

# TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHORAL ART

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## NAXOS MusicBox Review

by Kyle Hanson

*Editor's note: This article is an "out-of-the-box" review, exploring the on-line-based product MusicBox for the first time after receiving login credentials from Naxos. While the scope of this piece disallows for a full "unboxing" of the product, the intention is to provide an overview of a product and assess the delivery of the experience to the end-user. The author has not been paid or sponsored by NAXOS for this review, and the contents of the article purely reflect the first-hand experience of the author as a private home-user and not that of Naxos, the American Choral Directors Association, or any employer of the author.*

Boasting 2020 Creative Child Awards "Product of The Year" and catching the attention of conductors as renowned as Marin Alsop, Naxos MusicBox is a leading-edge classical music resource for those looking for an attractive solution for online-based music education. This robust educational resource has over 4,000 music tracks with di-

verse activities for engagement like puzzles, quizzes, and various exploration features. Naxos MusicBox is tailored to support the education of children ages 4-12 alongside a guide for a teacher or a parent, but the content is rich enough to support all levels of learning. Naxos has long been a stopping-ground for scholars of classical music: those with an appetite for exploring thousands of carefully curated audio archives and who have relied on Naxos for these services for over thirty years. Now this expertise can be delivered to kids, parents, and teachers in a beautiful remake that brings fresh vitality to online classical music education.

When one thinks of a Naxos landing page, the first thing that comes to mind is the iconic Greek pillars with embedded Naxos' serif font surrounded by grey, white, and royal blue—a page purposefully designed to be taken seriously. If Naxos were an entrenched style,

then Naxos' MusicBox would spout the complete opposite end of the design spectrum. Its colorful, playful icons gently float amidst the sun-yellow burst of music notes, staff, and bright orange messaging. It is delightfully refreshing and speaks directly to the core audience for whom this service was developed.

Once logged in, how does one know where to begin? Each icon reacts to cursor tracking, inviting the user to click and explore. For this unboxing, an icon with deep forest-green jewel tone catches the eye, unlocking a portal to music from around the world. Upon exploration, there is a quick narrative to introduce ethnomusicological studies in an encouraging, attainable manner. All one must do is click on a region icon to explore. These icons lead to another page that explores various field recordings from various regions supported with short explanations. The written language is

accessible but without a read-aloud function, flip-book story book, or video explanation utilized in many elementary learning apps, a child's exploration would certainly need to be supported by an adult.

Returning to the home page icon menu, the general format explored in music from around the world is repeated for discovery into the instruments, composers, history, stage & screen, and more. History timelines are modeled after traditional music history textbooks while the scrolling function allows for student-like perspective on the breath of music developed primarily within Western music spheres. The Composers icon opens to a basic encyclopedia of composers from William Byrd (1543-1623) to John Adams (b. 1947-present) but glosses over many notables covered within the wider Naxos library. Each composer page highlights a brief but accessible biography supported by music examples, quick-quizzes, key-facts sheet, and deepening listening activities.

While the formatting could be further tailored for the audience, the content is rich, unassuming, and an over-all delight to peruse. Admittedly, some explanation requires more explanation not offered—such as “There was a split at the time between the ‘galant’ style, which was very artificial and polite, and the ‘sensitive’ style, which was dramatic and powerful (regarding C.P.E. Bach (1714-1788))”—but there is a wonderful ease of approach for how each article describes the life, style, and impact of the composer's work.

One of the real gems of MusicBox is the Audiobook section. Front and center of the substantial contribution of MusicBox, the audiobooks provide a stimulating overview of musical genres broken down into bite-size pieces. Do you want to hear the story of classical music? Just click on a link, sit back, and allow the flood of classical sounds delivered by a gripping narrative to fill the room. The service delivered by this page is that of a young people's concert at a local symphony orchestra—brief enough for intrigue and rich enough for deepening. Want to learn more about classical composers? There is a book for that. Want to know more about ballet stories? There is a book for that as well. There are hours of audiobooks that delight the ears, open the mind, and offer just enough to plant the seeds of learning. Even though the Audiobook page does not offer link-sharing, support-videos, or pop-out images, this portal is a one-stop shop for delivering a substantial introduction into classical music.

It goes without saying that MusicBox's entry into supporting classical music education via a robust online platform is certainly a step in the right direction. However, like the roll out of all things, MusicBox does not always seamlessly deliver the brand experience to the end-user. For example, the considerable breath of the Instrument section is enough to support the broadest of education, but perhaps does so without considering the age of the audience. Did you know the clarinet has a cylindrical bore? Or that

Stradivari also made cellos? This section reads more like a textbook than an introduction; that is not to say the information is dull, just that the format and delivery of the information could be re-designed to lend itself to unfacilitated exploration. Combined with the seemingly haphazard approach toward quizzes within the activity portal, portions of MusicBox graciously lend itself toward updates and re-formatting in the future.

Overall, MusicBox is the perfect solution for parent-child co-learning the richness and expansiveness of classical music together. While the format at times may not align with their targeted demographic or smoothly entreat the end-user experience, MusicBox delivers an abundance of classical studies in bite size, delectable pieces. With a seven-day free trial, MusicBox is worth exploring and losing sleep-over (in a good way!). Education subscriptions are available, and one can even gift this music experience to friends, family, and loved ones. For \$4 a month or \$99 for lifetime access, Naxos has made a brilliant step toward breaking down the stodgy barriers long fortifying classical education within the walls of the elite institutions and delivers this beloved music accessibly to a computer near you. ☐