

Karaoke dokey: Software makes it easier to sing

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HACKENSACK, N.J. — Shower singers take note. Carry-A-Tune's Singing Coach software might give you enough confidence to belt out a tune with your clothes on. The company, which is based in Tampa, Fla., brought its latest learn-to-sing software to the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last month, and after several trips to the casino bar, I decided to give it a try.

Not one to sing willingly in public unless coaxed by my daughter, I took a deep breath before asking for the microphone and listening to the Carry-A-Tune folks' 15-second spiel.

The idea is this: You load the software onto your PC, plug in a microphone, and after the computer assesses your range (bass, tenor, soprano and so forth), you sing along, a la karaoke, with one significant difference. As the program played "Jingle Bells," it displayed a jiggy (in my case) line — in real-time — that represented my voice. I could see whether I was hitting the proper note.

At the end, I got a score (I rated a 61 out of 100, which I guessed was not bad after watching a man obviously proud of his singing voice get only six points higher).

Carry-A-Tune's latest product is a singing program for two, so you and your pals can learn to harmonize.

My upstairs neighbor, an Oberlin College grad and trained singer, sounded doubtful that a program could teach proper voice technique, and I have to agree. And I'm not sure it can take a tone-deaf person and get them on track.

But for a shower singer like me, it was fun to use, get a score and try to best it.

Keeping in the musical vein, another company showing its wares lured me in. MusicGiants, a Nevada-based business, offers an intriguing service — high-definition music downloads.

Although I own and use an iPod, I confess I was ignorant about those convenient MP3 files until a colleague recently set me straight. They are compressed, he noted (which I know), so while they sound fine on tiny ear buds, they don't sound as good if you play them on a big stereo system.

So for anyone looking to duplicate the sound of a CD, downloading from MusicGiants offers a solution. The company has cut deals with big labels EMI Music, Sony BMG, Universal Music Group and Warner Music Group, as well as some smaller labels, to offer songs for \$1.29 each in the Windows Media Audio Lossless file format. The company recently announced plans to add another format popular with discerning music lovers this year called 5.1. In the company's press kit, they've got a quote from drummer Doug Clifford, former member of Creedence Clearwater Revival, saying he's so enthused about MusicGiants that he's invested in the company. I haven't tried the service, but it might make the audiophile in your life happy.

Last on the music front is a company called Piano Wizard. The idea is to turn learning the piano into a type of video game. I was skeptical until the Piano Wizard wizards enticed me to try and there I was, playing some kind of sonata or other. It was nice to find a computer video game that actually teaches something significant.

Created by Allegro Rainbow, another Florida-based company, the idea is to turn the drudgery part of piano lessons — learning to read music — into a video game. As the company says, traditional piano lessons teach musical notation first, but most kids don't want to learn the notes, they just want to play.

I'm generally opposed to video games on principle (although I once spent some enjoyable weeks addicted to "Half-Life"). But I could see actually letting my nursery schooler tap away on this one — and me, too. Windows-based Piano Wizard uses several stages, changing the game so that eventually you are reading notes on a staff.



Piano Wizard, background; Singing Coach, right, and MusicGiants software are aimed at amateur music lovers.