Scottish Young Musicians Analysis & Review 2026



Scotland's Leading Music Education Charity

Inspiring the Next Generation

SCOTTISH YOUNG MUSICIANS

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"Participating in SYM has a phenomenal, transformative impact, fostering benefits that extend far beyond the stage. Preparing for such a high-profile event provides a powerful sense of purpose, accelerating technical mastery and musical expression. This journey builds resilience and self-belief, teaching young people to manage performance anxiety and channel their nervous energy into moments of personal achievement. It connects them with a vibrant, supportive community of peers, broadening their horizons and inspiring them through shared creativity. Receiving constructive feedback from adjudicators offers external recognition that fuels their passion to keep playing. The experience instils life skills such as discipline, time management and focus, celebrating a journey of dedication and confidence carried into every aspect of their lives."

Blair Strachan, St Kentigern's Academy, West Lothian



A Word From The Chair

Scottish Young Musicians has undoubtedly moved from being something novel and exciting to being a firm fixture across communities. Instead of SYM having to tell the story of what we are, the story is largely told by others, often enthusiastically. This represents a big step in our evolution and makes the role of running SYM much easier and more enjoyable for me and the team.

SYM continues to evolve. This year we have achieved direct participation from all of Scotland's local authorities. From small and remote communities to our vibrant cities, thousands of young people take part in our school, regional and national competitions, with four competitions running in parallel. For many, it is a life-changing experience, benefiting young people across the country's broad socio-economic spectrum, as our analysis makes clear.

This year we will add a fifth competition, which will run in partnership with Sir James MacMillan's extraordinary Cumnock Tryst. As with many of our previous initiatives, it fulfils an unmet need by introducing a composition competition and creating a new avenue for budding composers.

"That one day I can truly make a career out of music."
Kai Fitzharris, SYM Solo Performer of the Year Winner

"Challenge and motivation. Pupils were inspired to work harder and many gained great confidence in their skills and abilities. Pupils demonstrated kindness and appreciation of their peers, and it was excellent!"
Sean Cumine, Principal Teacher of Music, Park Mains High School, Renfrewshire

Running Scotland's largest music education charity would not be possible without the dedication and talent of our hard-working team. Considering our scale, we run SYM for a comparatively modest budget because of the generosity of our music education partners. SYM only exists because of the generosity of our donors. I am enormously grateful to all those who have contributed, enabling young people to benefit year after year.

Alan Kerr
Chair









School Solo Competition

SYM invites every secondary school to host its own music competition, which for many is now firmly embedded in their school year and being rolled out to even more genres of music and year groups. Across Scotland, large cohorts of pupils participate in school competitions before advancing to their regional stage.

SYM encourages young people to make music by giving them a platform to showcase their talent and go that extra mile. By giving schools support to host their own competitions, SYM creates a space where young performers can express themselves, build confidence and develop their music and life skills. At the heart of what we do is our continued commitment to breaking down barriers to music education to ensure it is accessible and inclusive for all.

A key strength of Scottish Young Musicians is its ability to engage pupils from areas of significant socio-economic deprivation. Through our partnership with all 32 local authority Music Services, we can target communication directly to schools in communities identified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, ensuring the competition provides a national platform that is genuinely accessible to young musicians from every part of Scotland. Our partners at Young Sounds also offer additional support to widen participation.

Impact
Teacher feedback shows just how transformative school competitions can be for young people, both in their confidence and engagement.

"One of our finalists was a non-attender who struggled with social anxiety. This was a pivotal point for this young person and her family who came to watch her achieve a runner-up place after she sang to the crowded theatre. She felt confident to move forward to sit and complete her N5 exam after this."
Sharleen Muir, Principal Teacher of Expressive Arts, Taylor High School, North Lanarkshire

"The introduction of our Intermediate and Junior categories has hugely increased the involvement of our younger musicians and provided an opportunity for them to perform solo. For many of them, it was their first time performing."
Matthew Harvey, Head of Music and Performing Arts, St Columba's School









Regional Solo Competitions

School competition winners progress to their regional event, supported by each local authority's Instrumental Music Service. These high-profile occasions are a special milestone for all competitors, giving them the opportunity to perform for an audience of parents, teachers, politicians and the press.

"I was very surprised and pleased to win the Edinburgh regional round. I was nervous about performing in the final, but the rehearsal time and support from everyone involved made me feel calm and confident when performing. This was a fantastic opportunity to practise my performance skills, manage nerves in a high-pressure situation, and push my musical abilities to give the best performance I could."
Joshua Gibson, winner of The City of Edinburgh regional competition

Collaboration between schools and music services continues to strengthen. By nurturing strong relationships with schools and local authorities, we can ensure that even more young musicians have the opportunity to share their talent.

"This opportunity has boosted personal and social confidence, and confidence to perform in a formal setting. Practising to the highest standard offers holistic benefits and being able to recount that 'I was in the regional final of the Scottish Young Musicians Solo Performer of the Year competition!' bestows a positive memory for life."
Paul Judge, Lead Instrumental Music Instructor, Angus Council

This year, the regional events brought together pupils from 269 schools. Engagement remains strong nationally, with 13 regions reaching 100% school participation and 5 more surpassing 80%.

Addressing accessibility challenges in rural areas was a key SYM priority this year, and we looked at ways to offer support. We were delighted that Orkney Islands Council held a regional competition for the first time and a Junior Competition involving 112 pupils across 11 schools. SYM supported Argyll and Bute by providing adjudicators for their online regional competition, ensuring that remoteness was not a barrier to participation.

"Scottish Young Musicians has meant so much to me. Growing up in Shetland, a very small yet very musical community, it was amazing to be able to see new people who also share this interest."
Martha Robertson, Shetland Isles Finalist

This year's Independent Schools competition was hosted by George Heriot's School in Edinburgh, bringing together talented young musicians from 15 schools. SYM is now firmly established within the independent community, offering a supportive stage where young performers can develop and shine. The High School of Glasgow has asked to host next year's competition, building on the strong momentum and growing profile of the event.

"SYM has meant so much to me and I have absolutely loved being able to represent my school. It was so heartwarming to see the different styles and personalities of music brought to light. Everyone was so supportive and at no point did I ever feel unsure or isolated because the support of everyone was unwavering and everyone was kind and attentive."
Eleanor Winter, Independent Schools Finalist





Solo Performer Of The Year National Final

The National Final was held again at the prestigious Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, with finalists representing all 32 local authorities and the independent-school sector. For many, it was their first time performing on a national stage, and they rose to the occasion with performances that were both outstanding and deeply inspiring.

"I had competed in the regional final for four years, so finally being picked for the national final was an amazing feeling. The chance to play in front of such a great crowd was exhilarating and I will greatly cherish the memories from the entire day, not just the performance!"
Isla Rippiner, Aberdeenshire Finalist

This year we introduced online mentoring sessions for our finalists to help them feel confident and fully prepared for their performance at the National Final. The sessions were hosted by Matthew Chinn, Head of Junior Conservatoire of Music, and Adam Lee, Co-Principal Clarinet, BBC Symphony Orchestra.

They both shared thoughtful, practical advice drawn from their own extensive professional experience. Their guidance was hugely appreciated by the young musicians and helped set the tone for a positive and supportive final.

"The support provided by SYM to our young singer was excellent. As a completely new experience for both performer and her family, the online session played an important role in preparing her for the competition environment. It offered encouragement, reassurance and guidance, helping to build confidence while celebrating and recognising her talent throughout the process."
Siobhan McAuley, Head of Instrumental Music, Clackmannanshire Council

The finalists performed to five distinguished adjudicators, led by Miloš, one of the world's foremost classical guitarists. Their performances showcased not only their technical ability but their individuality, creativity and passion for music. After much deliberation, vocalist Kai Fitzharris from Inverclyde was declared the winner. Runners-up were Jake Kenny from North Ayrshire and Daniel Small from Falkirk. Along with the category winners, they will receive career-enhancing prizes, including the chance to work with some of the country's leading conservatoires and professional musicians. Kai's performance was then showcased on BBC Radio 3's "In Tune" alongside a live interview.

Ensemble Of The Year National Final

The ensemble competition is growing in strength with 21 schools entering ensembles in the online round from which 13 progressed to the National Final at the Royal Conservatoire on 1 March, across two categories: Brass Ensemble and Open Ensemble, for all other instruments.

After a fabulous day of exceptional music-making, Campbeltown Brass Quintet were declared winners of the Brass Ensemble Prize, and Perth and Kinross Big Band were named winners of the Open Ensemble Prize and the John Wallace Trophy as overall winners.

"SYM offers an outstanding platform for young people to shine and express their creativity through music. The opportunity for our pupils in Perth and Kinross to take part in the Ensemble competition was invaluable; it allowed them to grow as musicians, build confidence, and connect with others who share their passion. The experience has had an enormously positive impact on young people and the wider community, giving them the chance to celebrate their achievements and inspire each other."
Lynsey Paterson, Music Co-ordinator, Perth & Kinross Council







JUNIOR COMPETITIONS

The expansion of the Junior Competition to 12 regions this year reflects the increasing enthusiasm for early-stage performance opportunities. It is wonderful to see younger musicians getting the chance to perform, gain confidence and start their musical journey supported by SYM. This strengthens the progression of emerging talent, ensuring that more young performers feel included, encouraged, and inspired to progress.

"We've been running a primary version of our young musician competition for two years, and it's great to see more pupils involved each time. What's been even more rewarding is seeing how much confidence has grown in those who took part last year. We've had lots of positive feedback from parents too, with many telling us their children put themselves forward for it when they normally wouldn't have had the confidence, and that it's helped them practise with more focus.

The events have a friendly and supportive feel to them, with pupils cheering each other on and celebrating each other's performances. It also gives primary school pupils the chance to showcase their talents on a wider platform beyond their own school, which is something they don't often get the opportunity to do at that age."
Jen Marr, Team Manager, Instrumental Music Service, East Lothian





Press And Social Media

Social media engagement continues to grow, with Facebook followers increasing by 55% in the lead up to the national final and views rising by an impressive 449%. This growth has been driven by regular content, active interaction and an expanding community of supporters.

SYM featured widely in both local and national press this year. From school and regional competitions to the National Final, media outlets helped shine a spotlight on the achievements of young musicians across Scotland.

"Jake's remarkable journey from his first public performance just months ago to a national podium finish highlights both his dedication and natural talent.

His success is a source of great pride for Garnock Community Campus and the wider North Ayrshire community. From North Ayrshire Young Musician of the Year to runner-up in the Scottish Young Musicians Solo Performer Final is a tremendous achievement.

Thank you to everyone who has supported and encouraged Jake and special thanks to the music instructors at North Ayrshire Music Service who have championed him every step of the way."
Provost Anthea Dickson, North Ayrshire Counc



Finance Review

SYM continues to perform well financially. Our actual running costs of just over £97,000 came in almost £4,000 under budget for the year. Our central running costs were lower than expected, partly offset by higher costs associated with running our regional competitions. We were pleased with the level of financial support, with almost all donors renewing their commitments and many increasing them. Demonstrating value for money is important to us. We maximise the impact of donations by drawing on services from our partners, often provided below market rates or pro bono, thus gaining considerable leverage on donations. SYM is sustainable at its current level of activity, while looking to expand gradually into new areas where we identify unmet need and where expansion can be supported from our financial resources. During the year we raised £124,000, allowing for an increase in our reserves to provide a prudent buffer for the year ahead.

"Being selected for the final was a big surprise because I didn't think I was good enough to be chosen. It was my first final, so I was quite nervous, but I really enjoyed performing and listening to the other musicians. The experience has given me more confidence in my playing and motivated me to keep improving."
Yani Chan, West Lothian Finalist





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