

Playing from the screen

Claire Jackson explores the latest developments in the world of digital sheet music



The pianist enters the stage to thundering applause. She takes a seat at the piano stool, adjusting the height slightly. The audience holds its collective breath in anticipation. But wait, there's an empty seat. A man scuttles across the concert platform; trying (and failing) to look inconspicuous as he takes his position next to the soloist. The pianist adjusts the sheet music, and begins an exquisite performance of a lesser-known sonata. The drama is interrupted every few minutes by a nod that the pianist gives to her page turner to complete his duty. We've all seen this performance, and felt the

jarring inconvenience of those turns. But musicians cannot be expected to memorise everything – especially rarely performed repertoire. Happily, this is the twenty-first century, and, like most problems, there's a tech-based solution.

It was while he was preparing Jörg Widmann's cycle of string quartets that Chris Murray first began to use digital scores. The cellist, a member of the Heath Quartet, was aware that the page-turning was particularly awkward, compounded by the fact that the five pieces were meant to be played consecutively. "There was a lot of sheet music on the stand!"

says Murray. "There were a few places in the music where you couldn't turn without disturbing the performance or losing the theatrical tension." Murray started using forScore, a music reader for iPad, which he found "surprisingly cheap and has lots of useful features". The Widmann page turns now happen seamlessly, using a pedal connected to the tablet.

Just like adopting a digital version of a novel or magazine over a paper copy, using screen-based scores comes down to personal preference. Plenty of chamber groups comprise players who use both methods, and that includes the Heath Quartet. "I think my colleagues are pretty impressed with the benefits of digital scores, but they aren't planning to ditch the paper just yet," says Murray, adding "it's very much an individual choice. Most professional musicians are very keen to know about the latest product that can help them perform better or make their job a little easier. Cellists, for example, often have several boxes full of spikes, tailpieces and rosins at home, each used for a while and then replaced by a shiny new alternative. After a while you settle on what

These come from the likes of Newzik, who provides software, training and



screen shots of the nikoda platform



Molyvos Musical Moment © Molyvos International Music Festival / Ervis Zika

purchasing services for the necessary accompanying hardware. “Newzik was born out of passionate musicians coming together to solve a shared concern: that orchestras today don’t always benefit from advancements in technology,” says Zoé Gerdil, Newzik’s business developer.

The Newzik app allows users to import scores in PDF or MusicXML versions, or to receive rental material. It’s possible to annotate scores and share those markings with a group – making it useful for ensembles. If that sounds daunting, you’re not alone: Newzik believes that using digital scores “should be a transition, not a jump into the unknown”. To that end, staff work closely with orchestras, musicians and conductors to help them implement new workflows. “We know that digital scores are the future,” says Gerdil. “Musicians often already use technology as a tool when rehearsing privately, on their own, and it will also, soon, become a norm in orchestras, ensembles and operas. Switching from paper to digital scores will save precious time and resources.” It’s not just musicians and orchestras who will benefit. Gerdil highlights the embedded editing tools that will “help stage managers to use their 600-page

booklets in a more efficient way” as one example. “Ultimately,” concludes Gerdil, “productivity during rehearsals is enhanced as everyone works collaboratively and not individually.” Digital sheet music can be especially useful for *al fresco* performances. The annual Molyvos International Music Festival, set on the Greek island of Lesbos, is notable not only for its high-quality recitals, but for the fact that the majority of music making takes place outside; either at a temporary stage built within the village’s breath-taking – literally, due to the steep walk – Byzantine castle or in unexpected places, such as the pre-historic settlement of Thermi. A key feature of the festival are its ‘Musical Moments’ (known as MMs), which bring chamber music to different parts of Molyvos – the quirk is that the location for each MM is only revealed a short while before the performance; audiences get to experience parts of the village they may not have seen were it not for the guides leading the way to the concert.

This delightful piece of programming, though engaging for audience members and the wider community, means the musicians can find themselves playing in a variety of

locations, for audiences on beach loungers and shoppers on a cobble, hilly street. Although dry weather is practically guaranteed during the summer months, a strong breeze can whip along the Aegean coast. For musicians performing outside, that means constantly wrangling with pegs or magnets to keep pages from going rogue. “Using tablets means we can concentrate on our performance, and not keeping the pages on the stand!” says flautist Matvey Demin. “There’s a lot of music to learn for chamber music events, so we don’t always have the possibility to memorise everything. Playing outside can be a nightmare for musicians; we are constantly thinking about the acoustics and the sound, so not having to worry about the music blowing away is a good thing.”

Newzik uses this element in an amusing video to promote digital scores: the narrative is centred around a chamber group giving a performance at a fancy mansion, complete with swimming pool. While the audience sips drinks and prepares to enjoy the music, a gust of wind steals away the musicians’ sheet music. One performer tries to rescue his pages – and falls in the water. As crisis reigns, only the trombonist

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continues to play undisturbed by the elements. Turns out, she’s playing from a digital device.

There are further improved practicalities for travelling musicians: “My bag has got fifty per cent lighter since I started using digital pieces,” says Demin. “This is especially useful when you’re playing at chamber music festivals or teaching. I recently gave masterclasses in St Petersburg, where I had eight students, all playing different pieces. That’s where an iPad comes in very handy!”

Each piece of software has its own features; Murray mentions the split-screen turning available via forScore, which turns the page’s top and bottom half separately. “This means you can be more flexible about exactly

when you turn, which helps a lot in faster music,” he says.

As with other areas of the publishing industry, digitisation is slow but steady. Many publishers offer both digital and print formats, in the same way you can buy a blu-ray that comes with a downloadable option. “A lot of newer pieces are available in digital format like MusicXML or PDF, yet older ones are not,” explains Gerdil. “Digitalising the gigantic repertory of sheet music that we have will be a ‘work in progress’ for many years to come.” Digital subscription service nkoda already offers 110,000 titles, and also provides tools to annotate music, make playlists and share markings with colleagues. Lorenzo Brewer, nkoda’s founder and CEO, has no doubts that the use

of digital sheet music will become more commonplace. “We see it already, with some of the world’s best-known artists moving exclusively to performing using a device,” says Brewer. Nkoda has some impressive advocates, not least Sir Simon Rattle, who describes the technology as “a view into the future of making music”. “To know that those artists who have reached the edge of human capacity and artistic expression find this tool useful, is something really meaningful,” says Brewer. “Ultimately it’s another way of enabling people to make music. Embracing it, as a community of music makers, is important because it’s a fundamental part of how we live today and will certainly be the environment the next generation will grow up in.”

Digital scores have brought with them a burgeoning range of supporting wizardry, from music stands specifically created for score-reading devices, to clamps to fasten iPads to mic stands and laptop holders. Of course, digital scores are not infallible. Tablets must be properly charged, and, where necessary, pedals connected. (I have attended several recitals that have had to be paused because a musician forgot a pedal.) And naturally there is plenty of room for operator error, even when everything is in place. Murray admits that the only problems he’s had on stage have been “self-created, such as forgetting to switch the bluetooth on or pressing the backwards pedal instead of the forward one.” Maybe we won’t cancel the human page turners just yet... 🎻



The Heath Quartet © Kaupo Kikkas