do think that there are five books that are must reading to challenge and stir conventional marketing thinking as it pertains to our world of music production.

The first is *Marketing High Technology* by William Davidow who came out of HP. Though written in 1986 (22 years ago), it's particularly useful for understanding product development and what happens when a technology peaks and all you can do is add features to it.

The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell is about finding people who really love your product (or your music) enough to talk positively about it and so bring customers (commissions, projects, fans) into your fold.

Wanted: *Mavens*.

Critics are everywhere (just read the blogs on the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *CNN* and lots of others). But Mavens are in short supply. And that's who we need as both people and companies comprised of people. It's the holiday season and maybe you've got some spiked eggnog, so let's be honest (*real* in an older version of the English language) and admit that we *need* people who *will* really say good things about us and our work, and *mean* it.

Look how easy it is in the music forums, all of which are internationally populated thanks to the web, for customers to criticize a product then hide anonymously behind a handle or avatar so that you don't know who your accuser is. Let's put it into an historical perspective. One signer of the *Declaration of Independence* was John Hancock, not *Connecticut BoatBoy*. When Britain's King George III read the *Declaration of Independence*, he and his Intelligence Division had the names of several dozen individuals to look for.

It takes courage to sign your name.

So when the criticism builds, it's the Mavens that now are a company's first line of public support. Their posts aren't always long, and maybe they're not as technologically accurate as a developer would like to

see. But these Mavens care enough to risk *their* necks in this critical world to be in their pitching for their favs. And that merits an encouraging word, maybe a card, or a PM, or even a \$5 gift certificate to some coffee joint or *some* place to let people know who've invested cash in your business that yes, they are important, especially when other forum readers accuse Mavens of somehow being in cahoots with the company being criticized.

Said Robert Townsend, a past-president of Avis in his book *Up the Organization*, "Thanks. A neglected form of compensation."

This next book will give a black eye but it's worth the ice pack – *Winning* by Jack Welch, the past president of General Electric (GE). An Amazon customer summed it up well when he stated the book covers empowering others, asking questions, tapping into the potential of all of your associates, choosing integrity and candor over charts, graphs, and politics, and spending more time in action instead of planning and posturing budgets.

I've found too often in music technology that companies and composers don't do these things enough. Our focus is so much on whether or not something is cool. That seems to be the guiding light. So we struggle when we see something that was cool, fail. "It was so cool, man, how could it fail?" A good reason to read the book and ponder the questions.

Who Says Elephants Can't Dance by Lou Gerstner explains oh too clearly our music technology sector by explaining what went on before in Silicon Valley. True to history the crud we encounter with buggy software happened elsewhere first. As we march our way through 64-bit technology and Snow Leopard on the Mac and Windows 7 on the PC, we're going to see more bugginess because that's what happens when software and technology transitions. And we need to see what happened originally in Silicon Valley to better understand, and even better, stave off what's happening in music technology – especially if companies would like to see broader sales breakthrough.

But is it important for songwriters and composers that more people in Wheeling, West Virginia or Ardmore, Oklahoma buy these products? Only if you want to pay lower prices.

So if you want to know where the theory of shipping unfinished software came from, start here.

Fifth is *Life's A Campaign* by Chris Matthews of MSNBC's *Hardball*. You don't think there's politics in the music industry, do you?

COMPANY DISCLOSURE VS. CUSTOMER DISCOVERY

It's so much easier for a company tech support center to tell the customer the problem is their computer, rather than taking proper ownership and laying out the critical facts ahead of time to avoid problems which lowers customer support costs which in turn helps keep the little company profitable.

For example, minimum system requirements.

When clients ask for my definition of that phrase, I give this answer, "It opens. Anything after that is grace and luck."

Cynical? Of course. But I give this answer because way too often a customer's expectation is that MSR means the least needed specs for the software to do everything it's advertised to do, when in point of fact, MSR means something different for every product. So when customers read about successful systems running with 8-cores or dual Xeons that are getting these killer results, and their Dual Cores are just

piddling along, they feel gypped, and so they complain. The trend is easily reversed by a company clearly stating the specs by which the system runs at optimum.

But here's the sales issue for some companies and why you don't see this too often: *fear*. More accurately, *sales fear*.

The fear is that a customer, usually an amateur, will look at the system's "real" specs and not buy the product out of concern that their system won't run it. Consequently, every company, including audio card makers, has its own unique "minimum system requirements" and you don't know what that really means until the system is built, the software is installed and you begin testing. That's when you really *know*. I need to restate that. It's *only* when you really know.

The result in the marketplace – lack of customer confidence in buying anything because they're not sure who to trust and what to believe regarding system specs. Forums have lots of lurkers who don't even register much less post. So when they see an established pro asking help questions that they're not getting answered from the OEMs, what should potential customers think? And I don't just mean newbies. Pros lurk on forums to see what's buggy and what's not.

Result: either deferred buying, or, "We'll just skip it and buy a big screen TV that the whole family can enjoy." If you don't think it happens, think again.

Something to consider. When the Vienna Symphonic Library first released their Vienna Instruments, the company posted a stress test that included testing their own products even on a PIII. The stress test was a confidence builder because it said, "If you have *this*, expect *that*." People write into the Vienna forum with their proposed specs for a system. The Vienna guys graciously offer opinions which includes *yea* or *nay*. Think about it for a minute. Isn't it much better when the company tells you what their software is working on rather than guessing and hoping you're getting it right if you decide to build a system just to run it?

Cakewalk is another company that does this with their testing labs for Sonar. They also recommend several companies who build DAWs, not just one. Much appreciated.

At the same time, it would be useful for the majors to send out their software to system developers who can beta test it, too. When a person does buy a DAW, they often want to buy it locally. So cutting loose a few NFRs can't hurt when it's to qualified companies.

Setting up multitimbrally is yet another time and confidence killer. It would be a refreshing change to see sequencing companies on their own, demonstrate how to set up multitimbrally with the leading software instrument libraries. It would be equally welcome for software instrument developers to post their own tutorials for setting up multitimbrally instead of copping the attitude, "We created it, *you* figure it out."

Sure, it could take 1-2 business days to create this extra documentation and post it as a downloadable PDF. But how many *thousands* of customer man-hours would be saved with 16 hours of company effort? Logic is a great case in point. I've been collecting tutorials on setting up multitimbrally in Logic so that each track can be assigned to its own audio channel. They range from the simple to the enormously complex. Does an end user really have to buy a \$50 book to find out this basic usage information?

Why should a customer have to discover that which the developer is easily able to teach as part of the basic training?

THE DREAM OF A SOLE MACHINE

What professionals and hopefuls both want is one machine that will do it all. Their cry: “Are we there yet?”

For the answer, we must recall the words of the unnamed New York City cab driver who once explained to a customer, “You can’t get there from here.”

The reason *why* is non-musical: system conflicts and memory. To explain. In Los Angeles for film/TV production, you’re always under pressure. So the fastest way to produce a film cue is to have multiple computers so that one or two computers contain all the string programs, one brass, one effects, one something else, and so on. Once the music is written and keyed into the sequencing program, all the computers fire at once so that the entire composition (cue) is recorded in one “take”.

Depending on how efficiently a composer works, that’s a studio with six to nine computers (memo to Hopefuls – don’t choke. The price of a music computer averages out to be about the cost of buying a professional synth. So instead of having a bunch of synths, we now have a bunch of computers containing enough software to equal 10-20 synths, or more!).

So you can imagine how much more efficient it would be, could be, *is*, with just a single computer on which to do all your work.

This is where system conflicts appear. Program A works differently than Program B on operating system Q even when both programs are on different hard drives.

Why?

We don’t know. What we know is that it’s not working. So the solution is a second or possibly a third computer.

If you’re not doing orchestral work, you can probably get away with one computer. But you need a motherboard capable of handling up to 16GB RAM and the computer case needs to handle four or more hard drives (which should be BIG), with a power supply more robust than 550 Watts.

If you are going to do orchestral work and your goal is to compete in Hollywood (California, not Florida), then you’ll probably need three machines.

And did I mention a mixing board and effects yet?

DON’T SHOULD ON YOURSELF

An email: “I have a 2.0 GHz machine with 2GB RAM and my X (library/sequencing program of choice) *should* work! Why isn’t it?”

A possible answer: “In the Yellow Pages of the phone book, look under *Palm Reader*.”

Another possible answer: “The Doctor is IN, 5 cents please.”

You can’t get around it. Whether you’re a professional composer or a hopeful, you do have to learn how to buy before you buy, and then, you have to learn how to operate your system along with continuing to develop your composition skills.

The more you keep saying, “Well! It *should*...” the more your disappointment and blood pressure will go up.

It should. But it doesn't. *Yet*.

The basics are 8GB of RAM, fast processor, lots of hard drives with one manufacturer per hard drive since each company's products stream audio differently. And that can cause conflicts, yes, even on the Mac. But as already reported, no one knows what those conflicts are because none of the sequencing companies are doing the testing, the developers aren't doing the testing, and the companies developing digital audio workstations shouldn't be put in the position to do the R&D necessary to tell composers how to set up and work efficiently *and* proficiently.

So in the end, it's the composers who do the testing and graciously post the system specs, and when appropriate, the parts list for systems that are working.

As a composer, my view is that the buck first stops with sequencing companies (which includes notation programs), because without these products, virtual instruments can't operate effectively.

A reflection. On my Christmas list is a set of CDs containing all the works of Bach for only \$99.95. How many CDs might that be?

167.

And all that music was written with quill and pen usually by candlelight at night, and many times, someone had to manually draw the lines for the music paper.

And yet, look at all that productivity. The Mozart collection was 100 CDs.

What do we say to this?

First, we have to remember that music technology in and of itself isn't an end in itself. It's a means to an end which is enabling and empowering composers and songwriters to produce and hear their music, preferably without the drama.

Second, the sequencing companies need to come together at NAMM with virtual instrument developers and audio card manufacturers, and after defining the common technical issues all are concerned by on both the Mac and PC, agree to meet at least annually, and within that, agree to a common set of implementation standards.

It seems that many companies try to corner the market by creating a closed, proprietary system. The message doesn't seem to be getting out – it's not working. As composers, we need to mix 'n match to create our work.

This means we *must* have some things that work under a single standard.

To achieve that, we must have some inter-industry cooperation, with a lot less hubris. It's not MIDI-2 we need, it's System Implementation 100 that's the requirement.

That can only be achieved with intentional co-operation. And yes, Apple and Microsoft, that includes you, too, because you're both a part of the problem because you develop the operating systems everything runs under.

END OF EDITORIAL

Here's who put me on this train for the final column of 2008: Leonard Bernstein. I had a pinched nerve in my upper back all of November. Doctors orders: no typing, no piano, no writing.

Lovely.

So, I found a Christmas present Caroline had bought me that I hadn't watched yet – *The Unanswered Question* by Leonard Bernstein. It was the Norton Lecture Series one year at Harvard. You can find several online at YouTube. For six DVDs he talked about music and Mozart. Not a word about velocity. Just music.

As I began to heal, I took joy again in picking up my conductor's baton and working my way through Mahler's *First*, and the first movement of Mahler's *Sixth*. Then I began studying the first movement of Mahler's *First*. I've probably listened to it two or three dozen times.

And afterwards, I sit back in my chair, or sometimes on the bed when my back is iced, and I just think about it and replay it in my head, and stretch my imagination without the *whrrr* of hard drives in the background.

I relax. I smile. The pencil and the score paper, they beckon me. I write.

Merry Christmas.

This article was previously published at SonicControl.tv