Soundtrap

KS3/4

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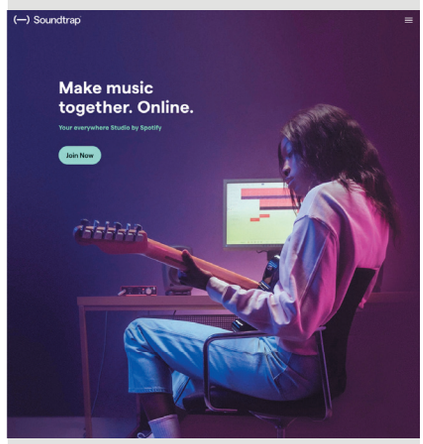


Introduction

Following last month's resource on BandLab (*Music Teacher*, June 2021), this month we turn to Soundtrap. Soundtrap and BandLab are both digital audio workstations (or DAWs) based in the cloud. They are both launched through a web browser, and they have similar functionality. BandLab is a free DAW, whereas Soundtrap does come at a cost, albeit a reasonable one.

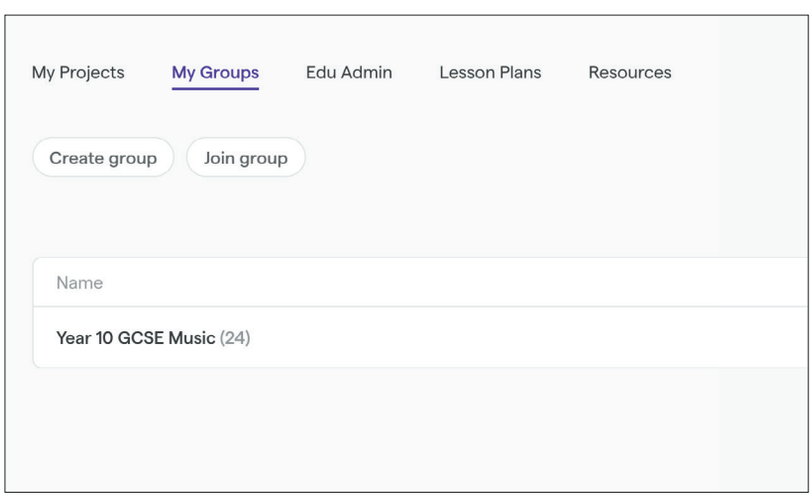
In this resource, I'll introduce Soundtrap, but I'll also point back to the BandLab resource where there are similarities between the two systems. Some of the concepts, functions and ideas around Soundtrap are similar to those discussed in the BandLab resource, but Soundtrap also has some unique functionality, including its powerful podcasting feature. Furthermore, some of the Soundtrap project ideas in this resource could be used equally well with BandLab.

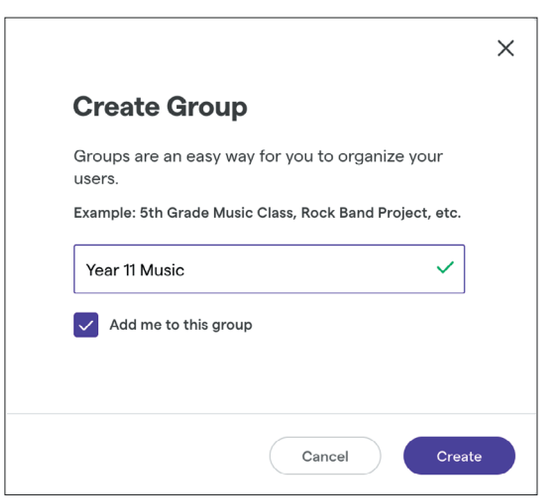
You can access Soundtrap at **www.soundtrap.com**. If you're interested in a demo or trial of Soundtrap, contact one of the following providers:

- MusicFirst: **www.musicfirst.co.uk**
- Future DJs: **www.futuredjs.org**

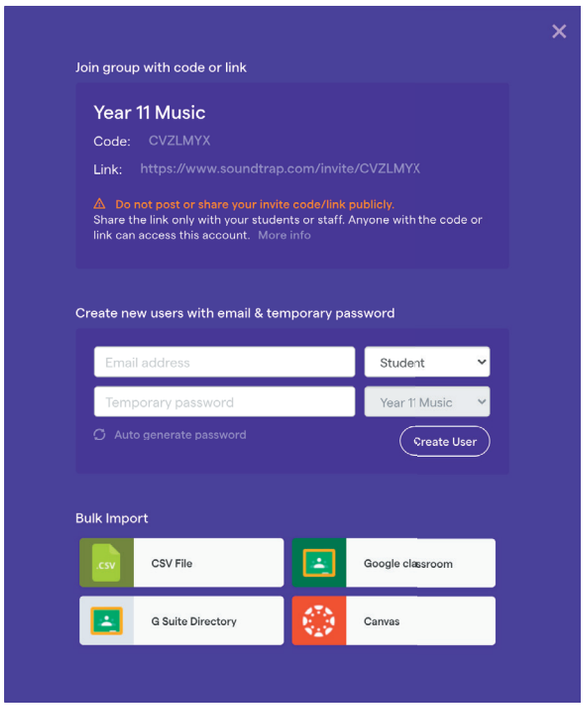
Setting up Soundtrap

In the BandLab resource (April 2021), we looked at how to add classes to BandLab that students can join. Soundtrap has a similar function. Once you're logged into Soundtrap, click on My Groups and then Create Groups. This then gives you the option to add a group to your account:





Once you've created a group, it's simple to add students. You can share a link with them to join the group, or they can use a code to join the group. They will need to already be registered with Soundtrap to do so.

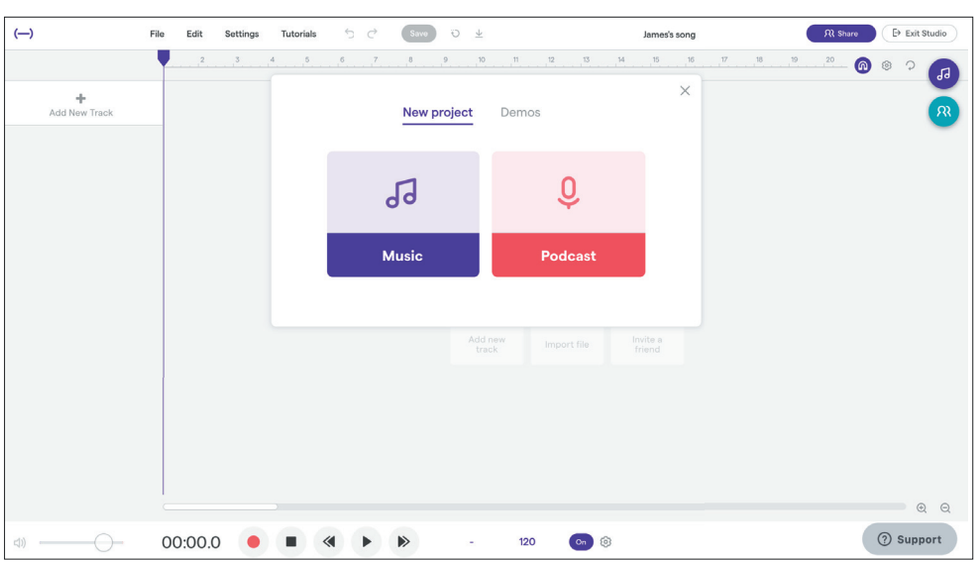


If they have a seat already, they will join the group. If they don't have a seat, you will need to assign then one. Click on EDU Admin and send students the link to join, using their school email. Using a school email address makes it easy to track them, and it's also good practice from a safeguarding point of view. You can also easily add users to your account as long as you have enough seats to do so.

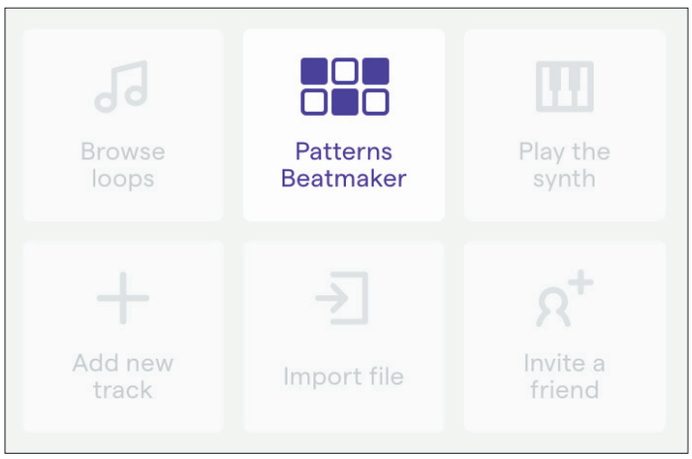
Starting with Beat Maker

In the BandLab resource, we looked at how students can quickly and easily generate beats. Soundtrap's Beat Maker is a good place to start with this system.

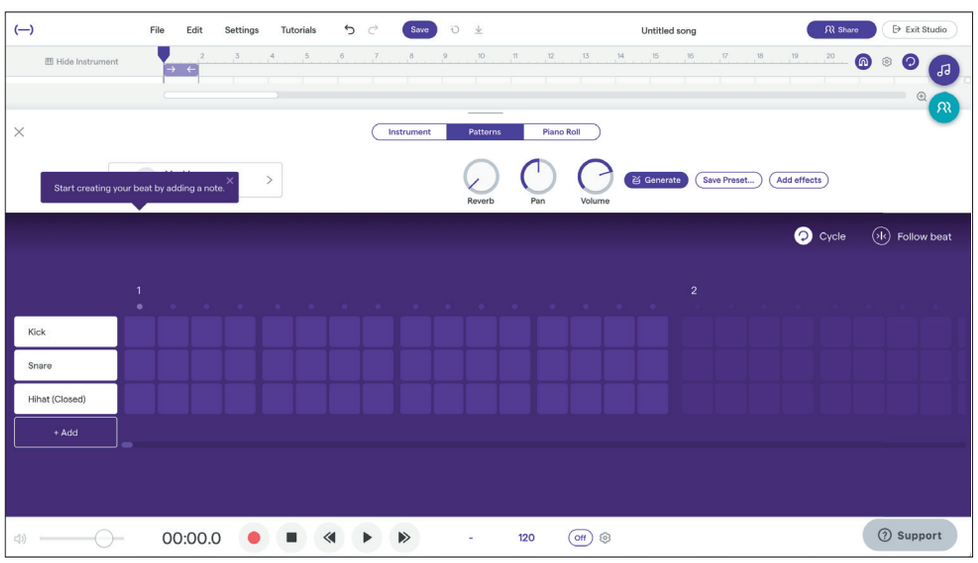
When you've logged into Soundtrap, click on the studio icon at the top of the page. This will open the Soundtrap studio, which is where the music making takes place. Click on the Music icon to open the Music Studio.



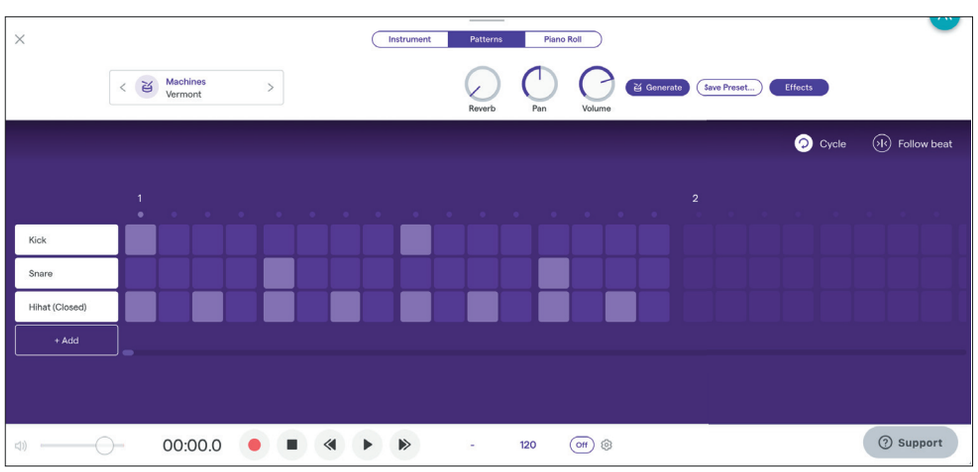
You will then see various options: we are going to begin with the Patterns Beatmaker. This function allows students to quickly create beats that can then form the basis for a composition. As with BandLab, creating a beat is an ideal way to get to know a DAW.



The Beat Maker uses a grid approach, and students can create a beat by selecting the squares that correspond to the different drums. By default, it will start with one bar, which it breaks down into 16 squares.



At this stage, refer back to the BandLab resource for some ideas related to creating beats in a DAW. The beat shown below is a classic four on the floor rock beat with bass, snare and hi-hat.

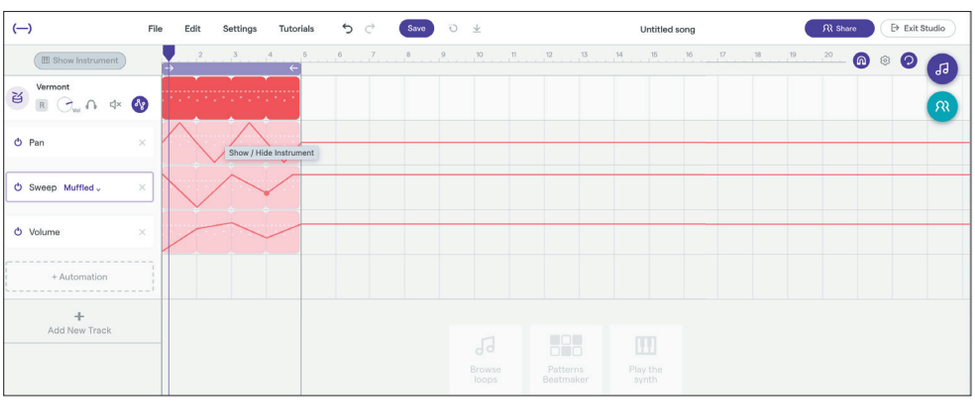


Much like BandLab, Soundtrap comes with a range of different drumkits, and it's always good to encourage students to listen to the full range of sounds available to them.

Adding automation

Automation within a DAW allows us to add certain processes to a track once music has been added. The first three automations to focus on are Volume, Panning and Sweep. Volume is a self-explanatory automation, but it's still a handy tool that allows students to gradually fade a track in or out. Panning will allow students to affect the stereo aspect of a track, and can be used to move the sound between the left and right speakers, or to keep the sound spread evenly across both. Sweep is where we change the frequency, creating a really interesting and exciting sound. There are different types of sweep that students can explore, which is another good way to get to know Soundtrap.

The key to automation is understanding what to do with the red line that appears under the track. Once you've opened the Automation line, you can select whether you want to affect the Volume, Panning or Sweep. You then click on the line to add dots. These dots can then be dragged up and down and moved around to create the desired automation, as seen in the image below.

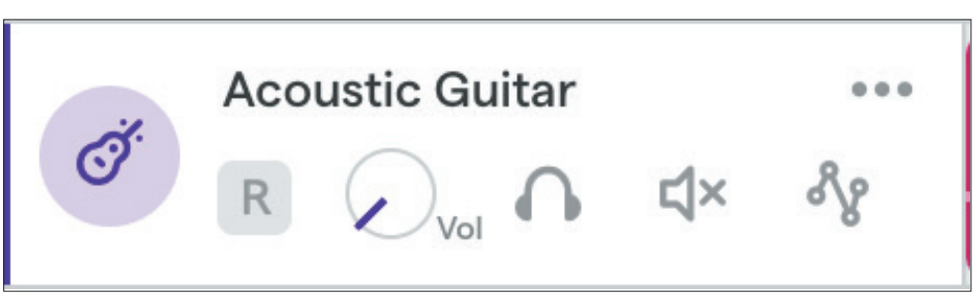


Using effects to enhance the sound

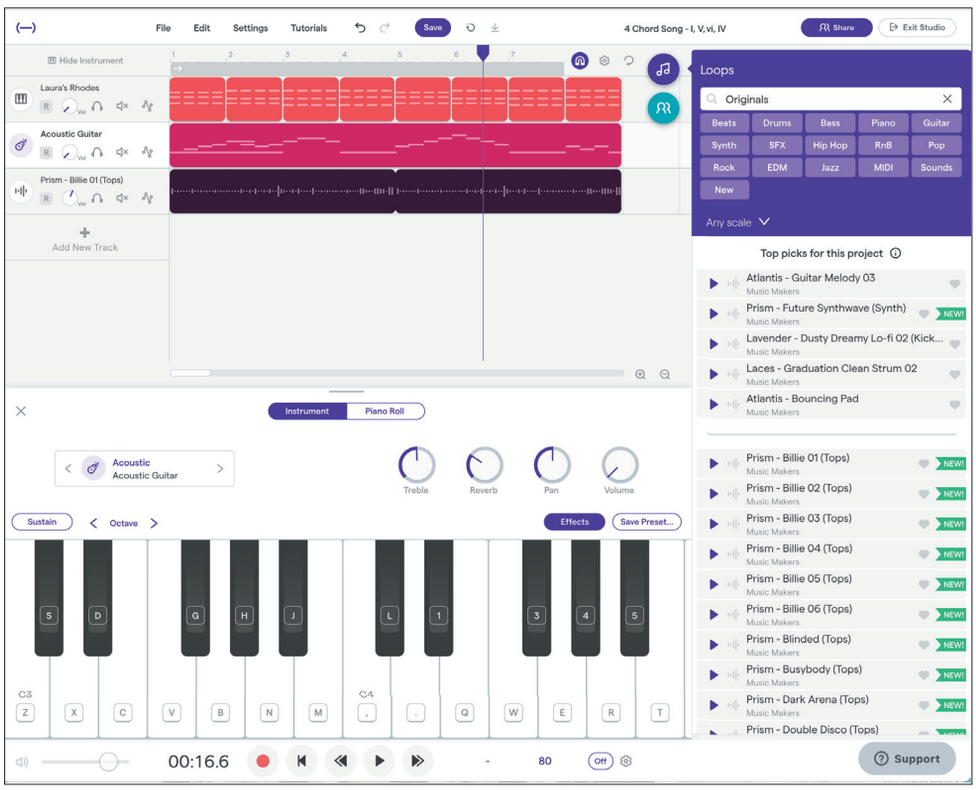
As you might expect, Soundtrap also allows us to add various effects to any of the instruments we use for a project. It would be impossible to go through all of Soundtrap's huge number of effects here, but I wanted to point out how to get to the effects so that you can allow your students to discover them for themselves.

One of the helpful aspects of creating music in a DAW is that students can not only create music quickly, but also explore how they want that music to sound. Adding digital effects, processes and automation to a track gives the students the power to explore sound in a lot of detail, something they'll hopefully find enjoyable.

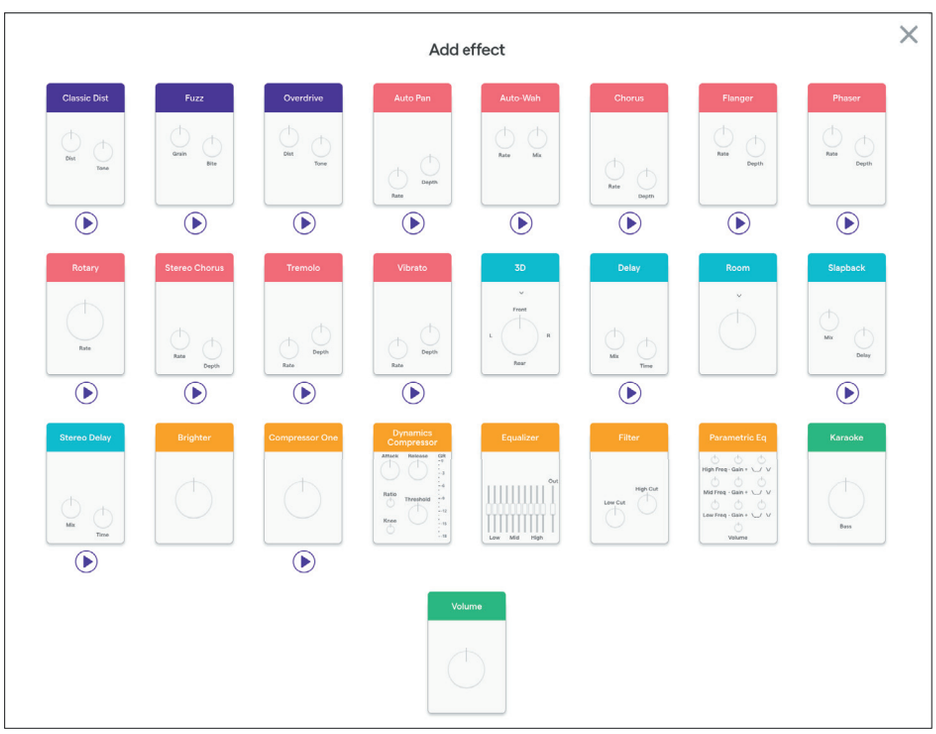
Once a track has been created, effects can be added. Effects can be accessed by clicking on the instrument symbol on the track:



This opens up the bottom window, where effects can then be added:



Click on Effects, and another window will open. Here you can change the basics such as bass, treble and volume. If you then click on 'Add effect', another window will open with a huge range of different options.



There are too many effects to go into in detail, but there are two that may be immediately useful:

- **Chorus:** this effect will thicken the sound by creating multiple versions of it.
- **Flanger and Phaser:** with these effects, you can create a sweeping sound where delayed signals are constantly changed and combined.

If you need more help with music technology terms, this website (**https://musictechstudent.co.uk/glossary-of-terms/**) has an excellent glossary. Another useful resource is the Rhinegold book *Music Technology from Scratch*.

MIDI in Soundtrap

MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) is a crucial component of music technology. It is important that students understand how MIDI works, and the ways in which they can input their ideas. In the BandLab resource, we looked at the concept of playing MIDI in using a controller keyboard, and also inputting MIDI in the editor. Soundtrap uses the same approach, and students should quickly get to grips with the MIDI Editor:

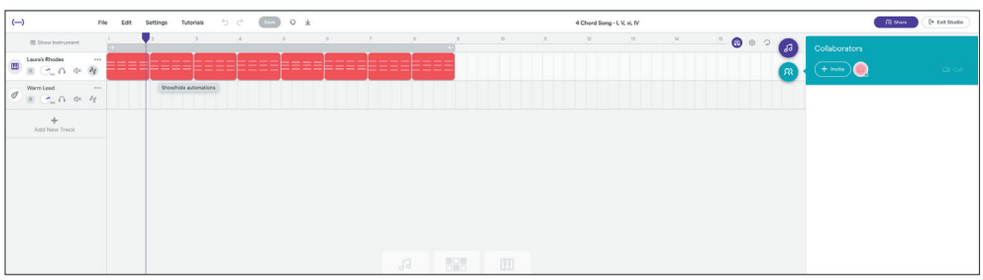
It can time to get used to clicking in a MIDI melody or chord progression, but it's easy to edit if mistakes are made. Using a MIDI editor also means that no additional hardware is required. It's helpful for students to know where the notes are on a keyboard, but they can also use their ears. The pencil tool in the top right-hand corner of the image above is used to add notes. The arrow tool is used to select notes and drag them if they need to be made longer or shorter.

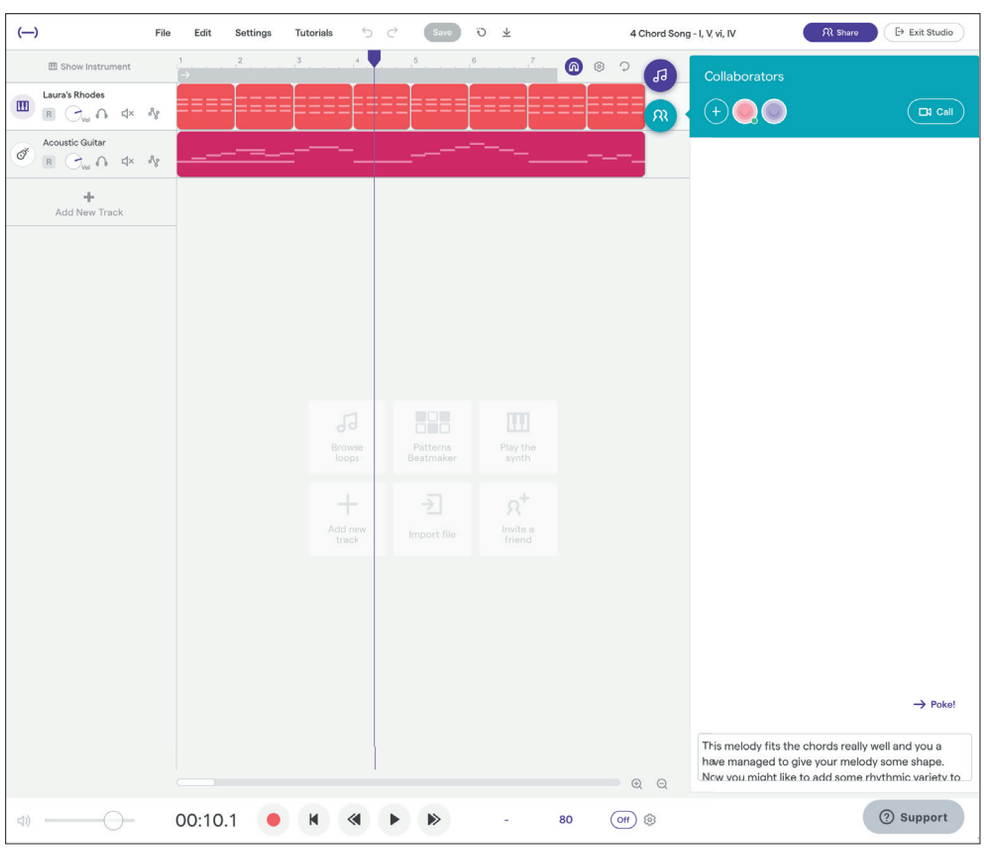
Four-chord pop song

The BandLab resource considered how we can use a DAW to create a chord progression. Chords can be added either using a MIDI controller keyboard where students play in the chords, or using the MIDI Editor. Soundtrap has the same approach as BandLab, and chords can quickly be created.

Creating a four-chord pop song in Soundtrap is quick and easy. Ask your students to use chords I, IV, V and vi to create their own progression. They can then either add their own beat or bring in a loop.

Once they've made a backing, students can share it with another student who can then easily add their own vocals. This could be at home using the app (see below) or in class. Collaborating on projects is easy in Soundtrap, and students can also work together on a project live in the cloud. Once a student has created some work, they can click on the button to the right that looks like two people together. They'll then be able to type the name of a teacher or student to collaborate with, and the student or teacher will be able to see the work in their own Soundtrap account and start adding to it. Music can be added, and comments or feedback can also be given.





Music for media composition project

Creating music for media is often a popular project with students. They take a TV show, film, video game or advert, and create music that fits what's happening on screen. Although you can't import video to Soundtrap, you can still use the app to create music for media. This will get students not only using the DAW, but also exploring all the sounds available to them.

The benefit of a DAW over a score editor is that students can start to listen to what they're creating and not get overly bogged down in notation. Of course, notation is an important part of any music course, but we also want students to be thinking, curious and creative. Creating atmosphere and mood will help students to begin to explore sounds and think about the effect of different instruments, chords and melodies.

Podcasting

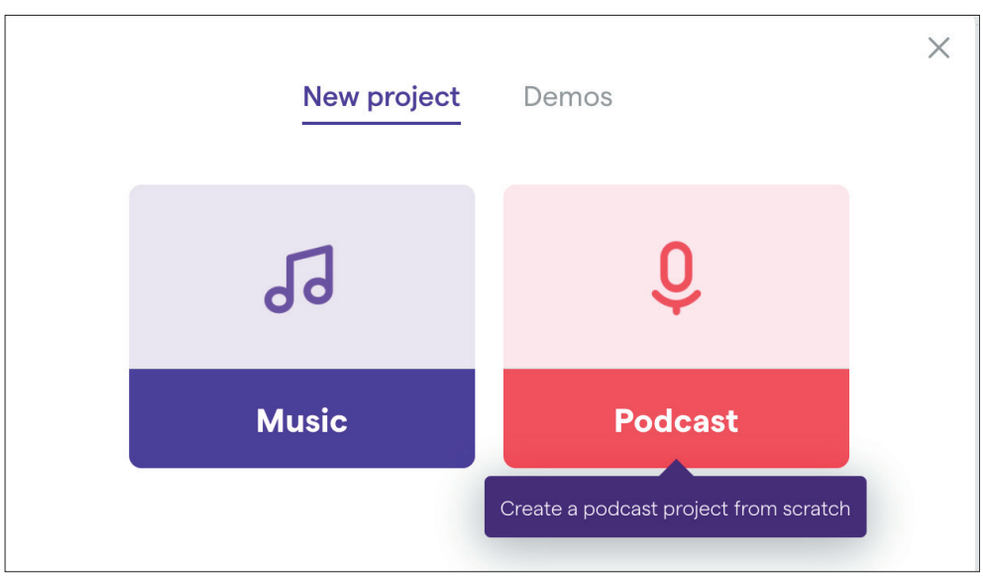
In essence, a podcast is like a radio show or an audio book. Information, discussions, interviews and conversations can be shared and accessed by downloading the particular podcast episode. The podcasting aspect of Soundtrap is a powerful tool that can be used not just in music departments, but also across the school. It offers a great deal of potential: podcasting might be just the thing for students who are looking for a new way to express themselves and share their learning.

Imagine a situation where you set students a research-based homework. Traditionally this might be something that they complete on paper, or type up on their computer. Soundtrap will allow them to present this research as a podcast, providing an exciting, interactive way to share what they've learnt.

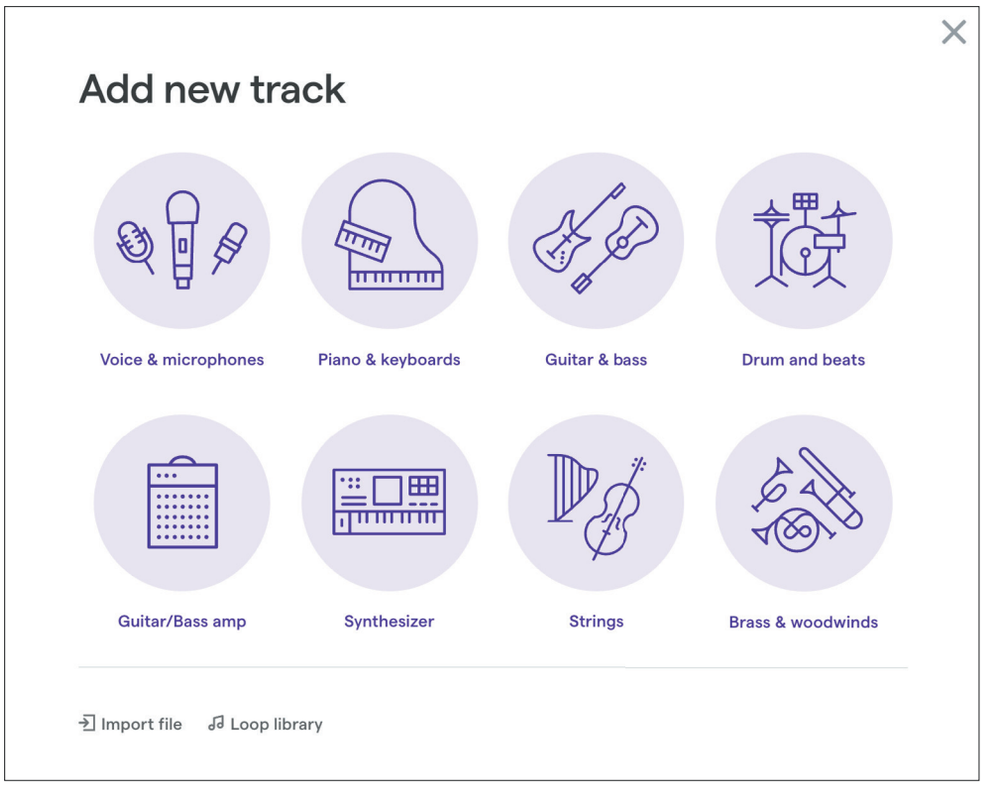
As a teacher, you might find yourself in a situation where you need to share work with students. You might want to record a lesson, or create some content for revision. Soundtrap will allow you to record all this information as a podcast, and you can easily add in musical excerpts and any other sound files you wish to include.

Creating your first podcast

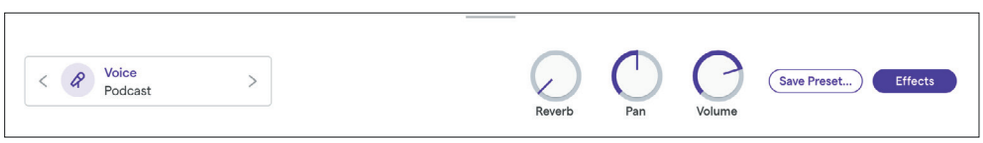
When you launch the studio in Soundtrap, you're given the option to either make music or a podcast. To make a podcast, click on Podcast. This will open the same window that we've got used to in all our music projects. However, there are some particularly useful functions within the podcast area.



First, add a voice track to your podcast. The starting point for a podcast will often be the spoken content, and it's easy to record using your built-in microphone or an external USB mic.



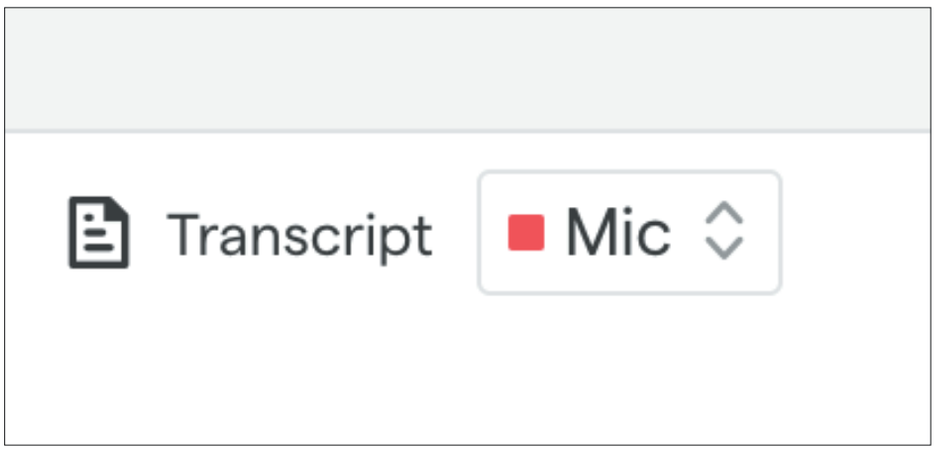
There are two voice settings that you may wish to use for your podcast track. The first is Mobile Mic Enhancer, which is ideal for anyone recording using a phone and the Soundtrap app. The second is Podcast, which is more for those recording using a computer or laptop.

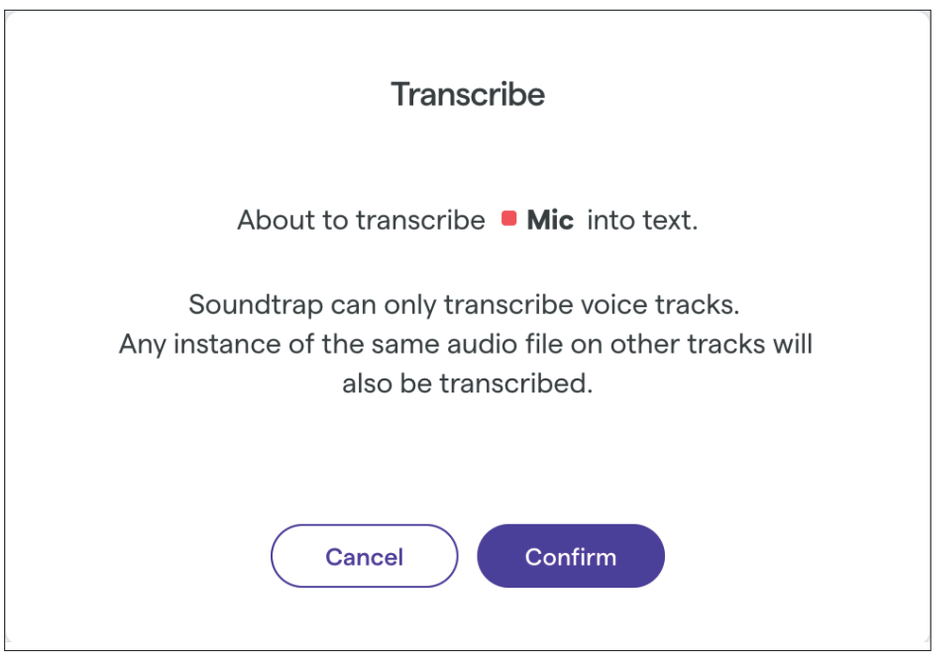


Once you have a voice track and the setting selected, you're ready to click record and start recording your first podcast. It's worth pointing out that you will now see seconds rather than bar numbers along the top. Nevertheless, recording your voice is the same as recording any instrument or track, and you can edit the voice recording easily, taking out any sections that you don't want in your final podcast.

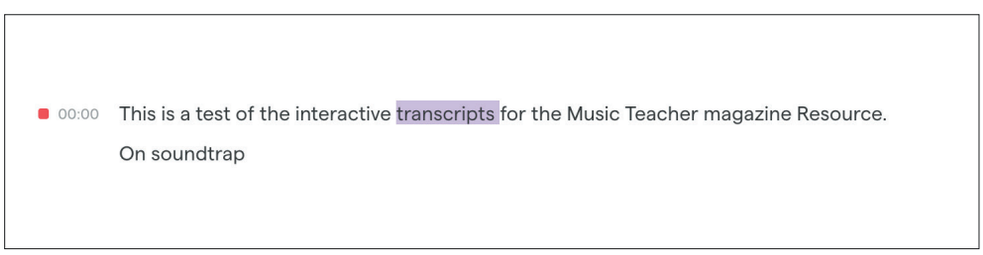
One helpful aspect of Soundtrap's podcasting facility is that the app will provide you with a transcript of everything you say in your recording. Not only does this provide a text version of your podcast, but it also offers an interactive transcript that allows you to edit your podcast using text.

Imagine you record a sentence that goes on slightly longer than you wish. Or maybe you make a mistake towards the end of a section. It can sometimes be tricky to pinpoint the exact moment on your timeline, but using the interactive transcript you can quickly find that exact point, delete the text, and Soundtrap will immediately remove it from the voice track.





The transcribing process can take a little while, depending on how long your recording is. You may wish to do it in stages, or set aside time to allow Soundtrap to do its work. Once you have the transcript, however, you simply highlight a word, sentence or section that you wish to delete. Then by clicking delete, Soundtrap will remove that section from the recording.



Podcasting projects

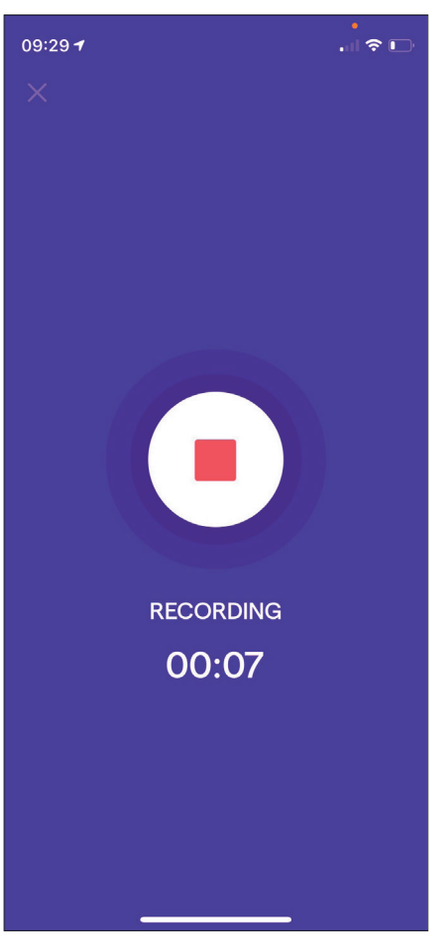
Here are some ideas for possible projects using Soundtrap's podcasting facility:

1. **Unpacking a set work:** students consider a set work, describe it and what happens in it, and select musical extracts. Extracts can be recorded and then integrated into the spoken sections.
2. **Revision podcast:** students are given a topic, key term or area of study. They then create a podcast that revises everything on that topic. They could add to it by creating examples in Soundtrap of the key terms they're discussing. This podcast project combines research, revision and composition.
3. **Wider listening diary:** students use wider listening as a starting point for their podcast, and share examples and links to the set works.
4. **Composition walk-through:** students take their composition from Soundtrap into the podcasting studio. They then talk through the piece by interspersing the music with their spoken guide. This will help them to review the work and show you what they've included. It will also prove a useful tool for those in other years who are considering GCSE or A level Music
5. **Interview a composer:** students stage an 'interview' with a composer, who is acted out by another student. The student acting the role of the composer will have to research the composer enough to be able to answer questions. This could be interspersed with musical examples.

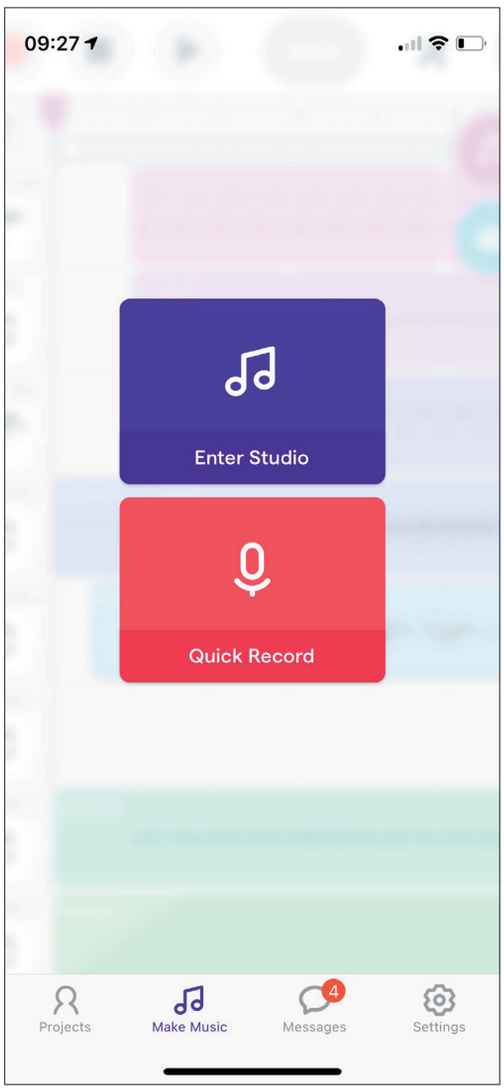
The Soundtrap mobile app

Soundtrap also has a useful mobile app that offers valuable functionality for teachers and students alike, and is free. It's worth encouraging students to download the app, either in class or at home, for which they can use their usual logins. It might well help students who don't always have access to a destop or laptop computer. The app has the same kind of layout as the browser version, and more or less the same functionality.

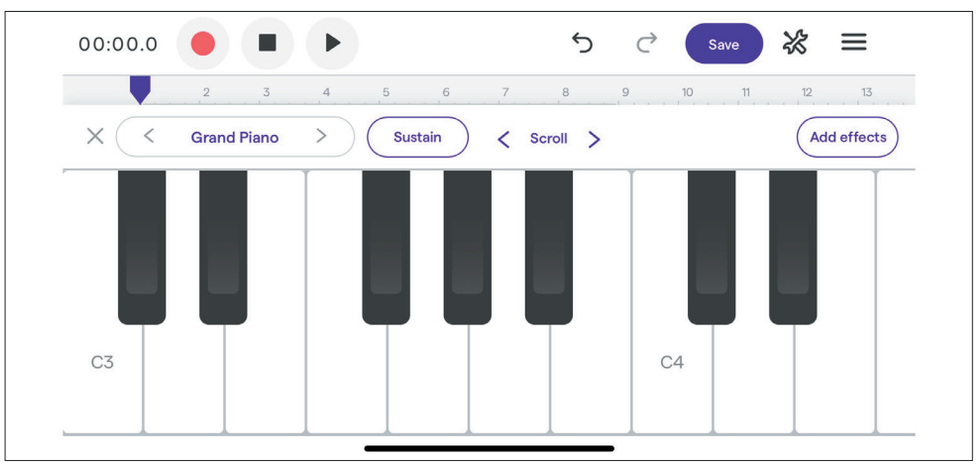
One very useful feature of the app is the ability to record straight into Soundtrap, using the phone's own recording device. This recording is then available in Soundtrap and can easily be shared. Students could record themselves performing or practising at home, for example, and then share that recording with their teacher, saving time in lessons and allowing teachers to keep track of students' progress.



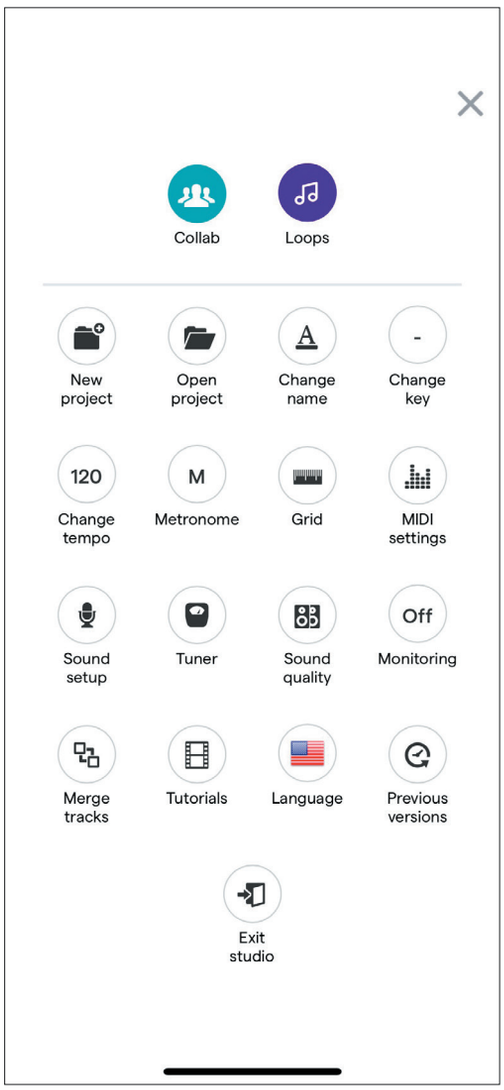
Once a recording has been made, it can also be opened in Soundtrap's Studio, where additional music can be added, and the recording can be edited. You might consider setting a homework task in which students have to create a melody and then add a drumbeat – an easy task to set up in the Soundtrap app.



The app also offers access to loops, and has a helpful on-screen keyboard.



You can't work with MIDI in the app, but you can add loops and access a wide range of instrumental sounds. Effects can be added, and students might enjoy capturing ideas quickly on the move.



Ideas for using the Soundtrap app

Here are some ideas for ways in which you could use the Soundtrap mobile app:

1. Encourage students to record themselves when they practise at home so that they can then share the recording with you.
2. Create a chord progression in Soundtrap that you share with students. Using they app at home, they can improvise over this chord pattern to come up with ideas on their phone.
3. Using the ideas of sound design and musique concrète, set students the task of recording sounds, which they should then manipulate and create music with.
4. Encourage students to create simple ideas for a homework task on melody. They can either create them at home and record or play them into the app using the in-built piano.