

The music app that helps school children play in socially distanced orchestras

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A team of musicians, composers, technologists and performers at the University of Sussex have developed an app called Synchonia, which helps students to play music in socially distanced ensembles.

Pupils can follow scores on iPads, meaning that they never need to lose

their place—something which can be a source of frustration and loss of confidence for children learning to play music.

Originally developed in 2017, a new updated version of the app has been launched and it is now more useful than ever given the need for social distancing. The Synchponia app includes GCSE and A Level set texts and the option for pupils or teachers to upload their own scores that they may have composed during lockdown.

The inspiration for the app came when Prof Ed Hughes, Professor of Composition in Music, noticed that pupils in his local primary school orchestra would get stressed about keeping their place when playing ensemble.

Professor Hughes, from the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex, worked on the app with Music Department colleagues Dr. Chris Kiefer and Dr. Alice Eldridge. He says:

"The return to school this term will be the first time in six months that most children will have played music as a group. Social distancing measures are poised to make this an even more challenging exercise. Our app, however, means that pupils don't need to rely on the close proximity of their fellow musicians. They'll be able to play in a synchronised way, following the score on an iPad, while also standing apart from their peers."

Dr. Alice Eldridge from the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex says:

"We've all missed the magic of a shared experience that playing music as an ensemble allows. I'm really excited that children returning to school this term will be able to experience that feeling again in a safe and socially distanced way. The app we've developed helps pupils follow

scores, while keeping their place."

Dr. Chris Kiefer from the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex adds:

"The app also contains features that mean that pupils from a wide range of music reading abilities can play quite complicated pieces together—something that will be even more valuable given the learning gap that might have been exacerbated by school closures during lockdown."

Evie, aged eight, who has tried the Syncphonia app, says: "If we had that I would never get lost again."

John, age nine, who also tried the app, says: "It blew my mind, because the sound is absolutely amazing compared to what it normally is."

How does Syncphonia work?

The Conductor App controls the tempo, and parts are instantly shared across the ensemble. Performers choose their own instrumental or vocal part or—new for Version 3.0—can follow and scroll through the full score. The current bar and (optionally) beat are highlighted, so players can't get lost, pages are turned automatically, and new parts can be distributed in seconds over a wireless network.

Syncphonia is ideal for socially distanced classrooms. The App uses Bluetooth—no need for wifi—and works with any iPad within 25 metres of the controlling Conductor App. So performers can be spread out in a large hall or classroom and stay in time.

Why Syncphonia?

Research shows that children benefit in multiple ways from taking part in ensemble music making, but that they learn new skills faster when they are enjoying themselves. Losing your place or struggling to keep up can be very demotivating for beginners. Syncphonia's networked score reader helps everyone keep their place bar by bar, and even leads to the ensemble playing longer pieces better, helping more experienced players to stay engaged.

Syncphonia particularly supports mixed-ability ensembles in classrooms, enabling pupils to develop together.

Who is it for?

Syncphonia is particularly suitable for mixed-ability GCSE classes exploring set works and other repertoire, whole-class ensemble work in KS3, and beginner and early music readers in primary and secondary school ensembles in years 4–8. It is also beneficial for mixed-ability A level classes to enable non-orchestral instrumentalists to join in with performances of set works and other repertoire and to follow full scores. Syncphonia has also been trialled successfully with amateur choirs, orchestras and all-comers mixed-ability groups.

Version 3.0 includes GCSE and A level set works in the Free Scores Bundle and a new 'All Parts' option in the Performer App—users can view five parts or scroll through the full score during playback. Perfect for teaching—the Conductor can move all the Performers to any bar or rehearsal number instantly.

New for Version 3.0: Teachers in trials wanted to upload their own scores and arrangements to Syncphonia and in Version 3.0 this is quick and straightforward. Scores in .xml format, originated in Sibelius, can be uploaded using iTunes and File Sharing. Teachers can create their own tailor-made ensemble pieces in Sibelius and share them with their

ensembles in seconds.

All the information you need to get started, including how to download for free, is here:

<https://www.syncphonia.co.uk/>

Provided by University of Sussex

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