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Technology gives boost to students learning guitar

Las Vegas Academy musicians to show off skills at concert

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Smooth guitar sounds trickle out of Bill Swick's classroom at the Las Vegas Academy. Inside, the students are playing a medley of songs with their silent guitars.

Since about mid-November, Swick's guitar students have been using Yamaha's LC3 Music Lab technology as opposed to each teen playing an individual acoustic guitar as they did before. The technology allows Swick to teach his students all at once, one-on-one, or split them into smaller groups.

The system pairs electric guitars with headphones and wiring that are hooked up to a central control in the front of Swick's classroom. From his chair, Swick can control whose guitar is heard outside the headphones with a push of a button. All the while, students can hear themselves playing in their headphones.

"It's really top-notch technology," Swick said.

Swick said his students are the only pupils in the U.S. using the technology.

A few years ago, Yamaha sent a group of engineers to the Las Vegas Academy to meet with Swick about the needs of guitar classes. He told them he wanted a similar setup to what traditional group piano classes have. In October, Yamaha called him and said the company had what he needed.

After spending 70 hours wiring his classroom, the LC3 Music Lab was ready for his guitar students' use.

While practicing, Swick's students play "Johnny B. Goode" while junior Jordan Sasse sings the tune. The guitars they're playing have open-body frames, solid necks and sound like full-bodied electric guitars.

"Our performances are getting a lot better," Sasse, 17, said.

Sasse explained that with the acoustic guitars his class used before, mistakes were covered up more than they are now with the silent guitars. The guitar major said the musicians also get a lot more volume from their new guitars, and there's not as much feedback from the more technological instruments.

"We're better, I think, because (Swick) can hear all of our mistakes," senior Kady Sutton, 17, said.

While in class, Swick can isolate specific students to determine who is doing what at random times without forewarning.

"I get to hear all the mistakes I make when I'm learning a new song or taking an assessment," senior Chris Sierchio, 17, said.

For Swick's part, he has to give each student a playing assessment every week. When he was administering them before, students lost time practicing because he couldn't hear the test-taker with everyone else playing. Now, everyone can practice silently while the test-taker plays on an acoustic guitar at the front of the room.

"The silent guitars by themselves are way cool," Swick said.

Since using the guitars, Swick and his students have seen a lot of benefits but have found some issues, too. The guitar instructor said the sound coming out of the headphones should be louder, and there is no button to mute the headphones, which needs to be there. To rectify the problem in his classroom, Swick has his students mute their headphones until someone needs to sing along. Also, Swick said, the system definitely should be wireless.

"If it was wireless, it would be smokin'," Swick said. "It's still the coolest thing ever."

In all, the guitar technology cost the academy about \$50,000.

On March 16, the guitar students are performing "Guitar Heroes" at 7 p.m. in the Performing Arts Center at the Las Vegas Academy, 315 S. 7th St. The high school kids will showcase music from some of the greatest guitarists who ever played, including Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Les Paul and The Beatles. Cost to attend the 75-minute concert is \$7.

For information, call 799-7800, ext. 5127.

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