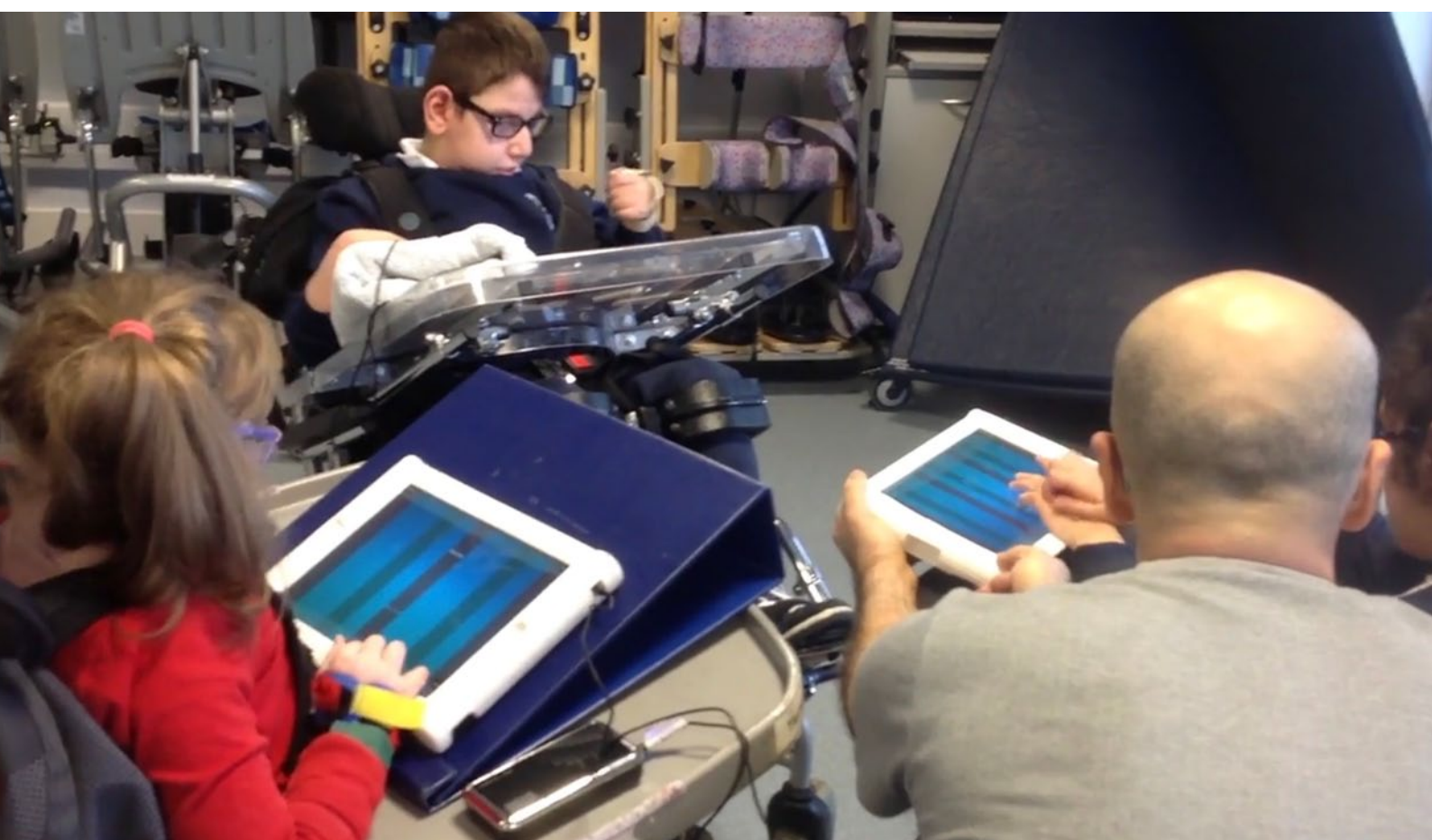


# Active Musicianship in the Special Needs Classroom



■ For students with severe mobility and physical limitations, active participation in music making can be completely out of reach. However, by harnessing the power of available technology and intelligently applying it to various musical principles, Carrie Lennard is opening a new space for students to express themselves through music.

## **OVERCOMING PASSIVITY**

As a special needs music teacher, my greatest joy is creating opportunities for my students with profound and complex learning needs to explore their own playing and vocalising capabilities through music. For many of these students, traditional music activities require dexterity and verbal capabilities that are unavailable to them. Often, their musical experiences are passive—listening to music that is played to them, or perhaps having someone move their body for them, either to play a drum or percussive instrument or to be moved around while music plays.



This model of passive engagement with music does very little in the way of adding quality to students' lives and is more just a token way of passing time. I felt that there must be a way to focus on their capabilities rather than their disabilities and so I explored the available technologies and created a programme that would allow the students to play in their own band, expressing themselves individually.

For most of my students, the ability to play or learn a traditional instrument is well out of their reach, usually due to severe physical limitations. However, for most students,





moving their body in whatever way they can is crucial for developing a sense of self awareness and independence of being. I have found that most of them can manage broad movements that can translate on an iPad, whether with their hands, feet, chin, nose, elbow or other body part!

So, the trick was to find an interface that would register this kind of activity and connect it to music making. The two crucial technology elements are an iPad and the ThumbJam app. Note: I prefer iPad over Android because the iPad's touch screen is instantly responsive to the lightest touch and the Guided Access facility (in Settings) enables the teacher to cordon off any area of the iPad playing screen to prevent players accidentally changing the settings.

### **GROOVING WITH THUMBJAM**

ThumbJam is a music performance experience app that has a wide variety of sampled instruments, scales and features that make it possible to create musical sounds in a variety of styles. In addition to its high-quality audio samples, it is also possible to add effects using tilt and shake of the iPad. It allows for simultaneous touch so multiple sounds can be produced at once.

Compared to other similar instrument apps, ThumbJam shines. It uses the whole screen, which makes it easier for students to use, and it has a wide range of instruments to choose from with good authentic sounds. It's not pre-programmed with automated music loops, which means the students are truly making choices of what they play.

When using ThumbJam, students can play with whatever body part they are capable of using—for some it's fingers or toes, and others, it can be their nose, chin or elbow. It really doesn't matter. The main thing is that they are making music themselves, actively participating in the ensemble, making choices and engaging personally with the experience. I listen to their sounds and create a musical backing (or use one of my pre-recorded backings) to bring us together. Between us we create an original composition and every time we do this, it sounds different.







### **ENSURING INDEPENDENCE**

It is crucial that the students have the opportunity to recognise that they are the ones making the sounds. Therefore, it is important that they have their own speaker and that the sounds are not all piped in together to one main monitor. I connect each iPad to a small vibratory WOWee speaker (this is a wired connection, not via Bluetooth, which creates a delay between what the student plays and what they hear). The students can then hear and feel the sounds, giving them immediate feedback that they can then respond to. In all my classes, the students love this, and in some cases, it is the only activity they participate in that gives them a sense of their physical presence in the world.



“*The effects on someone with SLD and PMLD are extraordinary. The sense of ‘I can do this’, ‘this is my sound’ is clear to see in the confident way in which so many students have independently and joyfully, participated!*”

## **PLAYING IN HARMONY**

You may at this point be imagining a horrifying cacophony of sound that hardly classifies as musical activity, and certainly there is potential for that. However, there is a better way and that’s by using the Pentatonic scale. The notes of the Pentatonic scale do not have any clashing tones, so it is perfect for this kind of setting. ThumbJam has many settings for choice of scale, so I just make sure Pentatonic is selected, which genuinely allows students to make music together that sounds good. I provide backing chords for the students (available for free download), which provides a structure for their improvisations.

This general approach to music making and improvisation can work for students with moderate disabilities as well. Because there are no ‘wrong’ notes and the technology is very easy to use, it is an excellent way to encourage students to explore and be curious about music. There is a general, unspoken assumption in society that for students with disabilities, technology or music will be too hard for them or that they can’t try because they will break the device. The fear they develop as a result can be very disabling and limiting. The ability to play music in this way can help them develop confidence and it can help lay a foundation for further music learning. With one group of students I worked with in Ealing, many went on to take the basic level of the GCSE for music—something they had never dreamed would be possible.



I've been working with this approach for many years and when iPads appeared, it all fast-forwarded. I formalised my method into the *Improvise Approach* and created a free e-book to show people how to set up a similar music session with their groups. It explains how to use an iPad with the ThumbJam app and provides key teaching information on developing the overall effectiveness and enjoyment of these kind of creative music sessions. The book also comes with 10 different backing tracks that can be used in a variety of settings.

I have seen first-hand how profoundly life-changing it can be for people to make music in all contexts, and especially so for students who have very limited physical abilities and for whom very little is expected in life. The active independence and real joy they experience while making music with others is utterly inspiring.

**Carrie Lennard is a special needs music consultant, composer, resource designer and publisher who has taught in Special Schools for forty years. More can be found about the *Improvise Approach*, including free access to her e-book at [www.improviseapproach.com](http://www.improviseapproach.com)**