

Scottish Young Musicians

Analysis & Review

2025



SCOTTISH
YOUNG
MUSICIANS



*Scotland's Leading
Music Education Charity
Inspiring the Next Generation*

www.scottishyoungmusicians.com



"It's been wonderful to watch Scottish Young Musicians grow to cover the entire country and become an important showcase of music education, enhancing music and life-skills in so many young people. It's the only competition in every school, covering every genre and is open to any school-aged young person in Scotland. It offers solo, ensemble and junior competitions, and the ensemble competition now has a live in-person final. It is fun and has become an exciting fixture in the music education map of Scotland. I can't wait to see what comes next!"

*Nicola Benedetti CBE
Violinist & Director of Edinburgh International Festival*



A Word From The Chair

Scottish Young Musicians reached a significant milestone by achieving national coverage, with students from **every local authority** participating. Thousands of young students now take part in our activities throughout the year as part of hundreds of local competitions that made up the festival. We are proud to say that SYM is now Scotland's **largest music education charity**, yet we recognise there is still more work to be done to benefit Scotland's young people.

"Scottish Young Musicians has meant a lot to me. It gave me the chance to challenge myself, grow as a performer, and connect with other talented musicians. It's been an inspiring experience that's boosted my confidence and deepened my love for music."

Tyler Clark, West Lothian Finalist

SYM runs four competitions: Solo, Open Ensemble, Brass Ensemble, and Junior. The Solo competition is the largest, with competitors progressing from school level to regional and then national, making it a significant part of Scotland's music landscape. Our other competitions are growing rapidly, and in March, SYM held its first Ensemble of the Year National Final at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. This electrifying event was followed in May by the Solo Final, now in its fourth year. The winner was honoured with a live appearance on BBC Scotland and, for the first time, BBC Radio 3, showcasing the **immense talent** nurtured by SYM.

SYM has always been about **encouraging participation** regardless of ability and background. The positive results in the schools of some of Scotland's most disadvantaged areas demonstrate that SYM's work is truly making a difference. Breaking down barriers to allow those who want to develop and advance their talent, where they might not have otherwise had the opportunity, is at the very heart of what we do.

*"SYM is a wonderful addition to our school calendar and brings pupils opportunities to hone their own musical skills and appreciate those of their peers. As our pupils are largely from the **poorest socioeconomic backgrounds**, we often face challenges to facilitate access to live music and this competition has been a great asset to our department, allowing not only access but participation in live music events."*

*Their confidence and enthusiasm for performing has been **drastically improved**, and the overall profile of performing within the school has been raised."*

Laura McTurk, Principal Teacher, Girvan Academy

This work is only possible thanks to the dedication of our SYM team, supported by hundreds of music educators who often go the extra mile. We are deeply grateful to our music partners for providing a plethora of opportunities and to our donors, without whom we would not exist. Many, having seen our work first-hand, have stepped up their support, and for that we are thankful.

By working in smarter ways, we have delivered a larger festival with two national live finals at around the same cost as last year. We believe few can rival the depth and breadth of what we offer for the money our donors give to us. We remain focused on allowing SYM to grow in a **steady and sustainable** way, though cost pressures, contained for so long, are undoubtedly mounting. Along with my colleagues, I remain grateful for your continued support.

Alan Kerr
Chair





School Solo Competition

SYM invites every secondary school to host its own music competition, which for many, is the highlight of the school music calendar.

Our goal is to encourage participation, regardless of ability or age, by providing a platform for young people to engage, perform, and develop their talents in a supportive environment. SYM is dedicated to breaking down barriers to music education, ensuring it is accessible and inclusive for all.

CASE STUDY

Belmont Academy in Ayr is a great example of a school that SYM has inspired to go the extra mile. Hosting events in no less than six categories: Primary Musician, Classroom Musician, Singer, Instrumentalist, Senior Singer and Senior Instrumentalist of the Year. Involving the entire school, this benefited younger pupils, allowing them to witness each other's musical journey and skill development. Many were energised and keen to explore new repertoire based on diverse musical performances. All young musicians and singers received written feedback from the adjudicator and were able to further develop their life-skills, far beyond just music.

"The young people involved displayed discipline, self-management and focus in the lead up to the competition. Many were practising before the school day had even started. There was a 'buzz' in the department on the lead up to the competition, and the feedback was that they had enjoyed the experience. I saw them grow in confidence."

Andrea Cameron, Sinclair Academy, West Lothian

"The opportunity to perform in the school competition allowed performers to showcase their talents to families, friends and esteemed guests, including the Director of Education and Provost, giving the opportunity to build up confidence. It was a fantastic event which will hopefully grow year on year as we seek to provide musical opportunities to bring together young musicians, instrumental tutors, and teachers, fostering collaboration and encouragement to perform and enjoy live music."

Laura MacMillan, Principal Teacher of Music, Belmont Academy

Regional Solo Competition

The winners of the school finals progress onto the regional finals, which are significant events attended by parents, politicians and the press.

SYM's nationwide presence highlights the strength of collaborating with school music services across Scotland. Teachers have enthusiastically embraced SYM's aims to showcase the talent they have nurtured. In return, SYM achieves more than it could with its limited resources. Together, we are bringing music to every corner of Scotland and creating and strengthening an accessible and inclusive pathway for young musicians.

Reflecting this widespread engagement, this year's regional competitions saw representation from 279 schools with over a thousand pupils participating. Of the 32 Scottish regions, 15 achieved 100% school participation, and 8 exceeded over 80%. Accessibility challenges led to lower levels of participation in some of Scotland's rural communities, and this is something that SYM needs to work on.

"We had a big increase this year of pupils putting themselves forward for the competition through the online entry route in addition to those that were selected by their school. This shows how important this experience is to them, and also how each year their self-confidence and willingness to compete is growing. They gain performance experience within a supportive environment and have the opportunity to celebrate not only their own progress, but that of their peers."

*Joanne Thomson, Music Service Manager,
Midlothian Council*

SYM is especially pleased to have near full participation from all the schools in Scotland's five most disadvantaged areas. The City of Glasgow's participation was so large that their competition had to take place over two days in The City Halls and was a great success.

Local Authority Areas with SYM Participating

2022 22

2023 30

2024 30

2025 32

St Aloysius' College in Glasgow hosted the independent schools' competition. A total of 16 schools from across the country participated, showcasing a wealth of musical talent and enthusiasm. Now firmly established within the independent school sector, the competition continues to serve as a valuable platform for young musicians to perform, grow, and shine.





Solo Performer of the Year National Final

Held in The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the competition brought together, for the first time, a finalist from all of Scotland's 32 regions alongside a finalist from the independent schools' sector. For many, this was the first time they had performed on a national stage to a panel of industry experts and a packed audience. They exhibited immense confidence and courage to deliver exceptional performances. The breadth of genres made for an electrifying final, covering woodwind, brass, piano, strings, percussion, vocal and traditional music, celebrating the rich diversity of Scotland's musical landscape and the inspiring work taking place in schools.

"This was a fantastic experience to build confidence performing to others and alongside like-minded musicians, and it was such a privilege to represent my local authority. Being able to watch everyone's performances has given me inspiration within my own playing which I hope to carry through on my harp."
Stella McIntyre, North Ayrshire Finalist



Adjudicated by a panel of international standing, accordionist Inver Shand from Fife was declared winner. Inver will receive, along with all the category winners, career enhancing prizes, including the chance to work with some of the country's leading musicians.

Speaking after the competition, Inver said *"It's been an incredible experience. I'm so grateful for the support and excited for what lies ahead. This is just the beginning of my journey."*

Inver appeared on BBC Scotland's "The Seven Show" and gave an interview on BBC Radio 3's "In Tune", where he spoke about his aspirations for the future.

Ensemble of the Year National Final

After three successful years of online competitions, SYM came of age by hosting its first live Ensemble of the Year National Final in March in the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Following an online audition process, 12 finalists were selected by a distinguished panel of adjudicators to compete across the categories of Brass Ensemble and Open Ensemble, welcoming all other instruments.

After an exhilarating day of exceptional performances, Composer and Conductor Sir James MacMillan awarded the John Wallace Trophy to the overall winner, Perth and Kinross Percussion Ensemble. Their outstanding performance also earned them the Open Ensemble Prize, while Campbeltown Brass Senior Ensemble were declared winners of the Brass Ensemble Prize.

The success of the first live final highlighted the importance of live performance in the musical development of young people and was a celebration of musical diversity and collaboration. It served as a powerful reminder of how ensemble experiences can inspire, challenge and connect performers – bringing music education vividly to life.

"It brought the boys closer together and they started working more as a team. They provided their own musical thoughts and egged each other on. They all worked hard on their parts, not wanting to let the others down. They had fun together. Their playing and musical understanding have improved enormously, and they have grown in character as individuals. The performance will be something they will cherish throughout their lives."
Ann Forbes, Hillfoots Music for Youth Saxophone Quartet





Junior Competitions

Following last year's success, more regions have launched junior competitions to broaden opportunities for young musicians. The form of the competitions varies, with one local authority holding primary school heats culminating in a regional final, while others allowing junior winners to progress into senior competitions, giving participants insight into their musical development. The junior competition is expected to grow further next year.

"Having a Junior Young Musician competition is now fundamental for us in South Ayrshire and an important step for our younger secondary musicians. It gives the younger musicians ownership of their own competition at their own level, and a chance to see, hear and aspire to be even better musicians as they progress through secondary school and into the Senior competition."
*Shonagh Stevenson, Music Service Manager,
South Ayrshire Council*

Press & Social Media

This year has seen a significant rise in social media activity, driven by steady and consistent engagement and more interactions with posts related to music education, particularly the school and local authority competitions. This has allowed SYM to share the outstanding work happening in music education across the country, building a stronger sense of community and recognition. Facebook followers were up 49% over the year, while views had increased by 405%.

Local and national press coverage continued to be significant, with the former covering the regional finals and the latter giving prominence to the national

finals, with The Herald devoting a full page. National radio and television coverage continued to break new levels through several live broadcasts and interviews, including with Petroc Trelawny on BBC Radio 3's 'In Tune'.

"Music plays a vital role in young people's development and I'm incredibly proud that we support talented young musicians like Ash Paton in Renfrewshire. Reaching the national finals is a phenomenal achievement and she should feel very proud of the dedication and hard work put in to achieve that."

Councillor Emma Rodden, convener of Renfrewshire Council's Education and Children's Services Policy Board



Inver Shand, 17, has been recognised as the 2025 Solo Performer of the Year by Scottish Young Musicians. Picture: Ian Georganos

Accordianist, 17, is 2025 Scottish Young Musician Solo star of year

The Herald

Classical MUSIC

Dunfermline Press
And West of Fife Advertiser

Dunfermline High's Inver Shand is Young Musician of the year



Evening Times

Port Glasgow pupil plays at national music competition



Teen wins school music competition



Finance Review

SYM underspent its £94,000 budget by around £1000. We were especially pleased with this since we managed to include many new initiatives. SYM expanded to all 32 Scottish regions, hosted the first live national ensemble final alongside the solo national final, and increased the size of the junior competition. After having held costs down at a regional level following four years of high inflation, our main cost increase came from here, alongside the costs of project managing an organisation considerably larger than when it was founded. Despite this, we managed to increase our reserves modestly to around £21,000, a prudent level to smooth through our cash flows.

Our ongoing goal is to make SYM sustainable. While we currently depend on significant pro bono support, we recognise the need to gradually shift to market-rate expenditures, which will require raising additional funds over the medium term. It's important to emphasise the leverage SYM obtains on donations through gaining access at under-market rates is significant and a great benefit. Everyone at SYM is grateful to our donors for their generosity in allowing this to happen.

"I found the whole experience to be uplifting and positive. I felt throughout such a warm and supportive atmosphere! What I'll take away is that supporting your fellow performers, and just focusing on enjoying the experience is far more important than winning."
Craig McGroarty, Glasgow City



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