

4 HOT LESSONS WITH FLAVITZ / WINWOOD SYNTHI SECRETS

Keyboard

OVER



www.keyboardmag.com

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE



CMP

United Business Media

ALLEGRO RAINBOW PIANO WIZARD

KEYBOARD INSTRUCTION COMPUTER GAME (PC)

by Michael Gallant



Colors match those on the supplied stickers you can apply to a MIDI keyboard.

Play the correct note while the egg is between the green and red lines. The zone between green and yellow represents ideal timing, and distance between lines is user-adjustable.

Score: 12/442 (2%)
Song File: vanhalen_jump
Progress: 40/1477 (3%)

Tempo 83
Time Signature 4/4

Eggs — um, notes, “hatch” when played correctly.

Moving eggs stand for notes, and fly towards the keyboard at a tempo you specify. Several eggs in an even row indicates a chord.

In the Premier edition, you can load any MIDI file as the basis of a game, though the manufacturer is not liable for social ridicule resulting from the use of overplayed '80s hits.

With its vertical layout and friendly dinosaurs, this screen is the easiest of Piano Wizard's four levels.

PROS

Addictive and fun. Easy to install, configure, learn, and use. Visually appealing interface. Can be useful to both children and adults. Good variety of songs and exercises. In Premier edition, student can use Piano Wizard to practice any MIDI track.

CONS

When using traditional notation, accidentals are hard to read. Translation of MIDI data into traditional notation can lead to awkward note spellings. Currently no Mac version. Potentially ineffective for color-blind students.

Premier version: \$199.99 with Keystation 49e, \$149.95 with eKeys 37, \$139.95 with USB/MIDI Combo interface. Easy Mode version: \$149.95 with Keystation 49e, \$99.95 with eKeys 37, \$79.95 with USB/MIDI Combo interface.

Allegro Rainbow
www.pianowizard.com

Hatching dinosaur eggs in a video game fantasy world equals . . . learning to play and read music? That's the goal with Allegro Rainbow's Piano Wizard, a cleverly disguised educational tool that aims to make practice feel like play. Is it right for you or your students?

THE GAME

Piano Wizard offers several distinct levels of difficulty, each of which incrementally moves the student one step closer to sight-reading fluency. At the most basic level, the game offers the choice of four lush, well-illustrated backdrops or “worlds:” a futuristic city, an underwater reef, outer space (complete with aliens and asteroids), and a prehistoric dinosaur landscape. Across the top of the screen runs a virtual piano keyboard, each of the twelve notes in an octave color-coded to match stickers applied to your physical MIDI keyboard. Allegro Rainbow sells packages that include MIDI controllers, if you don't already have one.

After you choose which song or exercise to play, the game begins: Various objects fly from the bottom of the screen towards the keyboard at the top, and you can choose from four options in each world; in dinosaur-land, for example, the objects can be eggs, ladybugs, beetles, or centipedes. Play the correct note on your MIDI keyboard just as the object crosses the corresponding key on the screen and you've got it: The note sounds and the object transforms, say, from a dinosaur egg into a flying pterodactyl. Oh, and if you hit enough of the objects at just the right times, you might just hear yourself inadvertently playing a song. Cool, no?

AUDITION



Ruby (right) and Grace Robinson (left), aged seven and nine, put Piano Wizard to the test.

CUSTOMIZING THE WIZARD

Not only can you change Piano Wizard's objects and backdrops, you can also include fingerings and note names with each note. During play, the left and right arrows on the computer keyboard adjust tempo, and hitting the Escape key accesses option menus at any time. Other cool features include beat lines and guidelines that appear between a note and its appropriate virtual-keyboard key, as well as special challenges that gradually speed up the tempo on you as you play, test your »

Once you've got the basics down, the next level of difficulty comes when the whole screen is rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise, with objects streaming from right to left. Resembling a typical piano-roll MIDI data environment in bizarro world, this intermediate level aims to familiarize players with reading musical notes left to right, as they appear in traditional notation. The third level of difficulty replaces the cartoon objects with real musical notes. They can still be color-coded to ease the transition, and the notes still move like they did in the first two levels.

Master that and you're ready to ditch the colors altogether in the fourth and most advanced level, where traditional notation moves across the screen as if it were scrolling sheet music. Two small areas for improvement: First, when Piano Wizard translates a song's MIDI data to notation, it doesn't know the difference between C# and D♭, so awkward spellings can occur in songs that have a lot of accidentals. Also, Piano Wizard's sharp and flat symbols are small and, to my eyes, a little hard to read.

IN USE

Navigation within the program was intuitive and very much like using a web browser. I also dug the excellent slideshows and narrated QuickTime tutorials — especially the one titled "Secret Agenda" that explains the designers' teaching strategy — as well as the overall design and architecture of the game. Vibrant colors, big buttons, and engaging visuals are everywhere, and the level of artistry put into the worlds and objects is impressively high. Allegro Rainbow definitely nailed the "Ooh, shiny!" factor.

After getting the hang of Piano Wizard myself, I brought in the real experts: Ruby and Grace Robinson,

aged seven and nine, respectively. Both girls sing in a chorus, but don't read music or play the piano. Piano Wizard captured their attention, though, and they spent upwards of 45 minutes playing enthusiastically. At first, I adjusted tempos, changed songs, and did other managerial tasks, but after a brief while, they handled everything on their own. "Do you think this is something you'd get bored with after a few hours, or a few years?" I asked after they'd played a few rounds. "Years," replied Grace. "I want to get it right."

About halfway through their time on the program, Grace and Ruby discovered a clever way of... well, bending the rules: Mash all the keys up and down quickly for

VITAL STATS

VERSION REVIEWED

Premier Keystation 49e package.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Windows 98SE, ME, 2000, or XP, 733MHz or faster processor, 32MB video card, 200MB free hard drive space, Internet connection.

RECOMMENDED AGES

3 and older.

VERSIONS AVAILABLE

Easy Mode, includes 100 songs and exercises; Premier, includes an additional 100 songs and exercises.

INCLUDED ACCESSORIES

Keystation 49e Package: M-Audio Keystation 49e keyboard, USB cable; eKeys 37 Package: M-Audio eKeys 37, USB cable; USB/MIDI Combo: Uno 1x1 USB MIDI interface; all: color-coded keyboard stickers.

rhythmic precision, and so on.

If you go with the Premier edition of Piano Wizard, you can use the game to teach any MIDI file: Just drop it in your Piano Wizard "My Songs" folder and you're good to go. For teachers who are tech-savvy enough to create their own — and students who want to practice the MIDI files at www.keyboardmag.com — this is a great feature.

To see if I could stump it, I tried using Piano Wizard to help me practice Eddie Palmieri's dense, rhythmically complex solo on "Tin Tin Deo," from our Oct. '05 issue. After using the Note Stretching function to spread out the notation and make it legible, I was able to get Eddie's polyrhythms back into my fingers. Though Piano Wizard isn't directly intended for experienced players — or music magazine editors — I was pleasantly surprised to find I could still benefit from it.

the duration of the song and, chances are, you'll get a relatively high score. The harder and faster the song is, the less effective this technique becomes, though, and a teacher's supervision (or the student's desire to do it "the right way") can also thwart it. Allegro Rainbow told me they experimented with negative feedback for wrong notes, but took it out because it caused children to play less, and also that their play-testers quickly tired of getting a high score by "cheating."

Another expert witness to try Piano Wizard was 23-year-old event planner Lauren Armas, a self-described non-musician. "It was fun, and would have been more fun if I'd been playing it with a kid," she told me. "It seemed

CLAIM CHECK

According to Allegro Rainbow, "Piano Wizard is designed for 'the rest of us' who have always wanted to play a song, who have wanted to be a better musician, or who have found sight-reading difficult. As a video game, it's fun and interactive, making the repetition necessary for mastery of the game serve an educational purpose. The combination of an action-packed game and musical training makes Piano Wizard unique.

"Our biggest challenge is that as different and revolutionary as Piano Wizard is, people often underestimate it or assume it's just another piano tutorial, or a non-educational arcade game like Keyboard Mania. You really need to see it to grasp the potential, which is why we have so many video materials at our website.

"Piano Wizard's sweet spot is the 3- to 6-year old range because no one can reach children at that pre-literate stage the way we can, but the game's power is infinite, with the ability to download any music from rock to Rachmaninoff, making it universal for all ages and levels."

WIZARD ON THE MAC?

At press time, Allegro Rainbow was finalizing a Mac version for debut at Los Angeles' Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) convention on May 10. We're looking forward to getting our hands on a copy.

way more interesting than any piano lesson I ever had." Ernie Rideout, who taught music in public schools for many years before becoming *Keyboard's* editor in chief, was also impressed. "It improves kinesthetic response," he said. "It helps build the connection between a musical idea and fingers." Technical editor Steve Fortner added, "The transition between levels is so clever that you don't realize how much you're really learning, and it holds your attention well. That's unique among the video-game approaches to keyboard instruction that I've seen."

One final warning to teachers: If you have a color-blind student, be aware that Piano Wizard's effectiveness could be diminished, as the physical sticker colors are more pastel than vibrant, and might be difficult to read.

CONCLUSIONS

Fun and engaging, Piano Wizard has the potential to help young (and even not so young) beginners have a blast while interacting with a keyboard instrument on a regular basis — and this is no small accomplishment. Does it make traditional piano lessons obsolete? Not at all: There's a tremendous amount of knowledge of musicianship and technique that isn't covered here. Does the program excite kids about music and keyboards, help them build essential musical skills, and reinforce that practicing can be fun? Absolutely. **K**

Assistant editor Michael Gallant rawks.

See what's new at www.myspace.com/michaelgallant.