# Sibelius at KS3: creating, composing and exploring

## James Manwaring

### Introduction

I have used music notation software Sibelius extensively over the years, and it's a fantastic resource. This resource focuses on Sibelius, although other notation software packages are obviously available, and the activities in this resource could be carried out with them. Our focus here is essentially on how we can use notation software within the Key Stage 3 classroom, what works and how students respond to the tasks.

### The importance of notation

Teaching KS3 students to read music notation is hugely important. Not only is it the crucial language that we use in music lessons, but it will also help them prepare for GCSE music. There's no need to make more of it than we need to, however, and we should always balance it with other topics. But Sibelius can be used to make reading and writing music more engaging and accessible.

The approach, however, should always be that students use Sibelius to enhance their learning and understanding of music. Lessons shouldn't be about Sibelius itself, but instead about music. Students can then use Sibelius to experiment and see how well they've understood a concept or topic. Notation enables students to see in visual terms what they're listening to or learning about: when a rhythm is presented to students using notation, for example, they can start to understand its characteristics and features in more depth.

In that way, think about using Sibelius to help break down barriers and encourage students to start reading music.

### Sibelius basics: getting started

As with any piece of software, there's a lot to learn when using Sibelius. Most importantly, however, ensure that your lessons don't focus just on the software, but on the music being learnt.

From that starting point, it's a good idea to think through the tasks that you're setting so that they gradually introduce the main features of Sibelius. Here are suggestions for the kinds of topics that students can work through when first introduced to Sibelius:

1 Start with a simple rhythm-based piece where students learn how to add different note values using the keypad. (This will be considered in more detail in the approaches to Sibelius below.)
2 Once students have created some rhythms, introduce them to adding accents and dynamics to their score.
3 Give them a starting note, middle note and end note, and ask them to start adding melody, using the mouse, computer keyboard or MIDI keyboard. Sometimes a MIDI keyboard can be problematic when it comes to rhythms. Therefore, you may prefer students to input notes with the mouse.
4 Once they know how to add a melody, introduce the idea of chords, and the various Sibelius shortcuts for adding notes on top of other notes.

Sibelius offers almost endless possibilities, but it is crucial to work through it alongside the development of musical understanding. Students should feel confident with the software, but likewise, lessons should not be dominated by lots of non-musical computer instruction. Building up their knowledge will therefore mean you can combine software understanding with musical understanding. The approaches below will touch on some of this in more detail.

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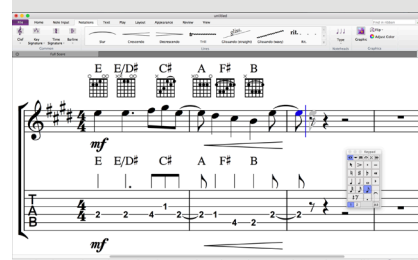
There are a number of shortcuts that can help students to use the software:

| | |
|---|---|
| Unload cursor (always do this before clicking anything) | Escape |
| Undo | CTRL and Z |
| Redo | CTRL and Y |
| Copy | CTRL and C |
| Paste | CTRL and V |
| Repeat selection | R |
| Add a bar | CTRL and B |
| Creating chords: add a note a specified interval above selected note | Relevant number on alphanumeric side of keyboard (ie 2 for a 2nd) |
| Key signature dialogue | K |
| Time signature dialogue | T |
| Dynamics text (mf, ff, etc) | Select note where you want the dynamics to be, then CTRL and E, then windows menu key brings up a list. Some common dynamics can be entered directly, for example forte is CTRL and F and piano is CTRL and P |
| Techniques text (pizz, etc) | Select note where you want the dynamics to be, then CTRL and T, then windows menu key brings up a list |
| Lyrics | CTRL and L |
| Hairpins | CTRL and H for crescendo<br><br>SHIFT, CTRL and H for diminuendo<br><br>Space moves the end of the hairpin to the following note |
| Slurs | S (NOT Enter – this is a tie)<br><br>Space moves the end of the slur to the following note |
| Rest | 0 on numeric keypad |
| Triplets | Select first note then CTRL and 3 on alphanumeric (other numbers create relevant tuplet) |
| Clef | Q |
| Instruments dialogue box | I |
| Symbol | Z |
| Play from selection | P |

## Using Sibelius effectively

There are many things that can be done using Sibelius, but it's best to approach the software carefully. Your goal should be to ensure that Sibelius supports and enhances musical learning and understanding, rather than being a goal in itself. We can teach students concepts, for example, and then use tools such as Sibelius to develop and test understanding.

Sibelius is also a great way to compose music. Its range of available instruments and its clear score layout mean that students can be highly creative. Composition is a lot more than just mouse clicks, however, and students should be encouraged to think about the difference between composing and arranging using Sibelius.

Below are three activities using Sibelius at Key Stage 3, which aim to bring to life key concepts at that Key Stage. Most teachers will already have topics and schemes that they teach. These activities should slot into existing work and provide ideas for using Sibelius to bring musical understanding to life. Each of the activities builds on the previous one, and help students to develop a working knowledge of Sibelius without spending whole lessons just learning the software.

## Activity 1: time signatures and rhythms

Rhythm, metre and time signatures are all topics that will be present in a Key Stage 3 scheme of work. Students will learn about note values, beats and bars, and how metre affects the feel of the music.

Sibelius can bring some of these concepts to life, and this first approach is all about rhythm. By focusing on adding just rhythms in Sibelius, you simplify what the students are working with.

For students new to Sibelius, this approach is very simple: it just requires them to use a single snare drum or woodblock. They will therefore learn how to add an instrument and select a time signature. Using just a single percussion instrument means that they can focus on how to input their first rhythm using the keyboard. They may already have learnt about beats in the bar or how note values differ. The keypad may therefore already make sense to them, and they can begin to add notes to their score.

Once they have a rhythm, they can then change the time signature to see the change. Changing time is a simple process, but a crucial one to learn. But clicking on the barline, they can press T for Time and open the Time Signature menu. They will fairly quickly have rhythms in different Time Signatures, and they can then learn to click on the first note and press P for Play to listen back to their work.

Here's a step-by-step approach to getting this set up in Sibelius. It's a simple process, so students can quickly focus on the music making.

1  Launch Sibelius and select a blank score. It's always good to start with something blank rather than pre-selected instruments. Students should always think about what instruments they're using and why: it's a good habit to embed from the outset.
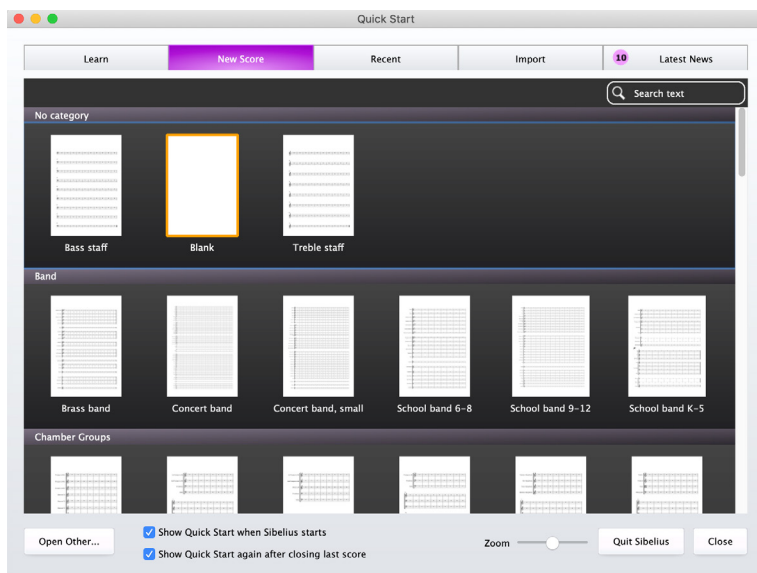


2  Add a snare drum or woodblock – something that will be on just one line, rather than a full five-line musical stave. We ultimately want students to be able to read a full stave, but starting with a one-line percussion instrument is a good introduction.
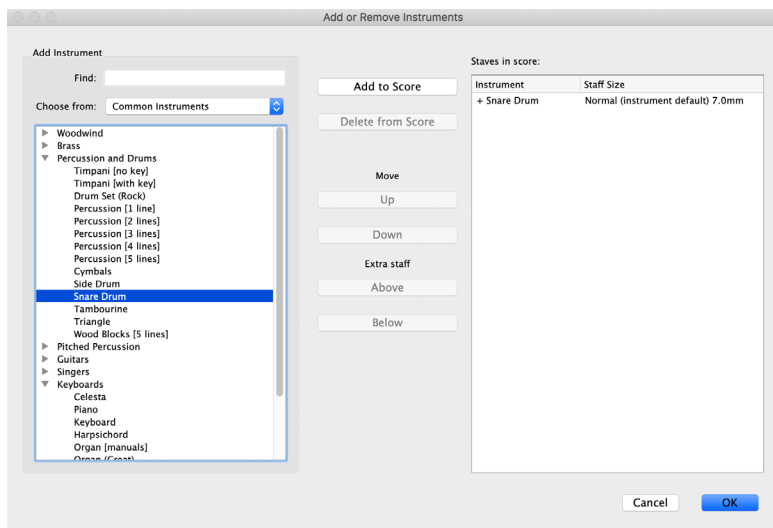
**3** Now select a 4/4 time signature as a starting point. It's also helpful to add a metronome mark at this stage: it can be edited later, perhaps leading to a discussion about beats per minute. Try not to always work in 100bpm, Sibelius's default setting: getting students to consider how fast they want their music to be is another good habit to instil early on.
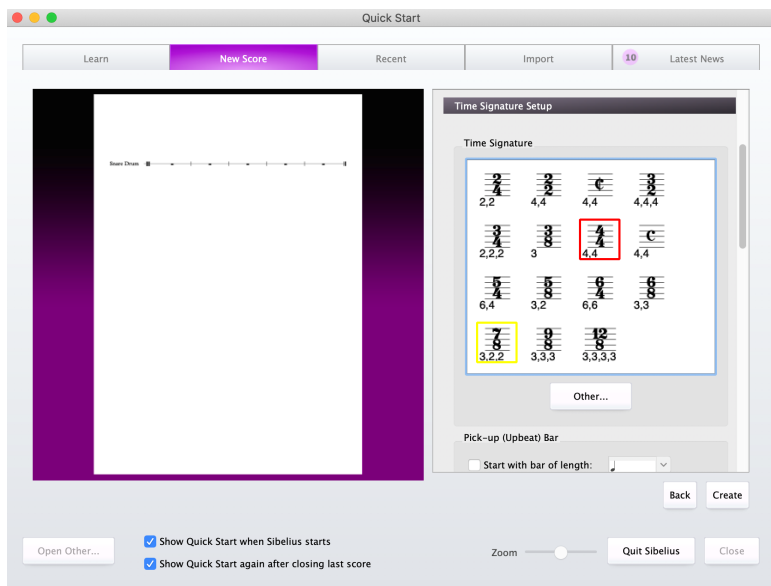
**4** You now have a blank canvas, and you can begin to create rhythms. Notes are selected using the keypad. Once a note – for example a crotchet – has been selected, the mouse curser will turn blue and the note can be added to the snare drum line with just a click. The note will need to sit so that the line effectively goes through the note, otherwise it won't play.
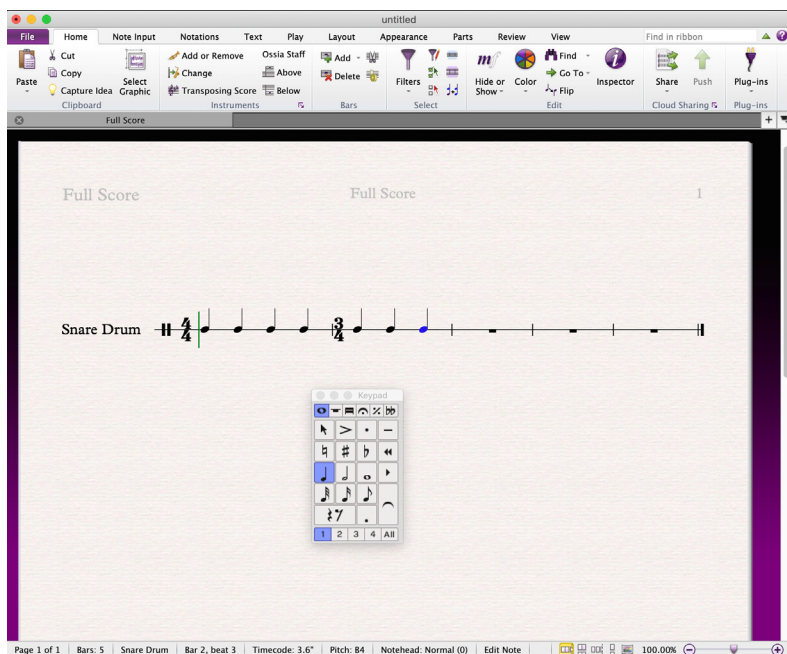
**5** Changing the time signature is quick and easy. Click on the barline where you wish to put the new time signature and press the letter T on the computer keyboard. This brings up the Time Signature panel, where new signatures can be selected and added to the score.
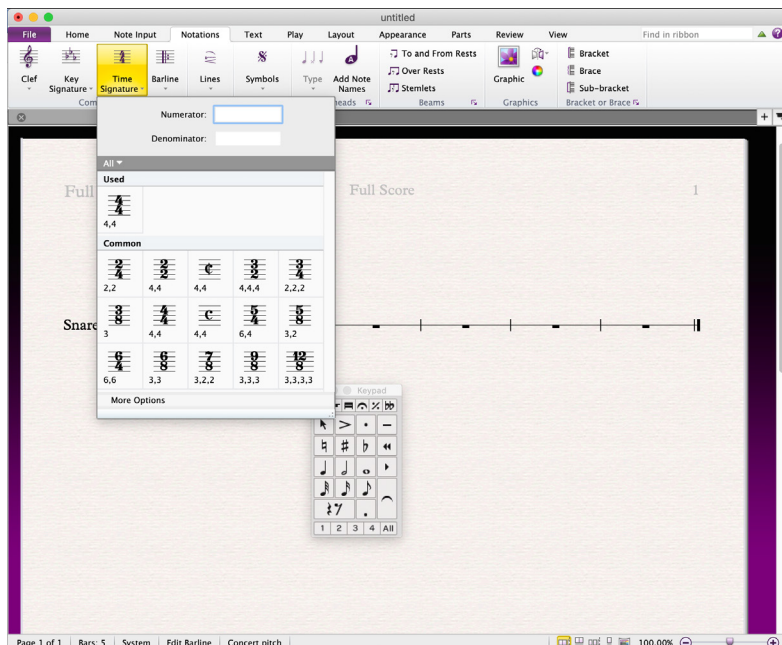


**6** Once a rhythm has been selected, it can be played back by clicking on the first note and pressing P for Play on the computer keyboard.

## Activity 2: school of rock

This next activity is designed to build on the rhythms we've just created, and to link in with pop and rock music projects. Students will now learn how to write a drum pattern, developing their understanding of rhythm and teaching them some new functions on Sibelius. It's also a useful way to teach another form of notation, since drum notation is slightly more complicated than the single line we've used so far.

This activity can easily be linked with looking at pop song structures, four-chord songs, or lyric writing. Students will also test their understanding of rock rhythms and how to create them.

**1** Launch Sibelius and create a score with a drum kit. There are several to choose from, all of which are under the Drum Set menu. Which particular kit you use doesn't matter too much. Remember to make it 4/4 time and add a metronome marking.
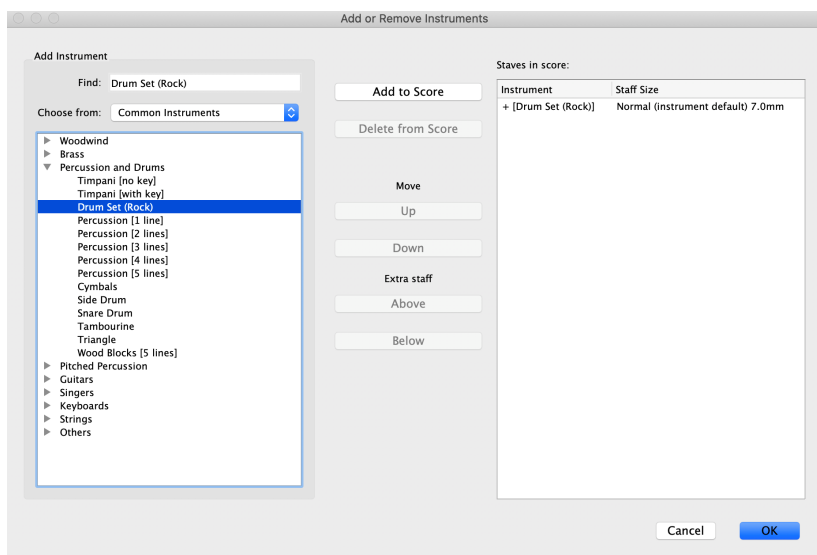
**2** Using the keyboard, add two crotchets on beats 1 and 3 – this is the bass drum and is located on the stave between the bottom two lines. (You could think of it as the note F, and that it's the floor/bass drum that you're adding.)
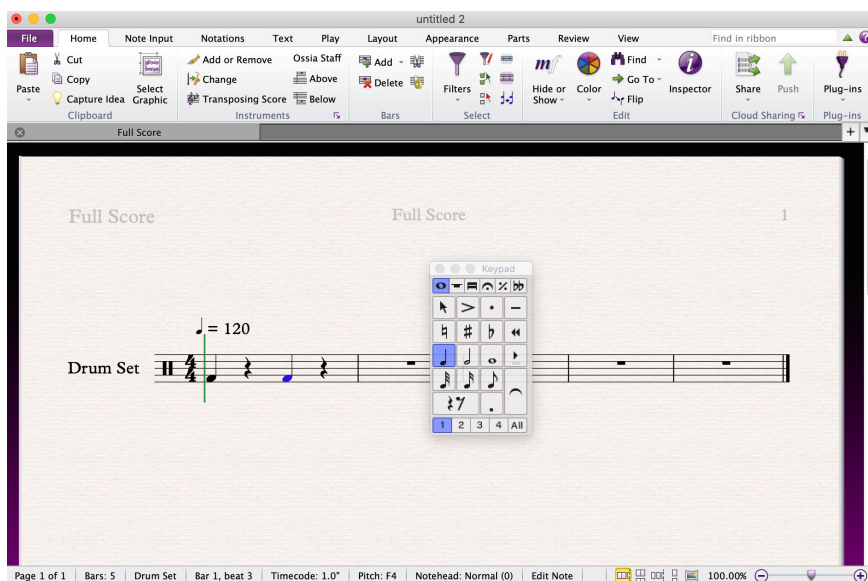


**3** Now we're going to add a snare drum to the pattern, which is located where you'd normally find the note C in the treble clef. Place this on beats 2 and 4.
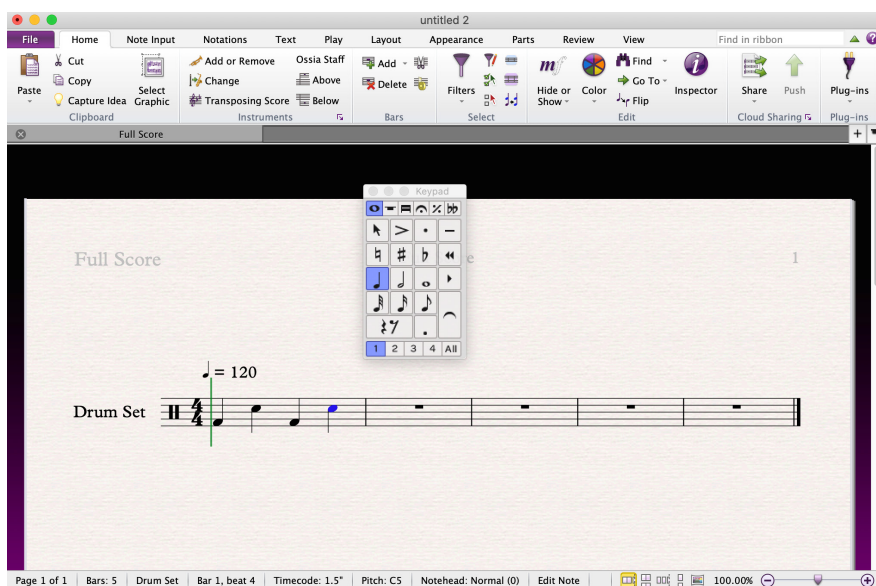
**4** The next part of the process is a first look at layout in Sibelius, and how we can make the score easier to read. Select all the notes in this first bar and then press number 2 on the keypad. This will effectively 'turn the notes upside down', which will make it easier to read the hi-hat part.
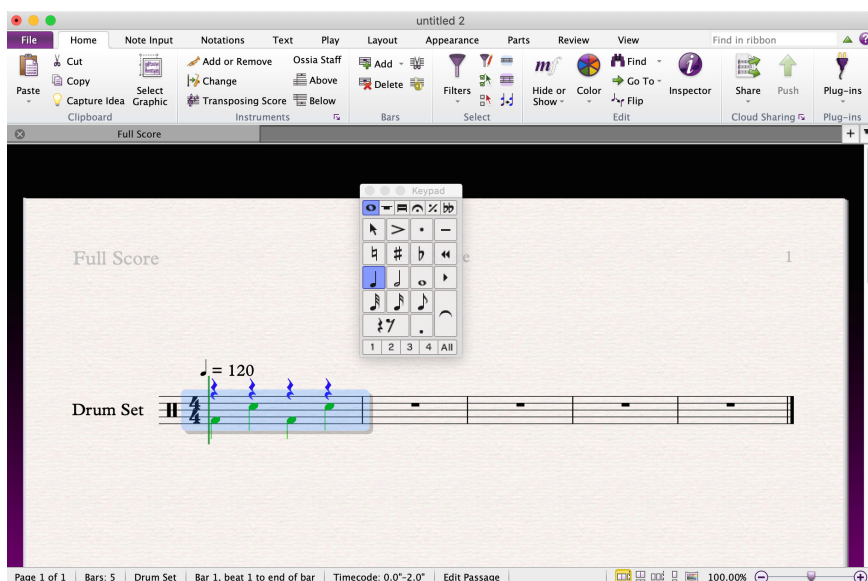


**5** To add the hi-hat part, select number 3 on the keypad, followed by the quaver. This will be orange: the different colours also help to indicate the different parts of the rhythm.
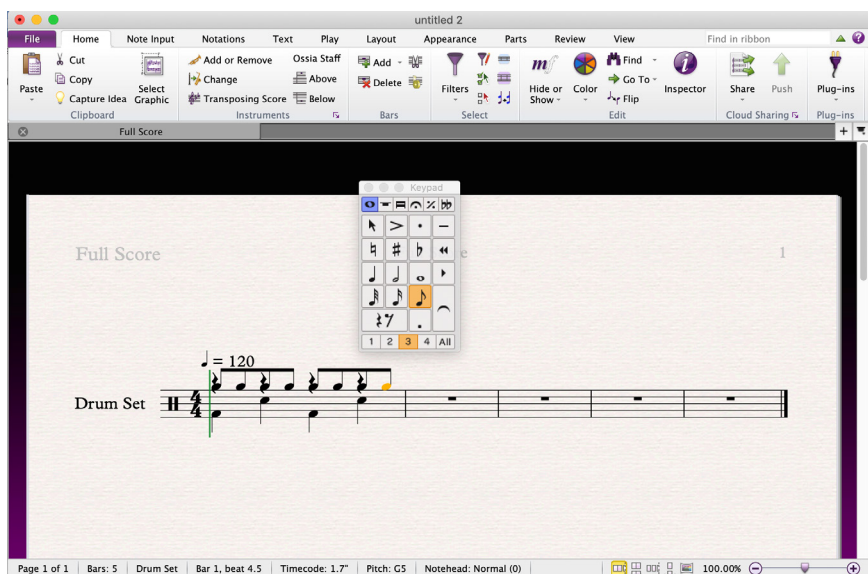
**6** The basic 4/4 rock beat is now complete, and students will have learnt how to lay out the score, and therefore how to put multiple parts on top of one another. To tidy up the score by removing the excess crotchet rests, click on them and press backspace twice.
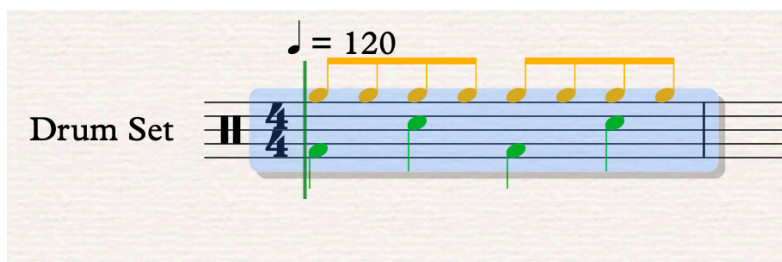


Creating a rock beat like this will give students a chance to test their knowledge of rhythm and also start to look at style. They will also learn how to read drum notation and how to add different parts using the numbers on the keypad. This feature of Sibelius will come in handy if they ever write vocal music, or undertake A level Bach chorales.

Once students have set up a basic rock beat, they can start to play around with the rhythms and thereby extend their understanding. They might come up with a more developed rock beat such as this:



This work might then form the basis for a pop/rock composition, or help students with a project on rap where they can write lyrics over the top. Mini-projects such as this are like ideas in an artist's sketchbook that they can refer to and build on later.

## Activity 3: atmosphere

Atmosphere in music is crucial, particularly when students want to compose cinematic or video game music. Sibelius can be used in a more abstract or creative way to create atmosphere, and you can even import video to watch play alongside the music once it's created.

Creating atmosphere requires students to think about what mood they think will fit a certain piece of film. First of all, find a film trailer or a scene from a movie on YouTube, download the movie file, and then import it into Sibelius. There are various websites that will help you capture videos from YouTube, and importing a bit of film into Sibelius is quick and easy: under the Play menu, there's an option to import video and then select its size. Once imported, this video will be time matched to the score.
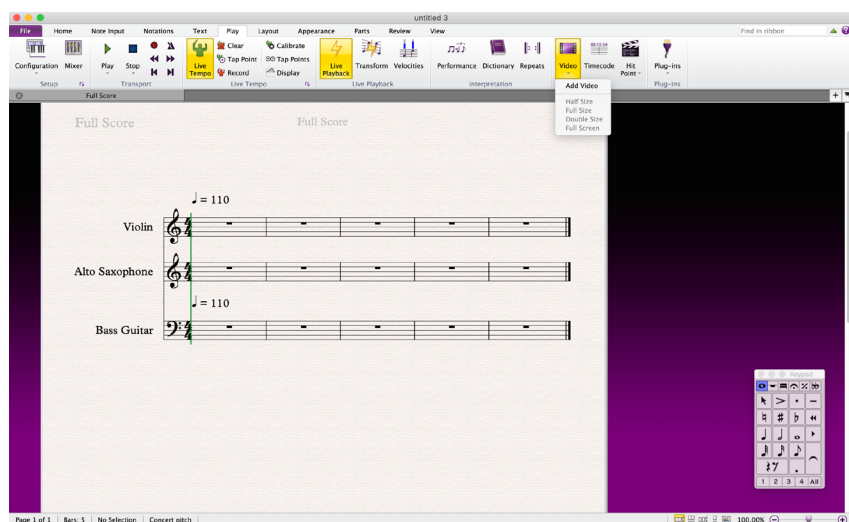


An alternative approach is to make a short film that students can then write music for. Alternatively, go against the existing film's mood: use a bright and cheery children's film or trailer and turn it into something sinister. Suspense is a good genre to start with because students can focus on eerie melodies and sudden bursts of rhythm.

Here are some of the ways students in which can create atmospheric ideas in Sibelius:

**1** Use percussion to create driving rhythmic patterns that match a chase scene or create a sense of build-up, for example:



**2** Create highly complex rhythms by filling bars with semi-quavers and then deleting notes at random from the bars. This is admittedly less of a musical approach, but the results are great in terms of atmosphere:

**3** Long, high-pitched notes are a highly effective way to introduce a sense of atmosphere to a piece of music. Furthermore, they're quick to add in Sibelius. Eventually they might become inverted pedal notes, but at first it's all about drawing the listener in:



**4** Cluster chords are fun to work with as they can be almost entirely random and focus more on rhythm than the notes of the chord itself. This might seem like a less musical approach, but the focus here is on atmosphere in the music. An effective way of approaching these chords is to ask students to add notes to an instrument of their choosing, maybe a marimba: they use the number keys at the top of the keyboard to add 'random' intervals on top of their starting note, eventually creating a cluster chord, which can then be repeated in an interesting rhythm. Students should then think about the overall sound they're trying to achieve.



**5** Now we have a long high note, an exciting rhythm and some cluster chords, it's time to add some percussive effects. Adding wind chimes is quick and easy on Sibelius, and works well at the start of a piece to get the listeners' attention. Students may then find other moments where wind chimes work: simply add them to the score and put a note on the stave at the point where you want them to sound.

Cymbal rolls can also be very effective, and they're accessed using the Keypad. Add a cymbal to the score, and then put a note where you want the roll to start. Using the Keypad, go to the third tab along at the top. With the cymbal note selected, click on the various different rolls offered to see which sound you prefer.
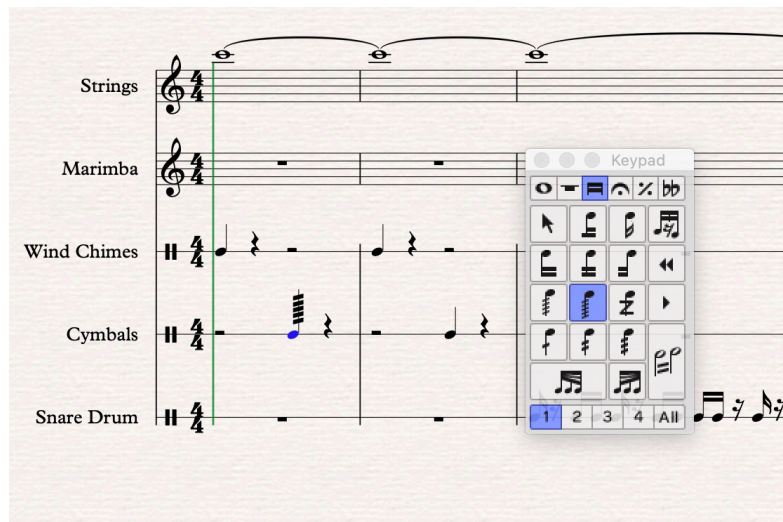


This activity not only incorporates the possibility of adding video, but also shows students more of Sibelius's capabilities: adding percussive effects, layering instruments, and experimenting with pitch. At Key Stage 3, this kind of organic, experimental composition can be very engaging for students. Importing a video helps to bring the music to life right before the students' eyes, and also helps them understand how music can be used – and how to be creative with the software.

## Finishing touches

Students may have already composed something at the piano or using a guitar, and they can now recreate their composition as a musical score using Sibelius. Alternatively, they can capture their ideas directly into the software.

Students should then consider how to present their final piece using the various score markings, tempo markings and dynamic markings. Sibelius will also allow them to mix their final audio to create a recording of their piece that has a sense of stereo panning.

Adding dynamics in Sibelius is easy: the keyboard shortcuts are H for a crescendo and shift-H for a diminuendo. If students select a whole bar and then press H, Sibelius will apply a crescendo to the whole bar.

Accents and staccato can also be added easily using the Keypad. Sibelius's three possibilities are located on the Keypad's first tab, with all of the notes we've been using. Individual notes or whole bars or sections of bars can be selected, and then accents can be added with just a single click.
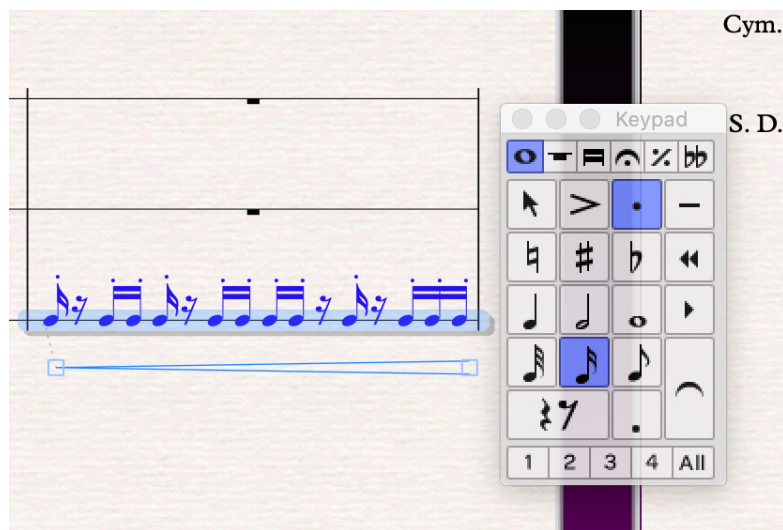


## Quick tips

To end, here are some solutions to recurring issues or questions about using Sibelius in the classroom:

▶ Where possible, show students what to do when using Sibelius at the front: modelling work using Sibelius is an effective way for them to learn.

▶ Students will often lose the Keypad, so make sure they know where to find it.

▶ Some students will not understand how rests suddenly appear in a bar when notes are added or removed, and you may need to explain this early on.

▶ When using percussion, a common problem is that the notes don't sit so that the stave line goes through them. Make sure students know where to put notes on the stave.

▶ Always add a metronome mark to a score when setting it up: it's easier than adding it later.