Perhaps no single activity is a more powerful catalyst toward the understanding of music than listening. Listening to varied musical examples can help students perform better, improvise, compose, analyze, and understand music in historical and cultural contexts. Technology can help teachers organize listening activities for students, and even make listening activities interactive, employing structures and habits that students probably use outside of the classroom.

The purpose of this article is to introduce you to iTunes, a media storage and playback program that allows for complex types of music organization. Also, we will look at some ways to use iTunes both for your own purposes as a music teacher, and for designing some interesting activities for your students.

Among the best features of iTunes are these: (a) it is completely free; (b) it is usable on both Windows and Macintosh computers, and looks virtually the same on the two platforms. Apple computers (laptops and desktops) come preinstalled with iTunes, but you might want to make sure you have the latest version (click the Apple menu, then Software Update...). Computers that run Windows typically do not have iTunes preinstalled, so you will need to download it from http://www.apple.com/itunes/download.

iTunes is not just a music program; it is a media playback program. It is capable of storing and playing back audio and video in many different digital formats. iTunes is kind of a "one stop shop" for storing all of your videos (such as movies, TV shows and video podcasts) in addition to music and other audio. Notice that the Library contains separate entries for each of these types of media (Figure 1).

iTunes stores media from several sources. The most obvious media source is downloaded music, perhaps from the iTunes store, which offers millions of songs and videos for download for relatively inexpensive prices. A credit card is required to download music, so the fact that the store is available through iTunes should not raise red flags with school administrators or IT coordinators. You can also use iTunes to save digital copies of music from your personal collection by ripping media off of your own CDs.

Beyond the technical functionality of iTunes for capturing and storing media, there are uses of the software in the classroom that you might consider because they can enhance the experience of listening activities. First, teachers who use many listening examples in their classrooms will certainly benefit from the types of organization that iTunes can provide. For example, liberal use of playlists can help provide instant recall of examples that address a particular lesson. Imagine that you are teaching a lesson on the functions of overtures in musical theater. In your iTunes library, you may have stored soundtracks from many musicals in their entirety. In order to make accessing these examples simple, create a playlist that contains only the overtures. One click on the playlist will show you a list of only the overtures, rather than having to sort through the entire soundtrack for each musical.

iTunes can help you stay organized so that you can fluidly present listening examples to your classes. You can also use it to organize recordings of pieces that your ensembles might perform in concert, or might perform in future concerts. Listening to recordings of pieces can help students understand what ways in which iTunes can help you. What about activities that you can design for your students in which they can interact directly with iTunes?

The same playlist functionality that you can use to organize your own music can be used as an educational tool for your students. Try some of these ideas to capitalize on the tools within iTunes:

* Create a playlist with a group of several pieces (songs, tunes, etc.) in it. Make the name of the playlist something generic such as “Playlist 1.” Then have several students listen to the list and imagine a name that captures the mood, style, or some other characteristic of the list. Results will probably be extremely varied. This activity will help students understand how different music crosses different boundaries, and therefore apply different labels to it. The activity might also illuminate some similarities in the ways people identify with music they listen to.

* iTunes can be used in place of a traditional “drop-the-needle” listening test in a music appreciation, music history or music theory class. Import pieces into your library, then adjust the Start Time and Stop Time parameters for each piece (select a piece in the library, right click on it and select Get Info; these parameters are in the Options tab). Students will only be able to hear the section of the piece you indicate.

* Genius is a feature in iTunes that automatically generates a playlist based on a track that you have selected. The technology behind Genius selections is still a bit mysterious to the common user, but it can be used in educational ways. Select a song, then click the Genius button at the bottom right corner of the iTunes window. Lead your class in a discussion about the common characteristics of the songs in the resulting automatically generated playlist.

The uses of iTunes are virtually limitless and the program is relatively intuitive. Many of your students are already familiar with iTunes because it provides a link between their computers and the ubiquitous iPods, iPhones and iPads we see throughout school buildings. I encourage you to download it and try it out, both for your own media library and for your classroom.