Using Sibelius at KS4

KS4

James Manwaring

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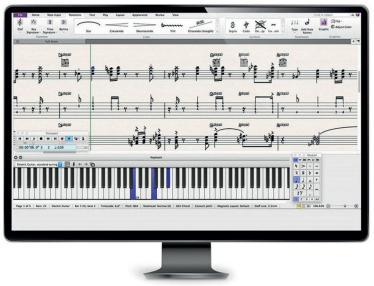


Introduction

Sibelius is a valuable tool for music teachers: not only can we use it for composition, but it also provides a useful way to bring theory to life. In this resource I will consider how you might use notation software to teach theory to GCSE students. The ideas presented will also help to stimulate compositional ideas, and start students off on their compositional journey.

Composition at GCSE

Composition is a large component of most GCSE courses. We often focus on performance, but composition is often given equal weighting in the exam – depending on your exam board, of course. Composition, however, is sometimes harder to teach than performance. Nevertheless, it's a journey that students need to go on when they start their GCSE course, and the goal is that they're able to write music for submission – and hopefully enjoy the process of doing it.

At the start of Year 10, we should teach our students the various components of composition. They need to understand how rhythm works, how to write a melody, and how to harmonise that melody. We can't expect them to simply start composing without any basic building blocks in place.

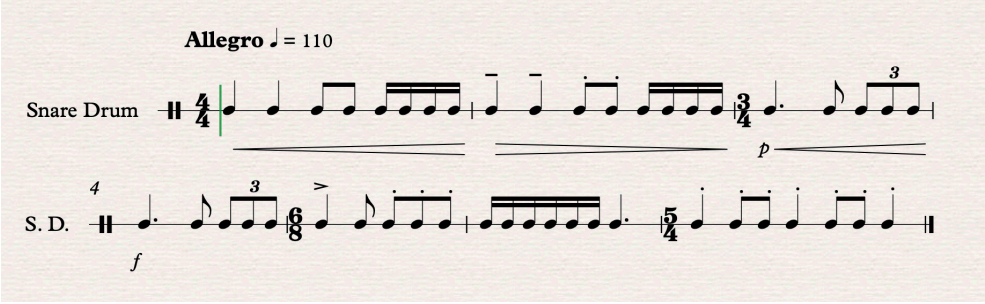
The ideas presented here are designed to teach students about compositional building blocks. What are the various things they need to consider when composing? Once they have that understanding, they'll be able to start composing a piece of music. And although it's outside the scope of this resource to go through different compositions/structures, I will suggest a few ideas.

Sibelius basics

If Sibelius is available to your GCSE students, it's likely that they will already have used it at Key Stage 3. It's worth checking that they understand some of the basic functions, however: for more guidance on using Sibelius at KS3, see the previous resource devoted to that subject (*Music Teacher*, November 2020). Here are some of the things they should ideally be able to do:

1. Create a score, add an instrument and then add notes.
2. Delete notes, change notes and add rests.
3. Create chords
4. Write drumkit rhythms and parts.
5. Add dynamic, tempo and articulation markings.

You might like to start your KS4 students with a simple task that involves creating rhythms using a snare drum. Not only will it get them to think about everything they can do with a single rhythm, but it will also help you gauge what they can already do with the software. Ask them to be creative with their rhythms, and to use as many dynamic, tempo and articulation markings as they can. You might end up with something like this:



Alternatively, simple ask students to use Sibelius to show off everything they know about the software. This will immediately help you to see where they are and what they can do. Whether or not

they have any experience of composing is another matter entirely, of course, but being able to use Sibelius will help with that.

One-note composition

You can begin your students' compositional journey with a one-note composition. It's very effective to use Sibelius for this project because they can listen back to their ideas quickly and easily.

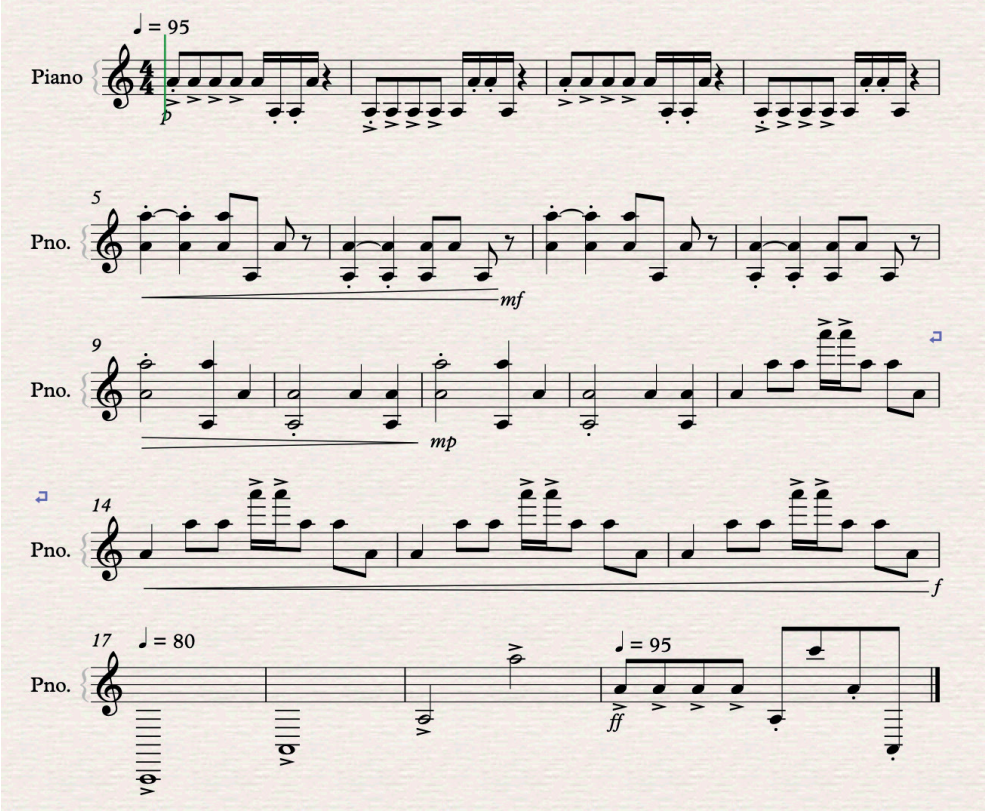
What exactly is a one-note composition? Here is a brief that you could give to your students:

- You're only allowed to use one note, but it's up to you what that note is – G, C, D flat... pick one!
- You're allowed to use this note in any octave and any number of octaves.
- You should create interesting rhythms.
- You should include a wide range of dynamics.
- You need to use at least two different time signatures.
- You can use any instrument, but only one instrument, but you must choose it rather that simply picking it at random.

Most students will remember the basics of rhythm and metre from KS3, but it might be worth refreshing that knowledge. The composing process here should be very creative and enjoyable, and your students should get a lot from this brief.

The idea for this one-note composition came originally from Ligeti's *Music ricercata* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIs3jechQ_E**). That piece technically uses two notes, but the second note doesn't come in until right at the end. Don't show this to your students before they start their work because they shouldn't copy it too much. They might be interested to compare their versions with Ligeti's piece once they've finished them, however.

Here is an example of a one-note composition that one of my own students created:



This one-note composition task requires students to use a range of skills on Sibelius. Adding dynamics, for example, is easy to do:

- The keyboard shortcut for crescendo is H.
- Shift-H will put a diminuendo in the bar.
- To add piano, forte and other dynamic indications, select the note where the dynamic begins and press CTRL-E. Then simply type a p for piano or an f for forte.

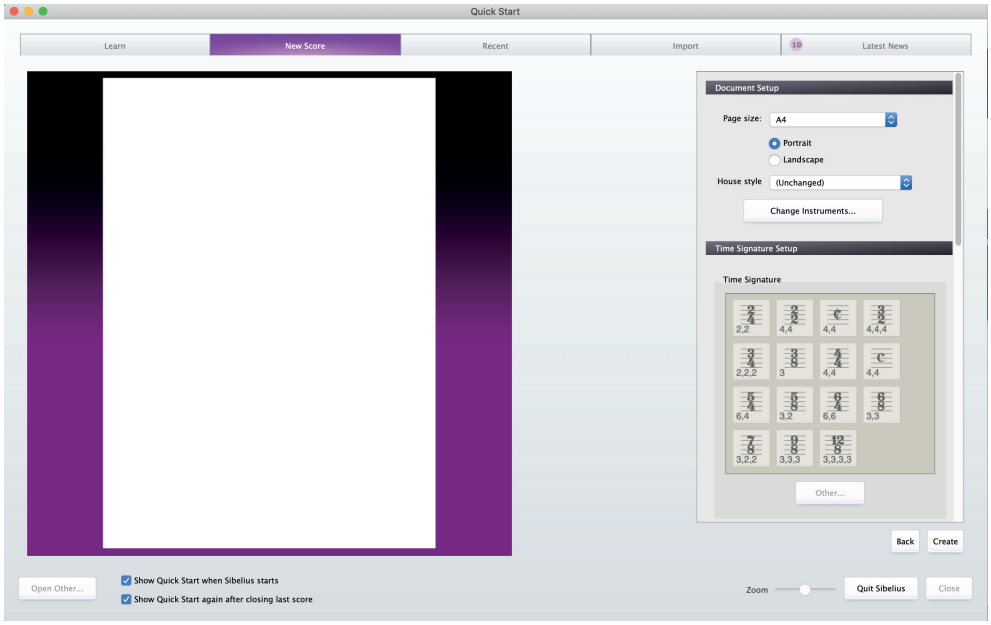
These simple Sibelius functions start to make a score score much more detailed, and provide useful ways to develop a basic composition.

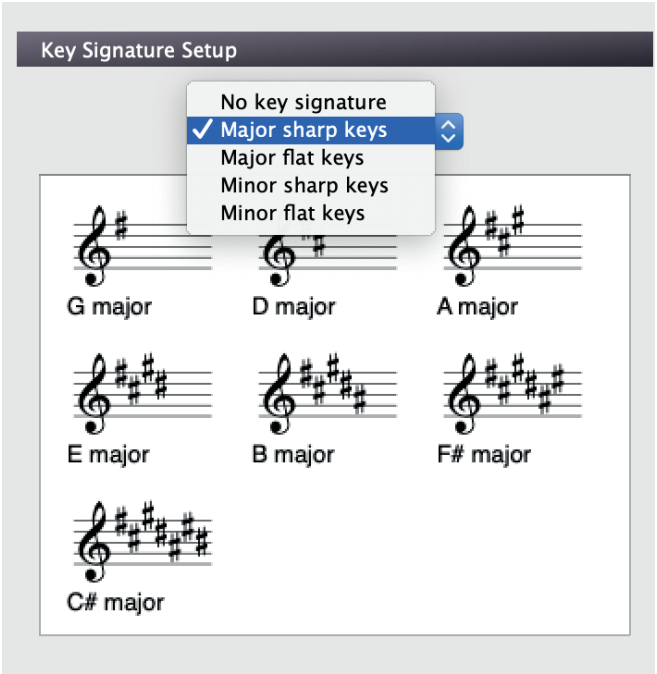
Scales and chord progressions

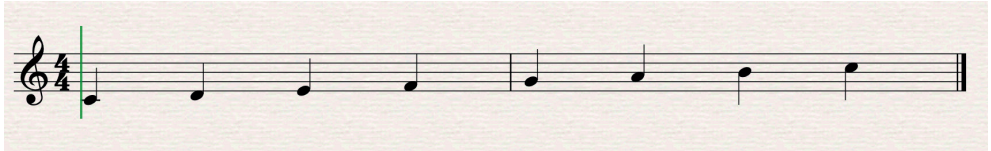
Many students find it challenging to understand harmony. Sibelius, however, can be used to teach students about the chords in a key and how they are formed. Students often start to understand scales far better when they create them and listen to them themselves.

It's simple to creating a scale or mode in Sibelius:

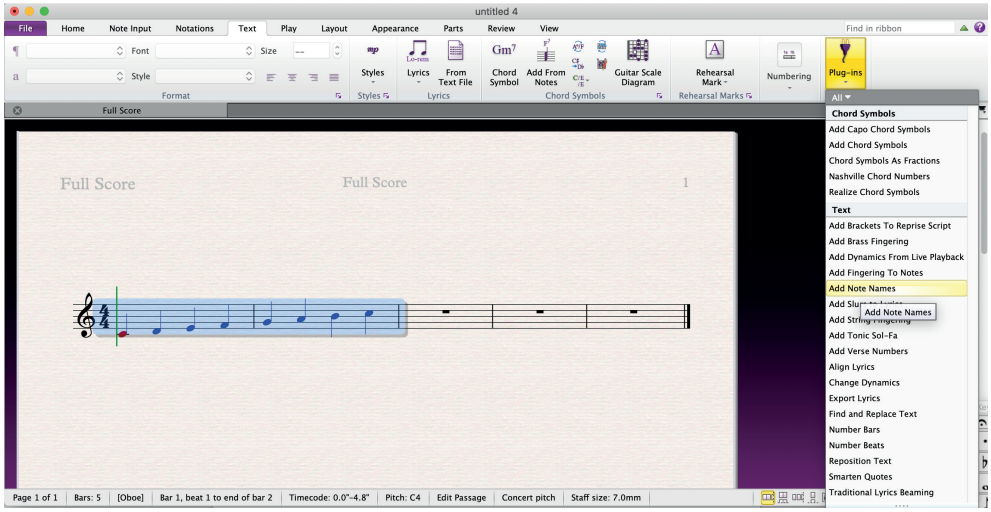
1. Add an instrument: let the student choose something they like or want to work with.
2. Choose a key signature underneath where the instruments are added.
3. Select a crotchet and then type the scale using the computer keyboard. If you're using C major, for example, simply press the letters CDEFGAB on the keyboard.
4. You now have a major scale.

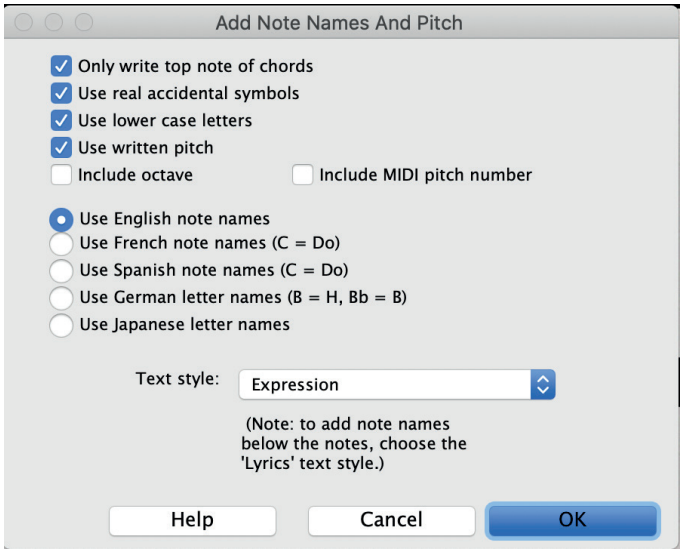


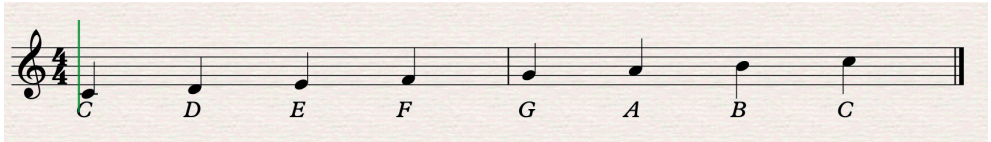




This is a simple starting point, but it gets students used to 'typing in' a scale – a process that can later be used when it comes to melody. Typing a melody into Sibelius can make the whole process much quicker. Doing things this way also helps students who are less confident about the positions of notes on the stave. If they still need support with learning where the notes are, Sibelius can add the note names using the following menu:

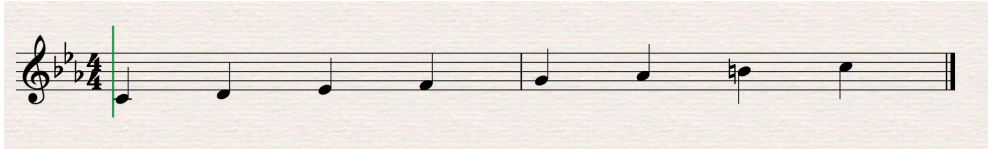






The key point in this process is that Sibelius can help students with both their music theory and their confidence. Adding note names is a simple function within the software, but it can make a big difference for some students.

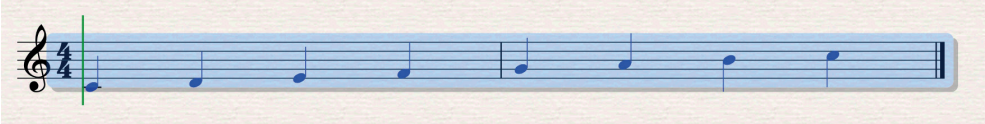
Now that they have a major scale, they can move on to adding a minor scale. Here, listening is key: Sibelius will not automatically sharpen the seventh note of the scale. When students type the scale they will need to sharpen the seventh manually – but you might like to let them work that out on their own with their ears.



Students could then make several scales in different keys, and save that document for later use: it will be helpful for them to have a sheet full of lots of useful scales and chords.

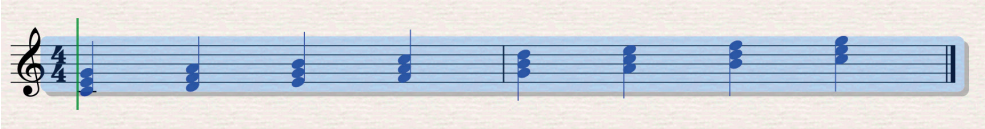
Creating chords in Sibelius is very simple, and a direct extension of creating scales:

1 Choose a scale and highlight the whole scale by holding down shift and clicking on the first and last note. The notes will be surrounded by a blue box.

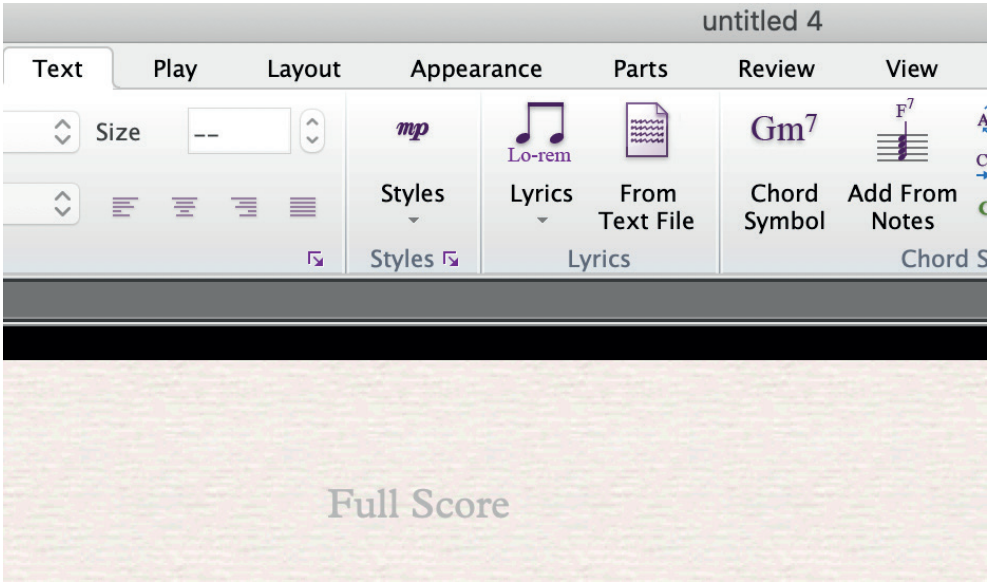


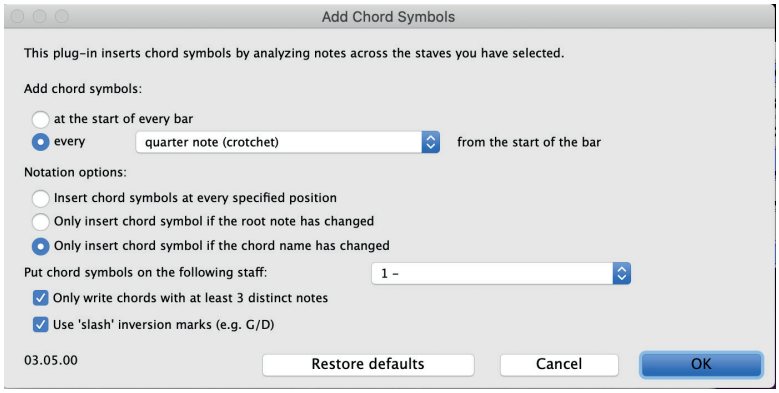
2 To create chords/triads, type 3 then another 3 on the computer keyboard.

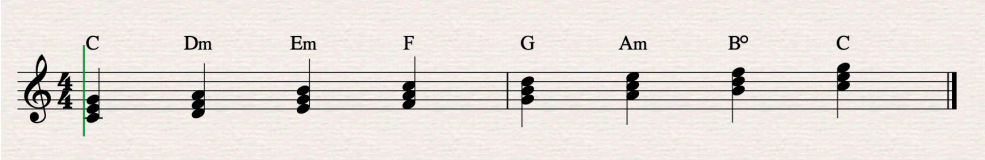
3 The numbers on the computer keyboard correspond to intervals, so typing 3,3 adds a 3rd and then another 3rd. (Typing 5 would add a 5th, and typing 8 would add an octave.) There's an opportunity to do some extension work here on intervals if you wish.



4 Students should now have the triads in a given key, and this works for major and minor modes. It would now be helpful to add the chord names to this scale, so that they know what they have. Just under the text menu there's an 'Add from Notes' button. With the triads selected, click on this button to open another box. Clicking OK will then add the chord names above the chords.

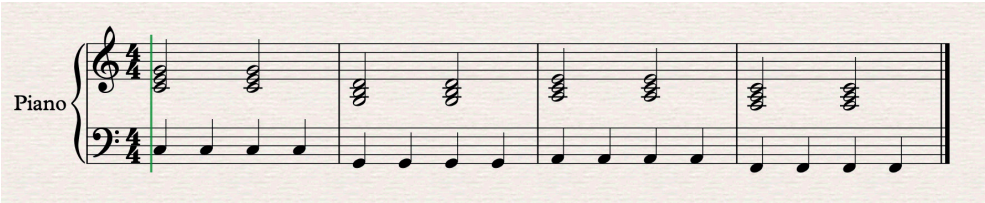




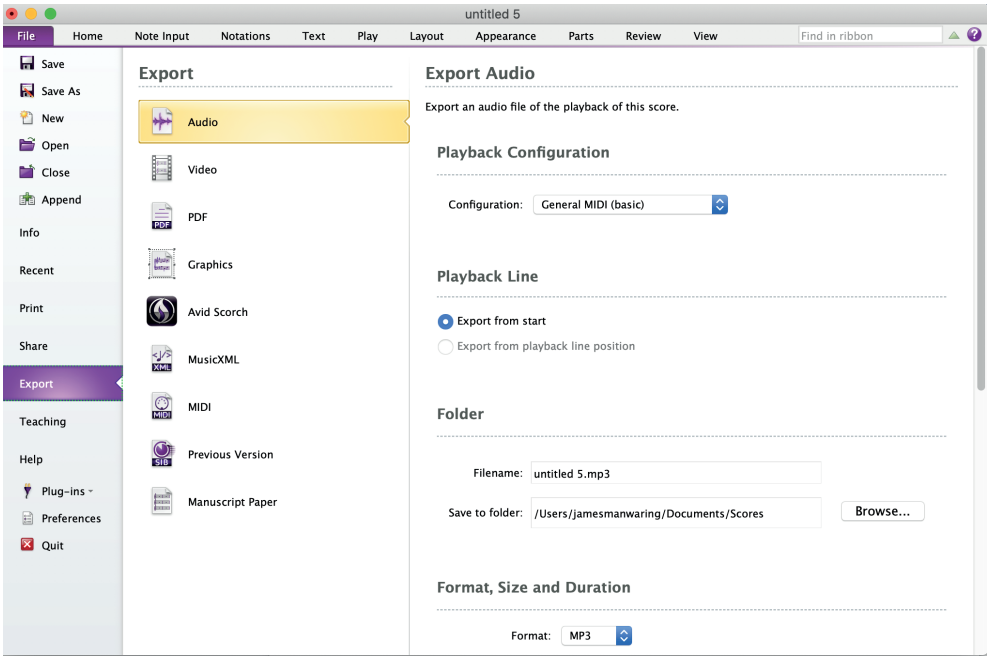


These processes will not only help students to learn how to use the software, but also develop their musical understanding. Students who are struggling to understand chords, harmony or scales will probably benefit from physically making them within Sibelius. Once they've done that, they can also listen to them, and start to learn what major, minor and diminished chords sound like.

Creating scales and chords is an effective way to embed understanding, and Sibelius provides a quick way of creating chords. Once they've done the exercise above, students can easily put together a chord progression in Sibelius by copying and pasting chords from the theory sheet they produced earlier. In this example, I've created a simple chord progression with bassline:



Students can then export their chord progression to Audio, which they can then take home and use to come up with a melody, perhaps combining software and a real musical instrument.



Minimalism or serialism

Students should be able to understand how to vary, develop and extend melodic ideas. They may often come up with an effective melody or ostinato, but then fail to fully explore that idea. Sibelius offers useful ways of helping students come up with new ideas from an initial starting point.

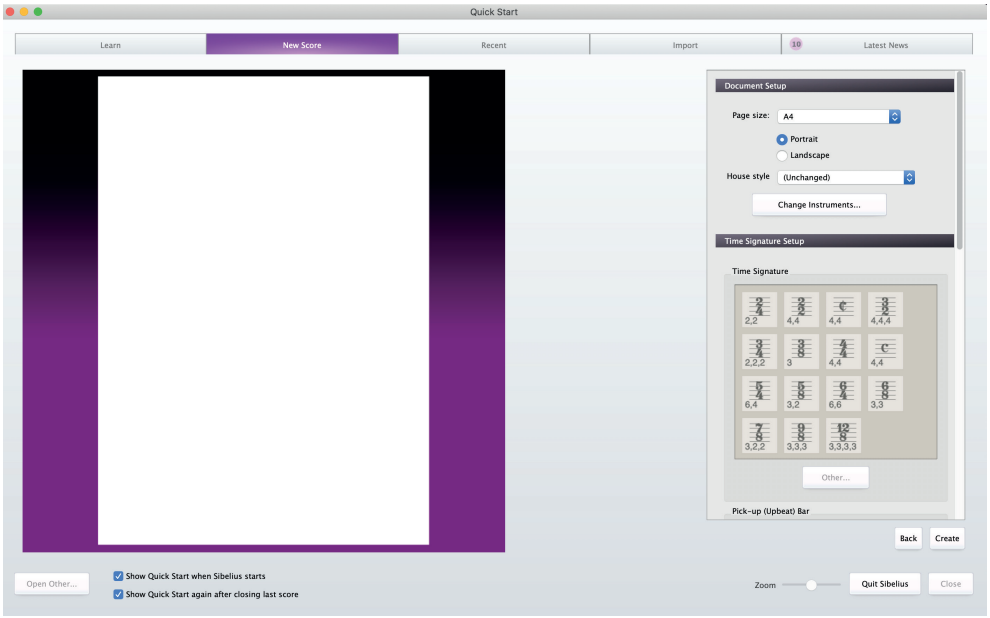
One possible approach to this project, depending on the class or stage, is to use the idea of minimalism or serialism. The idea of taking small ideas and adapting, evolving and extending them fits well with minimalism, and serialism relies on developing the a note row. You may like to use these ideas to then move into a full topic on minimalism or serialism as styles. Serialism can offer an effective way of getting students to think about everything other than traditional melody. Working in this way will also help students to learn more about using Sibelius. In this step-by-step example, I'll use a minimalist motif as the main idea.

Step-by-step guide

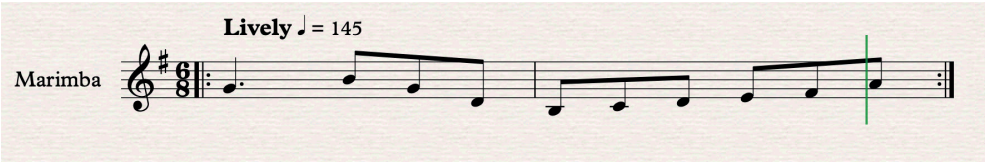
Students should first create a short melodic idea or ostinato. It might be pentatonic, or they might just use notes from a specific key.

This is a good moment, too, to get students thinking about composition and what it means to compose. When they're thinking of their initial idea, they could use their own instrument, or a piano. It might also be good for them to think about a mood, atmosphere or topic to base this idea around: you might consider using an animal, photo or particular word to help students come up with this first idea.

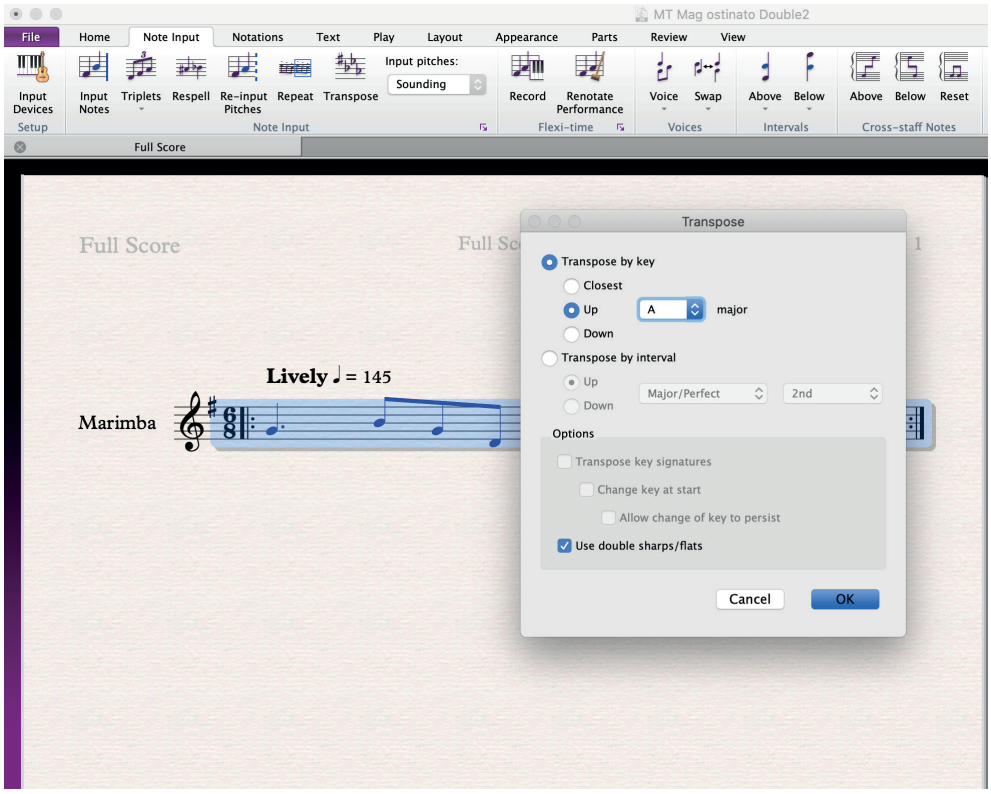
1. Come up with an idea behind the melodic motif – maybe an animal, a place, a word or a phrase. Make sure that students are aware that composers start off with ideas, and a plan of some kind.
2. Students should now make some decisions based on this plan: time, tempo, tonality, instrument and key. When they first set up the score, they can select all of this on the first page.



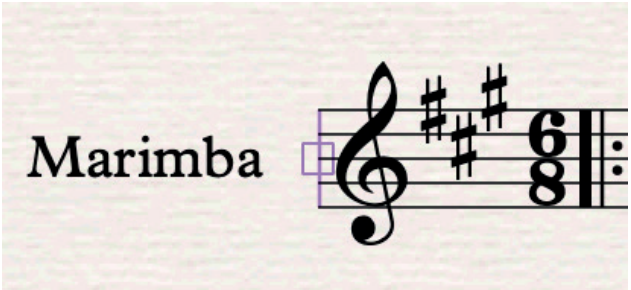
3. Once they've made these decisions, students might like to get out an instrument or find a piano so that they can start coming up with ideas. Their initial motif will be two to four bars long.
4. Students who find it hard to come up with melodic ideas might like to start with a rhythm in Sibelius. This rhythm can then quickly be turned into a motif by clicking on the notes of the rhythm and then pressing a relevant keyboard key – ABCDEFG. With Sibelius, you can instantly listen back to your idea and then make changes if you need to. Moving a note up or down is easy with the arrows on the computer keyboard, for example.

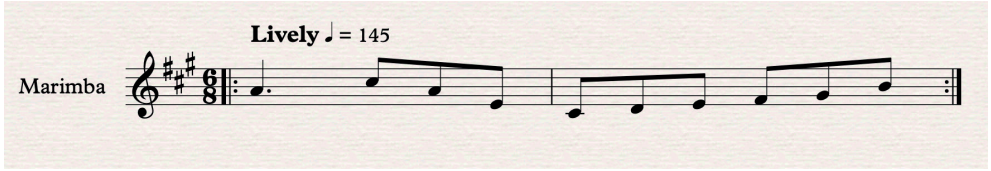


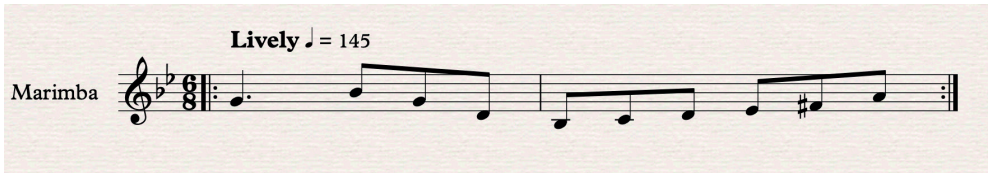
5 Now that students have a two-bar melodic idea, let's start to think about the things that we can do with this idea, and the ways Sibelius can help us. First, students can quickly and easily change the key of this idea using the transpose function. Transpose is found under the Note Input menu. You can decide if you want to move it up by an interval or transpose it to a specific key. Once it's transposed, you should change the key signature by clicking on the very beginning and pressing K on the keyboard. Select the passage you want to transpose and then click on the Transpose menu at the top.



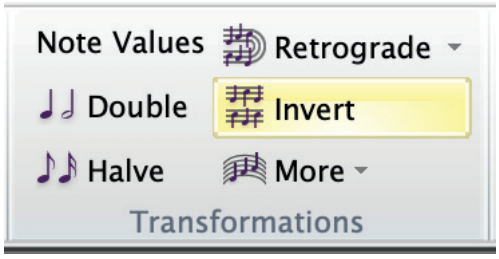
Putting the melody into a minor key is slightly different, since you'll need to manually sharpen the seventh note. But it's simply to put the original idea we've come up with into G minor by changing the key and then sharpening the F.



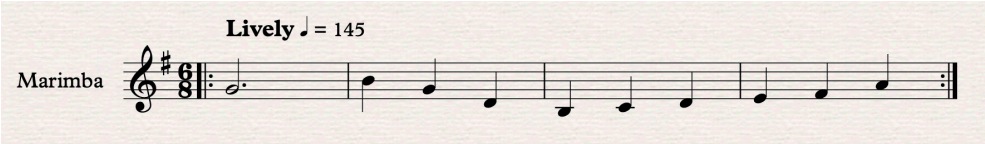




6 Now students can use Sibelius to alter their original idea. There are several ways of doing that. For rhythmic alterations – diminution and augmentation, for example – Sibelius can quickly and easily halve or double all the note values. This is carried out in the Note Input menu section:

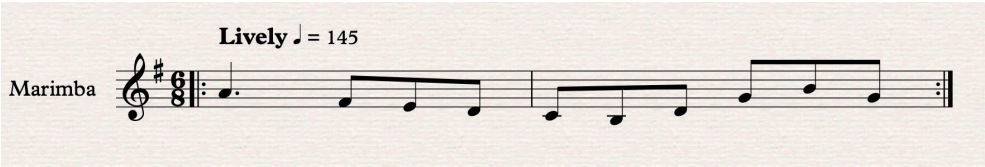


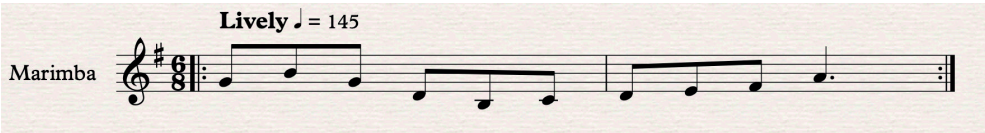
These transformations are easy to do manually, but it saves time to use Sibelius. Simply select the passage and then decide which transformation you wish to use. When you click on Double or Halve, Sibelius will open up a dialogue box: simply press okay. Then a new score will launch with the transformed melody. Copy the new score, close the new window, and then paste it into your existing score.

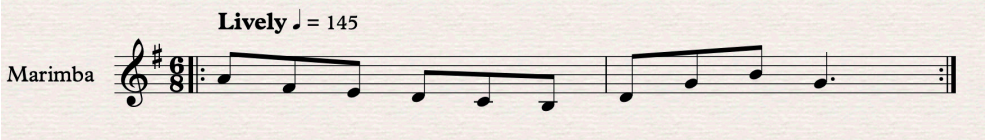


Students might find it interesting to hear how it sounds to layer the 'halved' version on top of the original version.

7 Another useful Sibelius function is Retrograde Transformation, which turns the melody, rhythm or both backwards, thereby providing a way of creating a new melodic idea based on the original. Here are all three options based on the original melody:

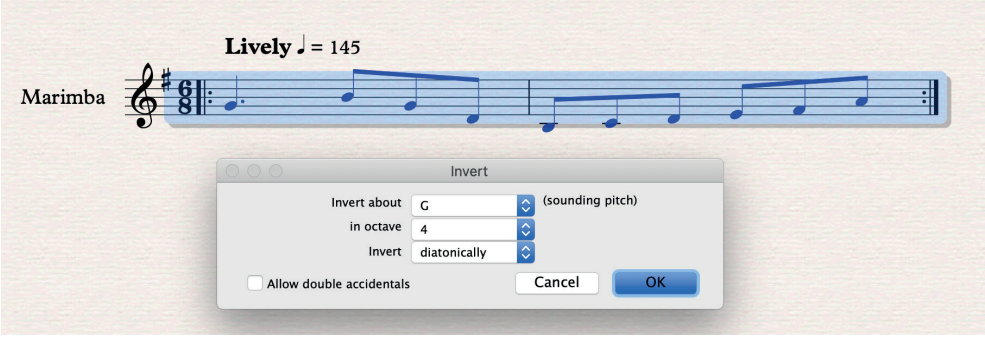


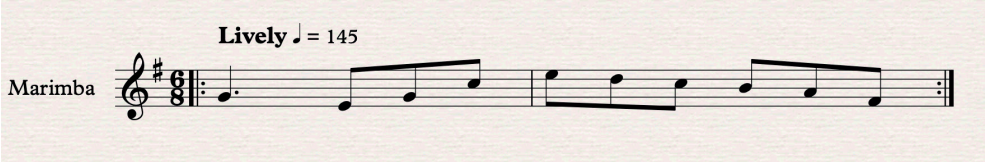




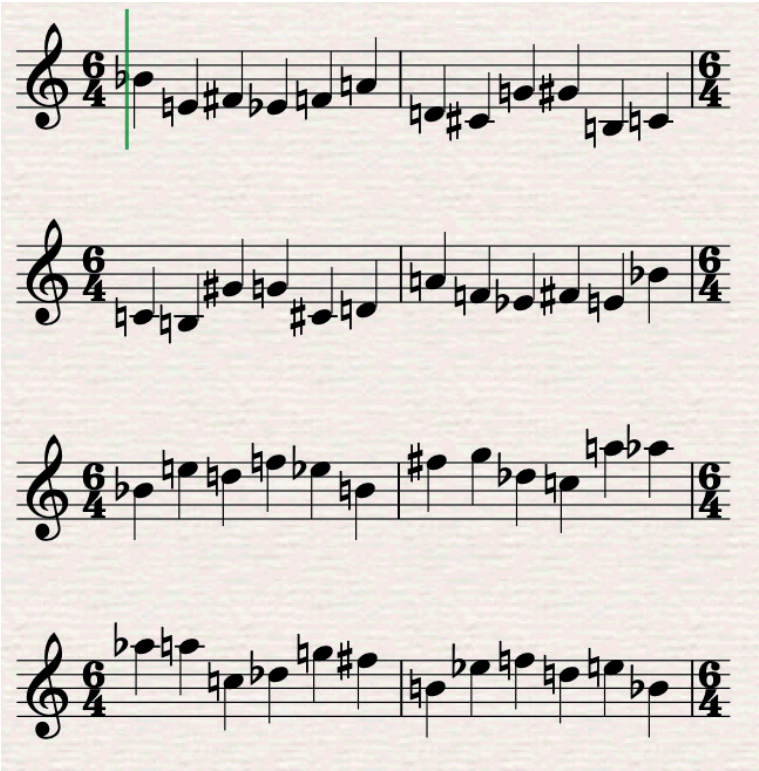
Once students have these new ideas generated by Sibelius, they can start to work out what they might do with them. Of course, they can also bring together Retrograde Transformation with Diminution or Augmentation to come up with even more ideas.

8 Another useful transformation offered by Sibelius is Inversion, which turns the melody upside down and therefore changes the intervals. It's an effective way of making yet another idea based on the original, and Sibelius makes the process very simple.





9 There are many more transformations available within Sibelius, but there's a danger that they might become quite arbitrary and take students far away from their initial idea. It's fun for students to experiment with these functions, however, and discover new ideas as a result. Although Sibelius is doing all the detailed work, students are left with the more important task of using and arranging the ideas that have been generated. A composer will take ideas and put them together into a completed piece of music, and this functionality within Sibelius allows students to generate a bank of melodic ideas that they can draw on in composing their piece. If they want to tackle serialism, these functions will help equally well. Here is the note row used by Schoenberg, for example, in his 1928 Variations for Orchestra, together with versions that are retrograde, inversion and retrograde inversion:

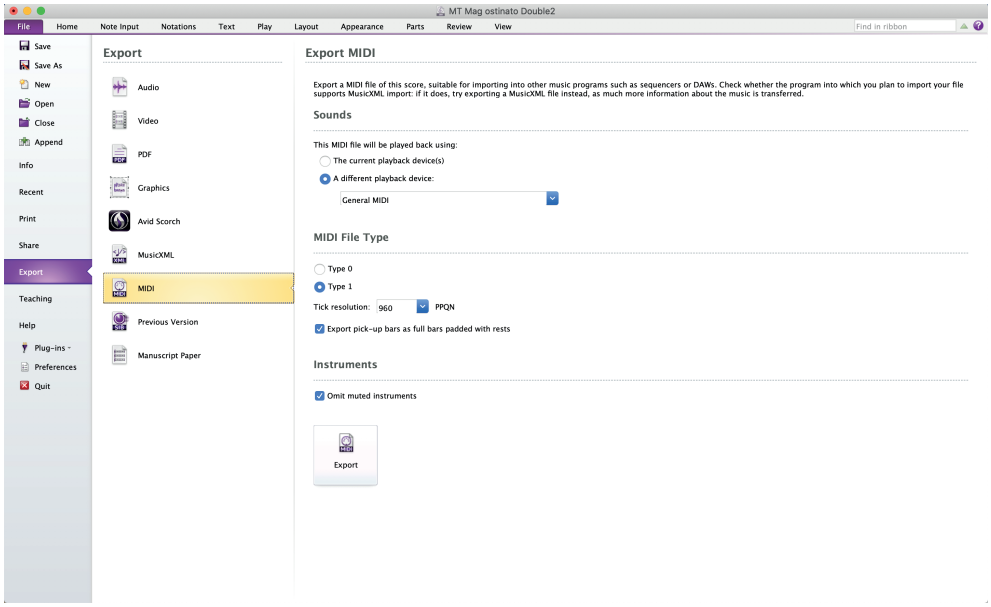


Sibelius and MIDI

Sibelius is a valuable source for creating ideas. Students may sometimes prefer to use other software, however, such as Cubase, Ableton, Logic or Garageband. Whichever DAW you use, however, it will almost certainly be able to import MIDI. In many ways, MIDI can be thought of as a musical language, and an idea in Sibelius can be exported and imported as MIDI. At GCSE level, it's useful to encourage

students to use MIDI, so that they think of ways of combining computer-created ideas with live recordings or found sounds.

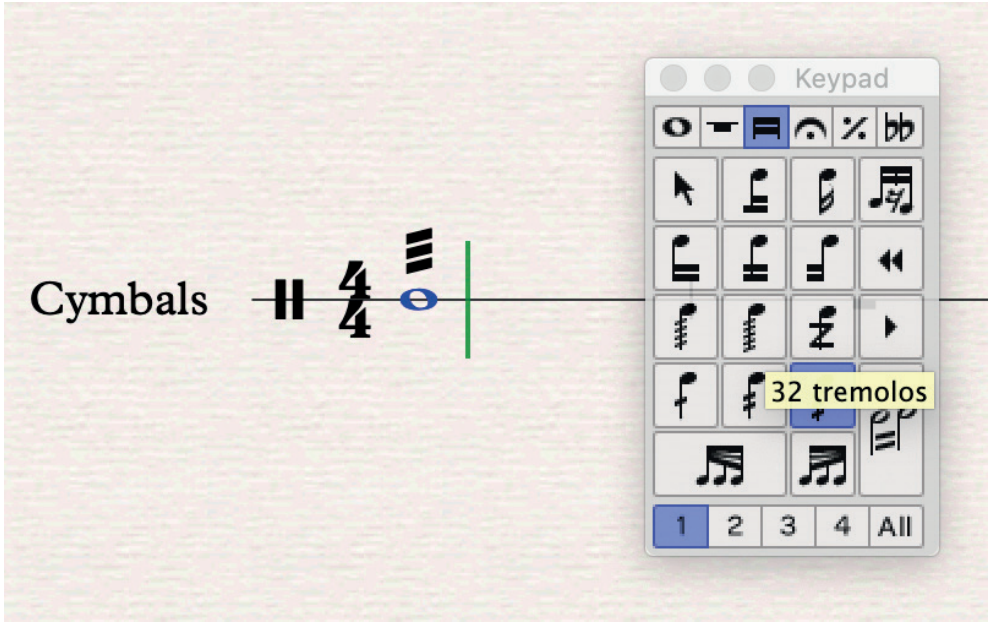
Exporting as MIDI with Sibelius is simple. It can be found under the File menu:



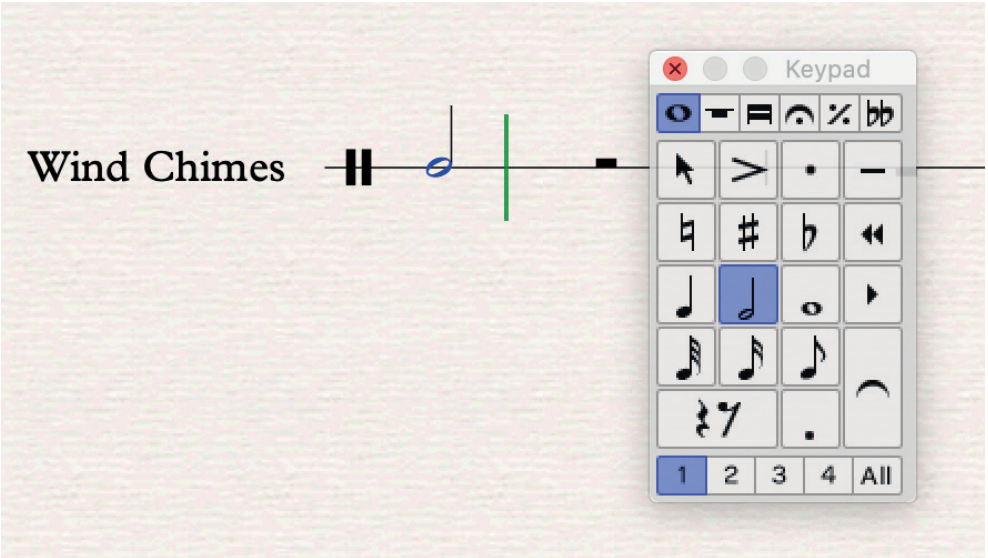
Percussion in Sibelius

Adding percussion to a composition can be a very effective way of bringing it to life. Percussion can be in the form of a melody or chords on tuned percussion, or colours and effects on untuned percussion. Encouraging students to experiment with percussion will help them to find new sounds to use in their music.

Cymbal rolls are very effective, and can easily be added to a piece using the Keypad:



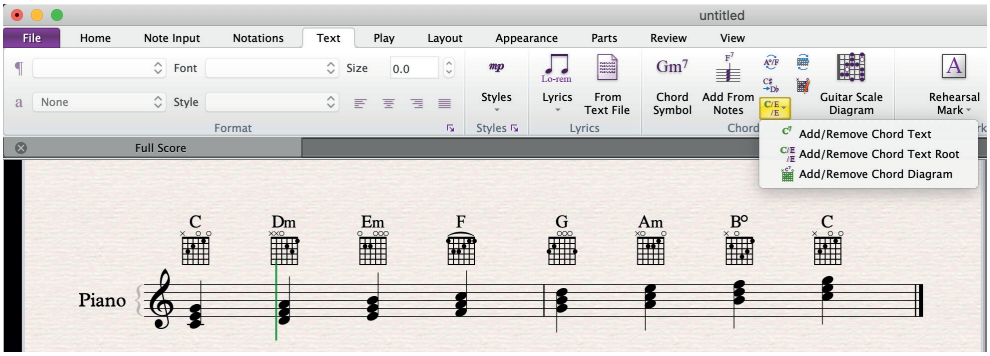
Wind chimes are also easy to add to a score as an instrument. Simply add the wind chime to the bar and it will sound like someone is running a beater along the chimes:



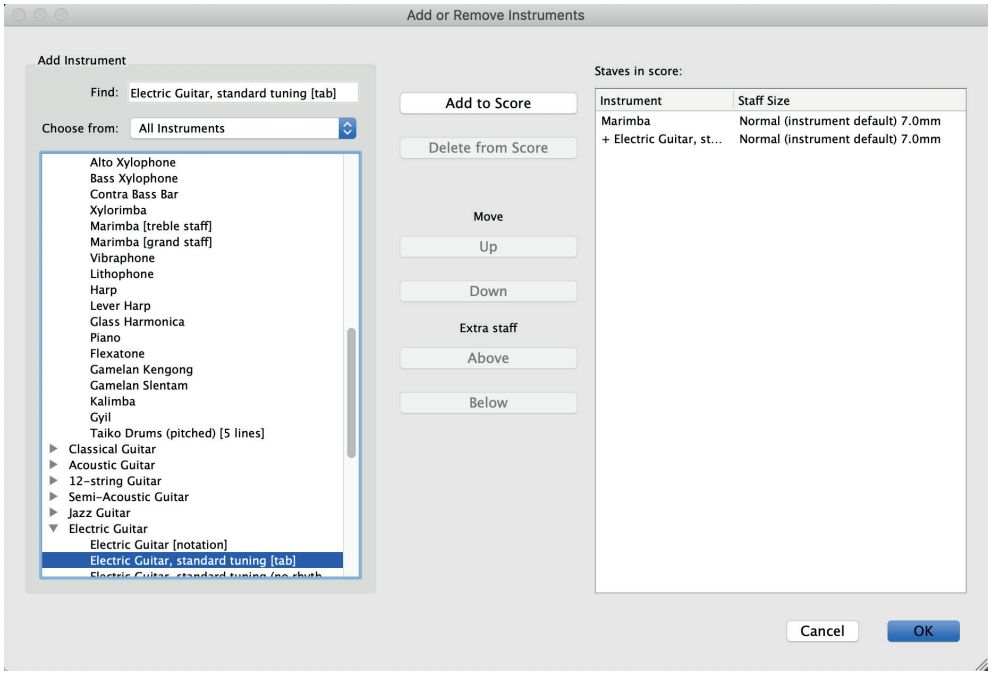
Quick tips

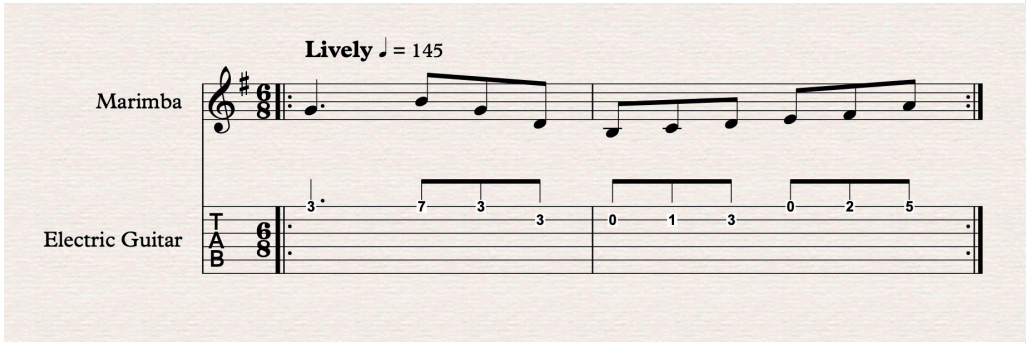
Here are a few quick tips about using Sibelius that it's useful for students to know about:

- Always add a metronome mark, title, upbeat and composer name when setting up the score. It's quicker and easier to do that at the beginning, and it's a good habit to get into.
- Learn to use the number pad on the right-hand side of the computer keyboard. It offers quicker and easier ways of doing things.
- Always think about dynamics as you go, rather than thinking that they can be added at the end. It's a lot more musical to do things that way.
- Working in Panorama view might be useful for some students as it lays things out continuously – worth a look to see if it's more user-friendly.
- Encourage students to use Sibelius to gather ideas, as if it were a digital sketchbook. But also encourage them to use 'real' instruments in the process as well.
- Keep guitarists happy by adding guitar symbols instead of the traditional piano chord symbols. Once you've added chords names, you can also add chord diagrams:



▶ Make guitarists even happier by converting melodic ideas into tab so that they can read them more easily. Simply add an electric guitar with tab as an instrument, and then copy and paste a melody onto the guitar. Sibelius will automatically convert this to tab:





Conclusion

This resource has looked at some of the ways we can use Sibelius to teach both composition and theory. Once students have a grasp of the functions and facilities within Sibelius, they can begin to use it to support their compositions. There's obviously some debate over the process of composing – so do encourage students not just to sit at a screen, but also to compose using their own instrument or at a piano. Students should use notation software to support their understanding and learning, as well as to enhance compositions. If they want to create an orchestral film score, but don't have an orchestra at their disposal, Sibelius can come to their rescue. But the melodies, harmonies, ideas and atmospheres all need to be discovered by students before they start. Sibelius is a valuable way of realising, arranging and creating music, and GCSE music students will benefit from using it.