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Add value to your website

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By Julianne Miranda, NCTM

Add Value to Your Website

Editor's Note: This is the third column in a three-part series that focuses on developing a website. The first and second columns appeared in the 2006 February/March and August/September AMTs*, respectively.*

Now that the content and structure of your site is complete, you can turn your attention to dynamic elements that will bring added value to your user's experience. The last column addressed traditional types of multimedia elements including sound and video. Multimedia can be useful for teaching and reinforcement of concepts introduced in the classroom or lesson. For example, it may be helpful to provide MIDI files of exercises or original compositions on your website. Both *Dreamweaver* and *FrontPage* make it easy to include sounds and videos in webpages. More complex materials including interactive quizzes usually require some knowledge of web programming. And perhaps the most complex multimedia tool is *Flash*, which is used to create interactive movies and animations. The Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT, http://www.merlot.org/) has a collection of reviewed teaching and learning resources that clearly demonstrate effective use of multimedia for teaching purposes. (Select music from the list of discipline communities.) In any case, it is important to be sure the added content somehow provides information that can't be presented in any other way and that the material is compatible with a variety of browsers and platforms.

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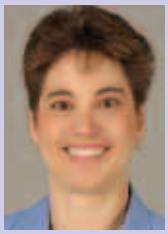
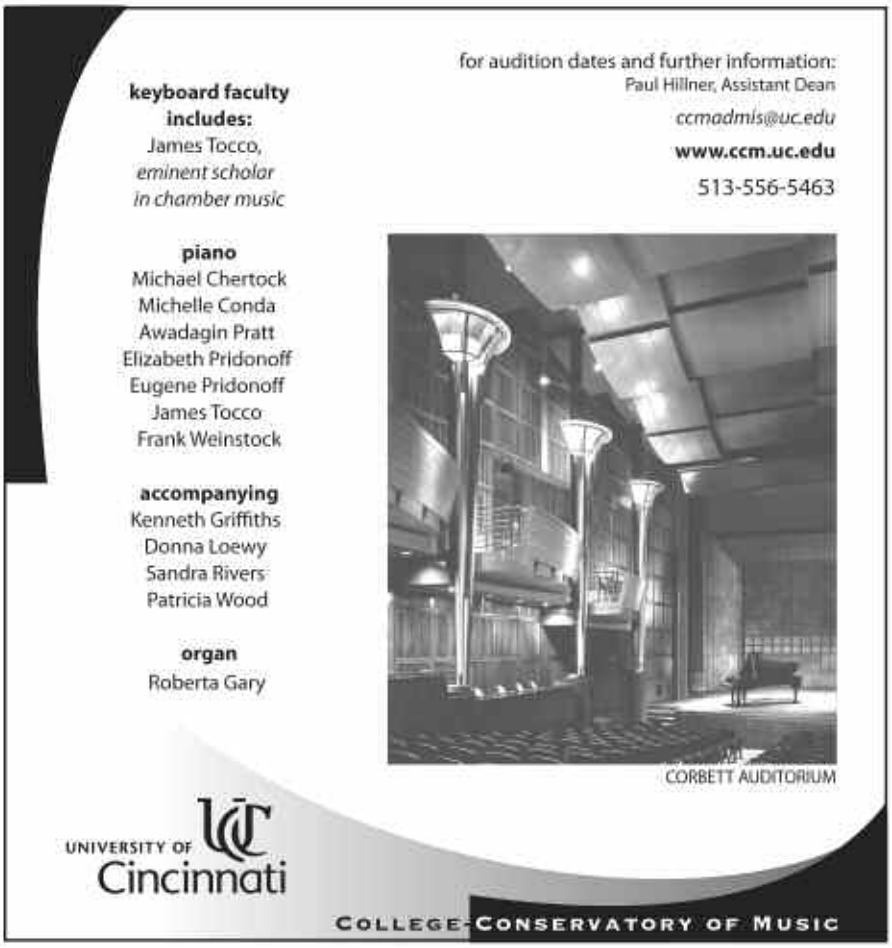
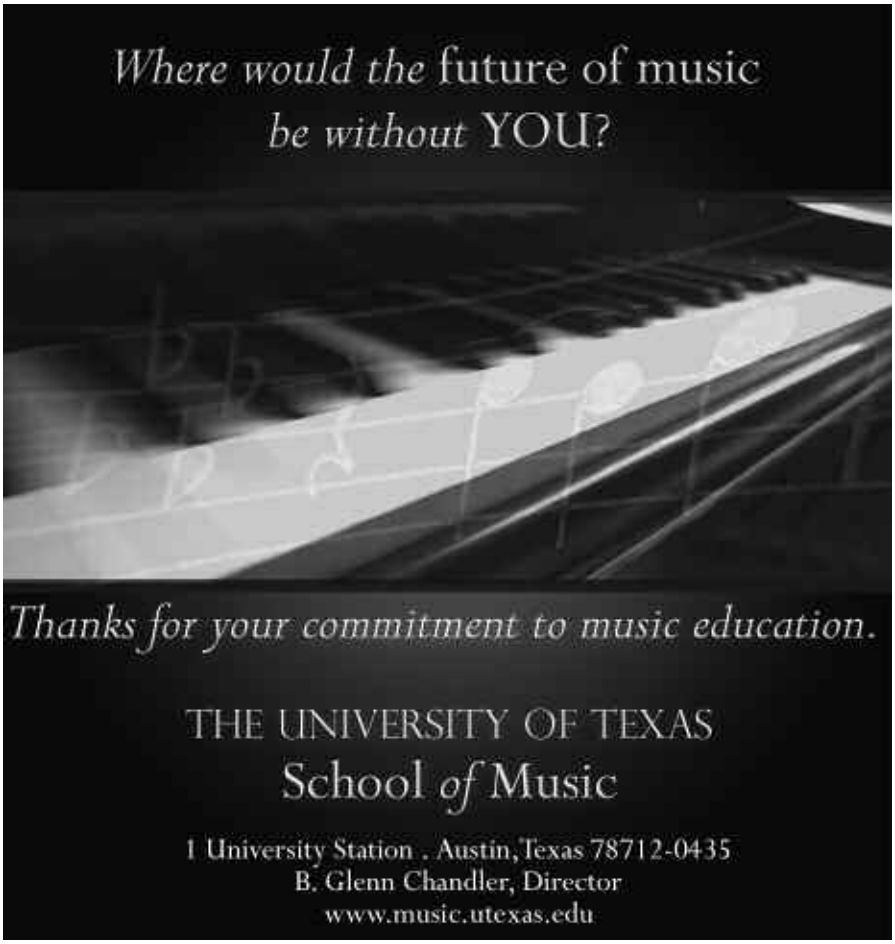


As multimedia materials have become more standard, many web authors are turning to interactive technologies including blogs and podcasts to create a more dynamic online presence for their visitors. A blog (short for web log) is a series of online journal entries to which others may be allowed to respond. Blogs are easy to create and use and typically are free of charge. Newest additions are positioned at the top of the web page, so visitors are always aware of the most recent content. In addition, some blogs are syndicated or send out automatic notifications when content is updated. Alex Ross, music critic for *The New Yorker* maintains a blog at "The Rest Is Noise" (http://www.therestisnoise.com). In addition to his own musings regularly published in *The New Yorker*, he also has an extensive list of links to similar resources ranging from opera to music theory. This is a wonderful place to start learning about how blogs can be an important part of discussion about the arts. To learn more about creating your own blog, visit any of the free blog sites including http://www.blogger.com, http://www.myblogsite.com or http://www.wordpress.org.

Podcasts are somewhat analogous to lectures or radio shows. A podcast is an MP3 file that is "fed" to the user who must then use podcasting software such as iTunes to collect the file and play it back. As podcasts become more popular, online services including Yahoo! and GOOGLE also offer podcatching capabilities. Once the user "subscribes to a feed" or makes a permanent connection to the source of the Podcast, they never need to do anything more to be sure the content is current. Instead, the creator of the podcast simply updates his or her audio file to be sure that listeners have the most recent version. For example, one might subscribe to the San Francisco Opera podcast (http://www.newmediaconversations.com/bravo/) to hear a pre-opera lecture on *A Masked Ball* in August and without doing a thing, hear a new lecture on *Carmen* in December. As the company continues through its season, the most recent lecture will always be available. It's important to note that subscription is a term used to describe how the individual connects to the source of the podcast, and does not necessarily mean the user has to pay a fee to listen.

Podcasts are relatively easy to create and are the best tool to use when you want to provide your visitors with regularly changing audio files such as lectures, vocabulary lists, interviews and so on, and when you want to provide materials not restricted by copyright. Generally, it involves three steps: recording the file, saving it on your web server and publishing it using an internet service. There are many ways

to record your audio file to a computer. There are many audio software tools available and many podcast authors rely on Audacity (http://audacity.sourceforge.net/), an easy to use free audio editing tool for Macintosh and Windows. Once you have collected your audio file, edited and compressed it into an MP3 file, you must save the MP3 file to your webserver. The last step is to publish the podcast using any one of many content providers such as Feedburner. Feedburner (http://www.feedburner.com) and other feed sites have step-by-step wizards to guide you through the complete process of publishing your new sound file. Once you have completed the publishing process, you will be provided with a web address for your podcast that you can include on your website.

With just a few mouse clicks and some creativity, the possibilities are endless. Interactive technologies have transformed the way we communicate, with blogs and podcasts being just a few of the emergent ways we can develop a professional association presence.

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