

Creating a recorded story

In this guide I'll go through the steps to make a recorded story for a class, including using Max to create the background music. It is probably most suitable for primary age children, and is a good substitute for a live show as the end goal of a schools project.

The story I used is about one of the children in the class starting up a band and going around finding her classmates playing different instruments. The final song is based on a simple descending melody one of the children liked singing.

Here is a link to the final recording I made, with participants from Victoria Park School in Carlisle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lBVmxt7dWM>

Step 1 – Groundwork

Before recording and putting together the story, I found it very helpful to spend the majority of the sessions (around 5-7 sessions) creating a space for the participants in which they could explore different instruments and see what they liked. As I was working with an almost entirely non-verbal class with rather complex support needs, it was important not to rush this stage by latching them onto a certain instrument too early on. This sort of exploratory playing can be aided by playing ambient music like Brian Eno on the speakers, meaning you can stop playing to support a participant without all the music in the room dropping out.

During these sessions you can also play a musical game to find out each participant's favourite place, either in the school or in the wider world. For mine I went round each participant we all sang 'Show Me the Way to Go Home', substituting 'home' for their favourite place. Make a note of this, as it will be used in the story later.

Step 2 – Recording

After these initial sessions, most of the participants should have found an instrument that works well for them. You can then spend a session recording them all individually in a side-room. This means you get clean recordings of each participant without any background noise, allowing more flexibility when it came to putting the story together later on. Try not to be too prescriptive as to what they should play, but make sure the instruments are all set up in the same key. For me, the key was prescribed by the descending melody that one participant sang. For the recording I used a Zoom H4N portable recorder, but if you do not have one available a phone recording would suffice. The important thing in this session is to spend as much time as possible with each participant, recording as many different takes as possible so that you have much more material than you think you will use in the end. This allows you to then decide on the best takes in the editing stage.

Step 3 – Putting the story together

After you have the recordings, plan out the story and organise it in your DAW. Record yourself narrating a story about one participant putting a band together, going to visit each other participant at their favourite place and asking them if they want to play in their band. Play a clip of each participant's instrument when they meet. You can also use certain speech habits of the participants to involve them in the story e.g. in mine, Sara was very keen on saying 'no' which I picked up during the recording session and incorporated into the start of the story.

Step 4 – Record the final song

Record a final song based on the recordings you've made. Depending on the musical abilities of your group, you might need to make a basis for the song with your own playing/singing, as I did. Make sure each of the participant's instruments has a chance to shine on its own, as well as in combination with others.

Step 5 – Create the backing music for the story

It can help a lot to have ambient music behind the spoken story section of the recording. If you have your own way of doing this then you can do it yourself, but if needed you can use some software I made in Max to help out. Max is a visual programming language for sound synthesis and sampling. It's free to use, you just have to buy the program if you want to edit and save files.

Below is a link to the cycling74 website where you can download Max, plus a link to the ambient music generator I made, which includes instructions in the patch on how to use it. When using the patch, make sure all files in the download are in the same folder.

If you have any further questions about it (or the project in general), email me at olliehawker@drakemusicscotland.org

Max download: <https://cycling74.com/downloads>

Ambient backing music generator download:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ws16W_o59aPdyJDaBfpFaTOIDNBWNE5w/view?usp=sharing