

STUDENT LIFE

Holiday gift ideas for geeks

By Craig Crossman
Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service
(KRT)

OK, here we go again.

It's that time of year where I begin to tell you about all of those great technology items that will make any geek in your life literally glow with delight.

This year, the offerings continue to outpace the previous year when it comes to flashing lights, strange sounds, tactile feedback and even personal hygiene.

Because there are so many, this year I plan to keep them coming for as long as possible beginning with this week's column.

Let's begin with the good old mouse pad.

This year, it's not your father's mouse pad anymore.

The FlexiGlow FX Illuminated Mouse Pad (\$26.99) is more for your eyes than it is for your mouse.

The mouse pad has a built-in multi-color LED light system that lets you choose any one of seven different colors by pressing a button.

Or you can have the mouse pad phase cycle through all of the colors for the ultimate effect.

The colors emit from a translucent material that runs completely around the perimeter of the mouse pad via low-power LEDs that get their power from a USB connection cord.

Turn out the lights in the room for the best mouse pad show in town.

The next mouse pad is something Minnesota Fats may have carried had there been computers in his day.

Envision him strolling into the parlor with his custom pool cue in its carrying case.

I've seen his counterparts with tennis rackets, golf clubs and even baseball bats, each in its very own custom carrying case.

But what of the professional computer gamer?

You guessed it.

It's the custom computer mouse pad.

The X-Ray Thunder 8 Gaming Pad (\$24.99) is a mouse pad so fine that it comes in its very own ultra-light carrying case.

Open the quality tin metallic shell and inside rests your unique dual-surfaced mouse pad that can instantly let you switch from a smooth to a textured mousing surface.

The idea here is that you can best determine which surface works better with your mouse of the moment.

I assume that you'll probably be carrying more than one mouse for different kinds of game playing, of course.

The base of this mouse pad is firmly anchored to the desk surface via specially designed soft, sticky silicone rubber feet that really grip the desk.

The Thunder 8 also includes a cord clip to keep the mouse cable out of the way when you elect to use a corded mouse instead of your wireless model.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/KRT

The Cold Heat Soldering Tool reaches a melting temperature in less than one second and then cools to a touchable temperature in about five seconds

The only choice you may have to wrestle with is whether you want the base of the mouse pad in black, green or blue.

Like walking into a pool hall with a Balabushka Pool Cue, your opposition will probably cut and run when you walk into the computer room with an X-Ray Thunder 8 under your arm.

For those geeks who like playing under the hood of their computers, they may find the need to solder something back in place.

One of the coolest soldering tools I have seen in a long time is the Cold Heat Soldering Tool (\$19.99).

This amazing device reaches a solder melting temperature of well over 500 degrees in less than one second.

But what is even more incredible is that it returns to a touch-safe temperature within 5 seconds after it is deactivated.

Anyone who has ever worked with a soldering gun or iron can tell you about burns received from these tools that can take minutes to warm up and a lot longer to finally cool down.

The Cold Heat Soldering Tool works on four AA batteries and will solder over 700 joints before you have to change them.

It too comes in its own case.

Finally, let's talk about caffeine.

It's the choice of PC champions when it comes to staying up all night with a computer.

Geeks first turned to coffee, then Mountain Dew, then Jolt Cola.

Now it's soap.

But not ordinary soap.

This soap contains caffeine.

I'm not kidding.

In fact, your morning shower may bring a whole new meaning to waking when you lather up with this bar.

Shower Shock Caffeinated Soap (\$6.99 per bar) is billed as the world's first and original caffeinated soap product.

For the health-conscience, Shower Shock is an all-vegetable based glycerin soap, which does not contain any harsh ingredients like ethanol, diethanolamine, polyethylene glycol or cocyl isethionate.

Now I'm not exactly sure if the caffeine really does make it through your skin and into your blood stream.

I noticed that the manufacturer makes no such claim, no matter where on your body you may wash with it.

But it still makes for one heck of a different holiday gift, don't you think?

All of the products here are available at Think Geek's website at www.thinkgeek.com.

Stay tuned for lots more unusual holiday gifts for the technology lovers in your life.

'America's Most Wanted' still captures viewers

By David Bianculli
New York Daily News
(KRT)

It goes unnoticed, but "America's Most Wanted" is the most-watched program in its time slot on Saturday nights. It's also No. 8 on a much more impressive list. This Little TV Show That Could has lasted long enough to be ranked as one of the longest-running series in the entire history of prime time.

"America's Most Wanted" began on Fox's owned-and-operated stations in February 1988, and went national on Fox that April.

John Walsh, whose son Adam had been found dead in a nationally famous missing-child case, was and remains the host nearly 17 years later, with more than 800 fugitives captured.

Families of victims, especially, trust Walsh because he's experienced in the ordeal they're undergoing.

"Unfortunately, I've walked in their shoes, so I know where they're coming from," Walsh said. "The media can be brutal."

"After Adam was murdered, a lot of the media that we begged to keep Adam's story going for the two weeks that he was missing lost interest after the first or second day. I had begged them to keep helping us look for this little boy, and, of course, when parts of him were found two weeks later, the most horrible murder, they were all camped out on our front lawn."

It was a horrible experience, he said.

"It's actually part of my deal with Fox, that I'll never do a story a victim doesn't want me to do," Walsh said. "We'll never show the face of a molested or abused child. That criteria has been my standard for 17 years. And if they don't want to say something, or are uncomfortable, this is not '60 Minutes,' this is my show. If they don't want to talk about it, it's okay."

The program, modeled after the BBC's "Crimewatch U.K.," went after FBI Top 10 wanted killer David James Roberts in its pilot, and caught him identified by several people at a Manhattan homeless shelter.

"When it started," said "AMW" executive producer Lance Heflin, "everyone was just shrieking in horror. 'Oh my God, it's vigilante TV! Everyone will be turning in their brothers and their neighbors! Here comes George Orwell and company!'"

"It was never that, and never turned out that."

The show helped catch John List, then the Texas 7, and, most famously, helped return Elizabeth Smart to her parents after nine months.

"America's Most Wanted" has lasted so long, Heflin said, because its audience (7.7 million viewers last week) is so loyal: "People trust us, and they know what they're going to get with us."

And that has helped keep the show running. The top four longest-running shows still on the air are "60 Minutes," the Disney umbrella showcase, "Monday Night Football" and "20/20."

How many reality shows will run that long? Not many.

As for reality the genre, Walsh is dismissive.

"I think it's unreality TV, to tell you the truth," he said. "A woman in a bikini eating two yards of horse colin is not reality TV. 'Who Wants to Marry a Ho?' That's not reality TV."

38 million children play music to our ears

By Richard Scheinin
Knight Ridder Newspapers
(KRT)

STANFORD, Calif. - In the Republic of China, 38 million boys and girls are studying the piano, learning their Chopin, Mozart and Beethoven. Shanghai and Beijing boast at least a dozen symphony orchestras, and concert halls are filled with young yuppie couples, because classical music is not only much-loved, but trendy.

Why is all this happening? How did European art music, in danger of withering on the vine in this hemisphere, grow such deep roots in China, which is now exporting superstar soloists and a fresh crop of composers to the West in one of the great cultural bounce-backs of our time?

Sheila Melvin, a writer, and Jindong Cai, Stanford University's new director of orchestral studies, have some answers. Their new book, "Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music Became Chinese" (Algora Publishing, \$33 paperback), tells the unlikely story of European music's 400-year journey into the Chinese heart. It's filled with tales of missionaries, emperors and idealistic musicians, some driven to suicide during the Cultural Revolution, some hanging on as heroes in the service of art.

Melvin and Cai, who are married with two young children, spent three years researching the book. For Cai, 48, there was an unexpected payout: He came to understand the long rollout of history that led to his becoming a musician in the Western classical tradition. China's love affair with Western music happened "step by step, many years of turmoil and musicians' devotion. Now I think, 'Ah! This is why I learned Western music.'"

He grew up in Beijing playing a violin that his father, a trolley repairman, had purchased secondhand for \$3. In September, after a summer visiting family in China, he and Melvin moved to Stanford with their children, Sebastian, 3, and Cecilia, 11 months. The living room of their condo is dominated by a

grand piano and a big Chinese gong. Lunch one recent afternoon was stir-fry followed by pistachio ice cream.

It's life in the global age: Melvin, originally from Washington, D.C., fell in love with China during an Asian backpacking trip after college and spent much of the '90s in Shanghai and Beijing. Cai moved to the United States in 1985 to attend Boston's New England Conservatory, studied with Leonard Bernstein at Tanglewood and spent years teaching in Cincinnati, Tucson and Baton Rouge.

Saturday night, his Bay Area career begins: Cai will conduct the Stanford Symphony Orchestra in a program of Mahler and Beethoven. In February, the orchestra will perform works by Cambodian composer Chinary Ung and Chinese composer Zhou Long, who has written a concerto for Western orchestra and pipa, the traditional stringed instrument.

"My idea is to create a kind of festival to introduce contemporary Asian composers, using Stanford as a base," says Cai, who thinks the Western music scene can be reinvigorated by Asian concert music, much as China was nourished by music from the West.

"How do you attract a new generation, a new audience to classical music? This is a way. You have to have something new and interesting. This is the place for me to do more things."

"People care about culture here," Melvin says. In Baton Rouge, where Cai taught at Louisiana State University, "they care about football." With its large Chinese and Asian populations, the Bay Area reminds her, in a way, of China, where "parents don't push their kids to play soccer or football. They push them to play an instrument and hold an intellectual conversation about poetry."

This is "the best place to raise our children," Cai agrees.

He and Melvin met in 1997. She was living in Shanghai, running the U.S.-China Business Council and writing freelance stories about Chinese culture for the New York

Times and the Wall Street Journal. She particularly "wanted to explain Chinese music" to English-speaking readers, she says, because "music crosses cultures easily. Music is something that connects."

A mutual friend introduced her to Cai, who had moved to the United States in 1985 but was back in China to conduct the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra in a program of American composers. Two years later, they started dating, had an across-the-globe romance, they have kept their "thousands of e-mails" and celebrated their engagement on the Great Wall of China about midnight on Jan. 1, 2000.

By that time, they were already collaborating on newspaper features, including a lengthy history of the Shanghai Symphony, descended from China's oldest symphony orchestra.

"Rhapsody in Red" is dense with names, dates and explanations of China's gradual opening to Western sounds. Melvin sees it as part of China's larger opening to Western trade, science and technology. "Western music is part of a package," she says. "And for the Chinese it means a lot of things. It means strength. It means power."

Several personalities stand out in the book: Matteo Ricci, a Chinese-speaking Jesuit priest from Italy, sailed up the Grand Canal to Beijing in 1601 to deliver a clavichord, an early keyboard, to the Emperor Wan Li in the Imperial Palace of the Forbidden City. The strange new mechanism, and the exotic sounds it produced, had its intended effect: It fascinated the emperor.

The rest, as they say, is history, at least until 1918, when another Italian, a pianist named Mario Paci, sailed into Shanghai harbor on a steamship to give a recital. He fell sick and, during a lengthy recovery, fell in love with the "Paris of the East" and decided to stay for decades. His illness changed the course of music in China. Paci turned Shanghai's town band into the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, the first symphony orchestra in the nation, originally composed entirely of foreign musicians. But he eventually trained a



NHAT V. MEYER

Jindong Cai rehearses with the Stanford Symphony Orchestra at Dinkelspiel Auditorium at Stanford University, in California

couple generations of native players who, Cai says, "became the backbone of musical training in China."

When their story about the Shanghai Symphony was published in the New York Times in 1999, Melvin and Cai heard from a reader: Floria Paci Zaharoff, daughter of the legendary Mario. She was about 80, living in New York near Lincoln Center and still attending concerts. She still wore outfits made by Madame Garnett, a White Russian tailor in Shanghai in the 1930s.

And she had shoeboxes of her father's memorabilia, including many programs and reviews, and an autographed photograph from Jascha Heifetz, "In memory of a jolly good time!" who had performed with Paci and the orchestra in Shanghai in 1925.

For Melvin and Cai, writing a book had become inevitable. They holed up in the Shanghai Library and Beijing's National Library, examining English-language newspa-

pers back to 1918: "We go page by page," Cai says, "to find one ad: Jascha Heifetz came, or a Russian orchestra came. And you suddenly realize, 'Wow! Shanghai was like that.'"

Another Shanghai archive has a huge catalog of unreleased recordings; Melvin and Cai plan to scour it for Paci's recitals. He is said to have been a remarkable musician, but the sounds of his playing have vanished.

"And for our next project," Melvin says, "we're going to find out what happened to the clavichord."

She is talking about the instrument delivered by Matteo Ricci in 1601. It hasn't been seen in centuries.

"It means we'll have to get into the Forbidden City, which is an impenetrable maze," Melvin says. "People think it's still there. They don't throw anything out."

Cai says, "We're going to find it."