



TiME and Nordoff and Robbins The Arcana Strum Case Study

In the Autumn of 2023, we worked with Nordoff and Robbins to trial the Arcana Strum in Music Therapy settings and gain insights from an experienced music therapist's perspective. This initiative provided an opportunity to expand our shared understanding of how music technology can enhance options available to therapists and meet the organisation's objectives of helping people through music.

We were also able to assess whether the Arcana Strum presented new opportunities or solutions for therapists and participants, and to identify potential enhancements to engage more people in music-making.

Nordoff and Robbins is the UK's largest music therapy charity; established in 1959, they have over 60 years of experience supporting some of society's most vulnerable people through therapeutic musical engagement. Nordoff and Robbins meet the growing need for music therapy by training music therapists and ensuring their skills are maintained and developed.

The Nordoff-Robbins approach is based on the power of musical participation. By giving people a platform to improvise, write new tunes or play old favourites, music therapists help people unlock their creativity and capacity for connection.



Across the UK, Nordoff and Robbins employ around 140 people and offer courses, including entry-level short courses, Music Therapy Masters courses, and a PhD programme that enables seasoned practitioners to extend their learning through ground-breaking practice-based research.

Thomas Smolen is an experienced musician and music therapist employed by Nordoff and Robbins to deliver music therapy sessions in a range of settings, including SEN/D schools, hospitals and hospices. Tom worked with two young people in one-to-one sessions and in a group setting. The names of the young people have been changed to protect their anonymity.

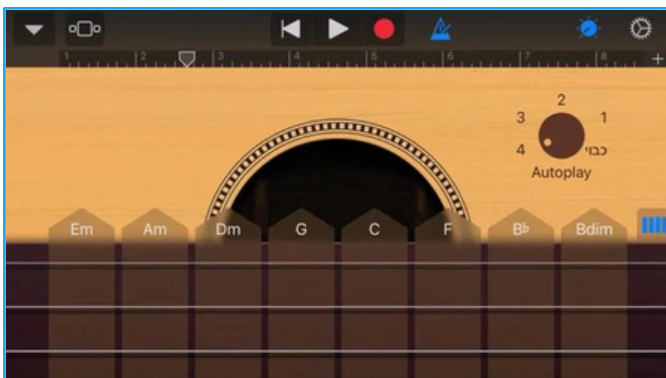
Mark is a young person with a keen interest in music and attends one-to-one sessions with Tom. Sessions allow Mark to explore his musical creativity and support him with his confidence and well-being. Mark has a visual impairment and restricted mobility. Mark enjoyed the feel of the instrument and valued the sound he was able to make. He could easily experiment with the Strum and particularly liked playing lead.

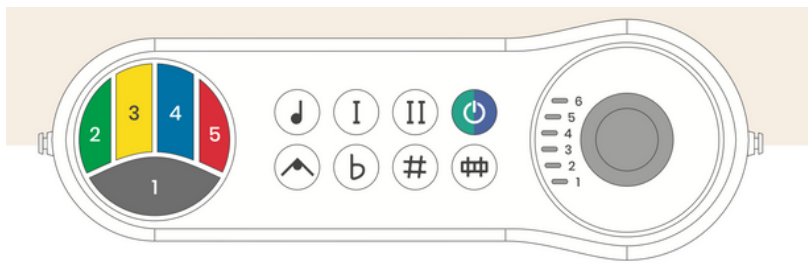


Rudi has a learning disability and attends an SEN/D school. Tom worked with Rudi in a group setting. Rudi enjoys music and has tried a range of acoustic instruments, which he can find frustrating. He loves singing and dancing and engages enthusiastically with music.

Rudi was able to play as part of the group quickly and easily. He also enjoyed being able to create a good sound and, consequently, was able to better express his musicality.

The Arcana Strum is an adaptable digital instrument that emulates the experience of playing the guitar. Chords are played by pressing a round silicon pad, and strumming (or picking individual notes/strings) is created using a handle on the opposite end of the instrument. The strumming motion provides haptic feedback. Many adaptations can be made, including the choice of three or five chord pads and six different handle types. You can also set the Strum to suit left or right-handed playing. Connecting to switches or sensors to play the instrument is also possible. The Strum is connected to Garageband or other DAWs by Bluetooth to generate the sounds.





Learning highlights:

The intuitive nature of the instrument worked well with Nordoff and Robbins' approach to music therapy, where children take a lead role in the music while supported by the therapist.

The Arcana Strum was easy to play and enabled instant musical participation; the layout of the instrument offered an intuitive and tactile experience.

The ability to be able to play with a 'satisfying' sound was an important benefit to the young people. They enjoyed the sound they created, enabling them to better express their musicality. Being able to set the Strum to play in a specific key is especially useful when playing with other people and in group music-making.

The Strum has the technical capabilities to facilitate musical development through regular lessons and activities, such as practising a particular chord progression or playing different scales. This offers an equivalent progression pathway as would a standard acoustic instrument.

The Strum could be useful in many therapeutic settings, including enabling older people to play their favourite music that may not be possible on a standard guitar, or using the Arcana Strums as bass and rhythm guitars in a group.

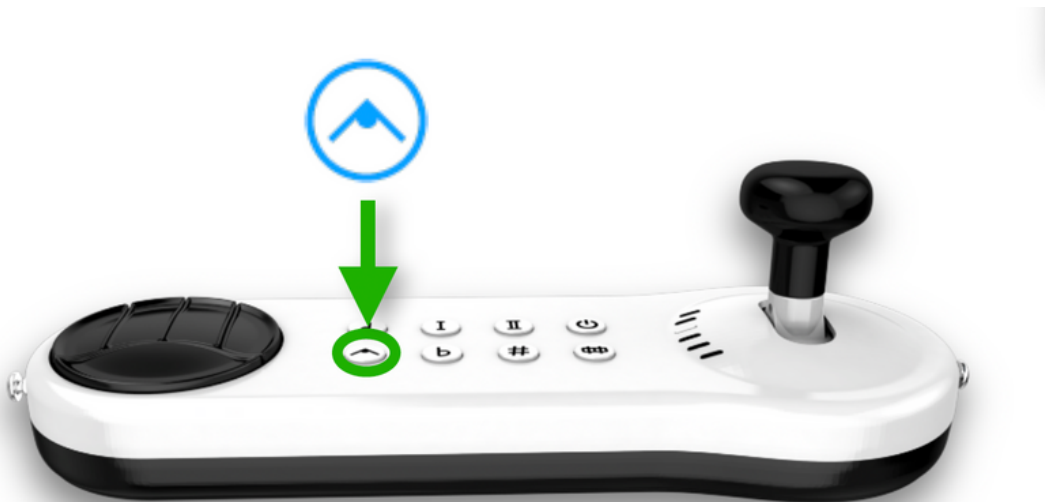


Offering CPD sessions on using the Strum in music therapy would enable a deeper understanding of its creative possibilities; this includes advanced features of the Strum and the sonic possibilities of using other sounds, tones and effects in Garageband or other DAWs.

Learning highlights:

Being able to lock or 'disengage' buttons is an important feature; this is possible, and the information in the instrument manual on how to do this should be highlighted. The Arcana team have attended to this in the online manual and information.

For a visually impaired learner interested in progressing their skills on the instrument, there needs to be a way of identifying each button. There are temporary solutions, such as using textured fabric. Longer term the Arcana team are looking into creating tactile buttons and replacing the functionality of one of the slide switches on the instrument to facilitate a 'Lights-On-Off' function.



ARCANA Strum Trial: Report by Thomas Smolen

I had the opportunity to trial the Arcana Strum in a local SEN secondary school. I'm a Nordoff & Robbins music therapist and sessions in this setting are largely based around musical improvisation, encouraging children to explore and express themselves through instruments and use of their body and voice while I respond and support them musically.

I'm going to describe two examples of children's use of the use of the Arcana Strum in these sessions. In each case names have been changed to protect clients' anonymity.

Mark is in year 8. He is visually impaired and uses a mobility cane to get around. He was referred to 1-to-1 music therapy sessions because of his interest in playing the piano. It was also hoped that sessions would offer him the chance to recognise and develop his abilities and encourage confidence.

When I introduced the Strum to Mark he was immediately excited by the chance to produce satisfying guitar sounds and hear his playing amplified through the speaker. The layout of the instrument and the handle design seemed to offer a satisfying tactile experience and enable Mark to intuitively explore the different harmonic and melodic possibilities.

It seemed to me that Mark found the instrument most satisfying in our sessions when he was able to use it more like a lead instrument, sometimes playing single notes using the finger pad, or producing dramatic tremolo effects by moving the stick rapidly between notes. I would accompany using the guitar as a harmonic and percussive instrument.



ARCANA Strum Trial: Report by Thomas Smolen

Mark was also keen to explore the settings through the buttons in the middle of the instrument. I noticed that, while these features offered further avenues for musical exploration, there was no way for Mark to identify what the buttons were or whether they were on or off. Mark's engagement on this instrument is likely reflective of the nature of our sessions, which focus on exploration, improvisation and developing musical experiences together. The tactile and intuitive playability of the Strum affords for musical improvisation in this way.

I can see how many of the more technical capabilities of the Strum might be of more use if you're working through learning the instrument together, such as practising a particular chord progression or playing different scales., and it would be interesting to further explore the different improvisational experiences you could offer in 1-to-1 therapy sessions when combining these features with the options on the Garage Band app.

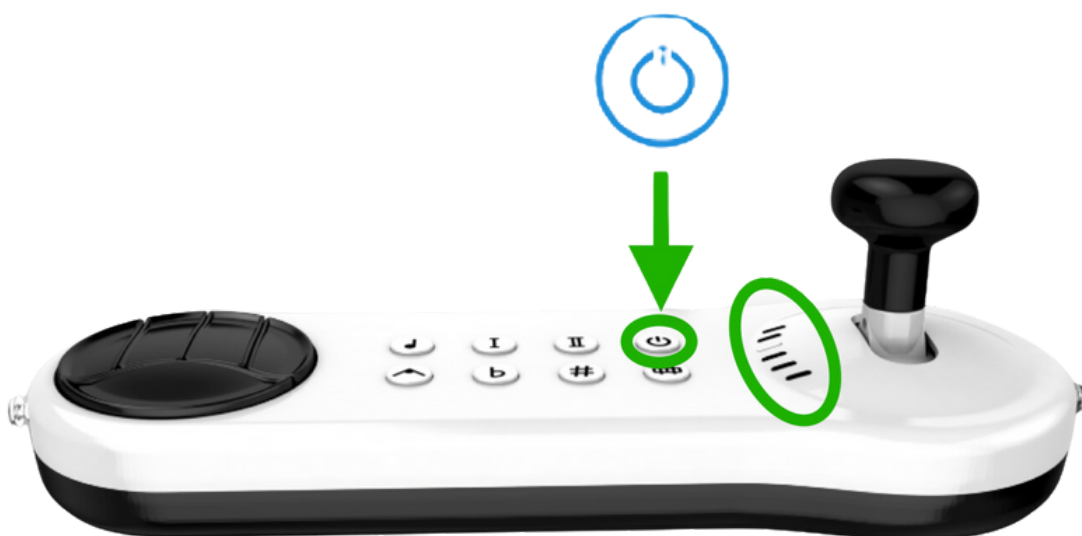


Rudi comes to group music sessions with three other teenagers aged 15-18. He has a learning disability and was referred to music therapy partly because of the joy it was noticed that he takes from music. Group sessions also offer a space for Rudi to explore and share his musical abilities. While he sometimes has trouble with the coordination required to play acoustic instruments, Rudi generally engages enthusiastically in sessions and loves to sing and dance.

ARCANA Strum Trial: Report by Thomas Smolen

I offered Rudi the Strum during one of our group improvisations. Others in the group played the drum, chimes and glockenspiel while I used my voice and the guitar to offer a musical framework and bring the group together. Due to the nature of the group, I only had time to very briefly show Rudi how to create sounds on the Strum. However, Rudi immediately settled into a groove, using the stick rhythmically and intuitively picking out chords and notes on the finger pad. Rudi began to sing as well and led the group through the chorus of The Lion Sleeps Tonight, which is one of his favourite songs.

In this group, Rudi's natural musicality can sometimes be limited by the sounds he's able to produce on conventional instruments. The Strum offered Rudi the opportunity to create a satisfying guitar sounds with a good amount of playing options for him to explore. It's also particularly useful in group settings being able to set the instrument parameters, such as the key and tone, in order to enable people in the group to play together.





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ARCANA Strum Trial: Report by Thomas Smolen Conclusion

Mark and Rudi's engagement in the Arcana Strum was reflective of the nature of our music therapy sessions, which focus on free improvisation and children taking a lead role in the music while supported by the therapist. I can certainly see the value of the Strum as a tactile and accessible instrument that children can explore intuitively while being part of a satisfying sound world with pre-defined parameters.

In addition, there are other clients I've worked with who I can imagine making use of the different settings and progressive learning the Strum offers. In particular, there are clients that come to mind from my work in an adult hospice setting who I believe would benefit from being able to play their favourite rock songs, but who may not have the capacity to do so on conventional instruments. In the right circumstances it's exciting to conceive of setting up a band made up of accessible instruments, with Arcana Strums being used as bass and rhythm guitars.

