

# Bill Machrone

## The PC Road to Stardom



**A**re you ready for your shot at fame and fortune on *American Idol*? Although some of the contestants have made it remarkably far on little vocal talent, being able to sing well generally helps. You might be surprised to learn that your PC can help you do just that.

Singing Coach Unlimited, a new software package from Carry-A-Tune Technologies, is both a tutorial and an open-ended coaching and practice program that harnesses the PC's considerable multimedia capabilities to teach you to sing better. I've been using Singing Coach Unlimited for the past week or two, and it's making a difference. I sing bass in our church choir; I'm the only bass, so the onus is on me to be accurate and produce a good tone. Although I've sung since high school and most people think I have a pleasant voice, I'm fairly self-critical and still, after all these years, sometimes cringe when I listen to recordings. I've thought of taking voice lessons to improve my tone and control, but have never gotten around to it. Or maybe I'm just chicken.

So I was very pleased to discover Singing Coach Unlimited at the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. I've used tape- and CD-based singing programs before, and even some PC software. But SCU is dramatically more interactive than any of them. It listens to your singing and displays the actual pitch and duration on your computer screen. Better yet, it scores you on your accuracy. It also includes a comfortable headset with a built-in microphone so you can go right to work.

The main screen has a horizontal line for each pitch and displays a pitch target—a band of acceptable accuracy—around each note that you sing. It's sort of a spreadsheet view of the music, with notes on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal axis. When you sing, the software charts your pitch and the duration of each note with a white line on the screen. If you're within the pitch target you get a good score, but you lose points if you wander sharp or flat or make your transitions at the wrong time.

The software does a superb job of eliminating any information not related to pitch, so all you see on the screen are the actual notes, and none of the clutter caused by consonants, breathing, and such. It's sensitive enough to show vibrato clearly. In fact, strong vibrato can lower your score, since you can push the note outside the pitch target range at the extremes. It's much more difficult to suppress the vibrato and produce clean, accurate tones.

Before you get to the songs, though, a detailed tutorial takes you through the rudiments of breathing, head voice, chest voice, and producing good tone. It even samples your voice to determine whether you're a bass, baritone, tenor, alto, or soprano, and then alters the pitch of the exercises to suit your vocal range.

The tone of the tutorial is light and breezy, aided by characters such as Mike, the microphone, Carrie, the wannabe singer (Carry-A-Tune, remember?), and a couple of ancillary characters. Overall, the script is well done. Carrie's initial efforts are endearingly off-key; you won't look bad by comparison. But she improves rapidly, and so will you. You'll see Dr. Clef's jokey little movie and lessons about posture, diaphragm breathing, and proper relaxation, and you'll get plenty of reminders to apply them.

After you've completed the tutorial, you can go into song mode and play any of the included standards, such as "Amazing Grace," "Danny Boy," and "The Star-Spangled Banner." You can vary the tempo, pitch, and accompaniment levels to suit your preference, and SCU will score you on your accuracy. You can choose to view the song in music staff mode, and SCU will draw your pitch onto the staff as a colored line. You can also download songs from [www.carryatune.com](http://www.carryatune.com), which currently has roughly 200 songs in a variety of categories.

You can also compose your own songs and enter them into SCU, or download MIDI songs from other sources, and it will play them back and score you. I did this with the bass line of a difficult piece, and it really helped me nail it. One annoyance: While it was easy to paint the notes and their durations into the spreadsheet view with the mouse, the music staff view would display them only in the treble clef. I sing from the bass clef, so sight-singing from the screen wasn't in the cards.

For \$99, Singing Coach Unlimited is a slick piece of technology and a challenging workout for your voice. Who knows, it just might help you become the next *American Idol*—or at least sing the way you've always wanted to.

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**The power to**  
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