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From Pocket to Stage, Music in the Key of iPhone

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PALO ALTO, Calif. — An expectant hush fell over the audience as the director of the chamber ensemble, Ge Wang, came out and asked them to turn off their cellphones. The seven other musicians, dressed in black, filed in and took their positions in a circle.

The conductor raised his hands. A low droning sound arose, as if the chamber ensemble were tuning. Then the musicians began to swing their arms in wide circles, creating rising and falling waves of electronic sound.

The Stanford Mobile Phone Orchestra's performance on Thursday used the most unusual of instruments: [Apple](#) iPhones amplified by speakers attached to small fingerless gloves.

Sometimes the sounds were otherworldly. Sometimes, they mimicked raindrops, bird songs or freeway traffic. In one piece, two performers blew into their phones to stir virtual wind chimes. In another, the instruments took on personalities based on the pitch, volume and frequency of the notes played — as if the musicians were flirting, teasing and admonishing each other.

And gradually, the audience disobeyed instructions, pulling out their own iPhones and iPods to record the performance.

From the earliest days of the [iPhone](#), applications that mimic musical instruments have topped the download charts. But the [Stanford Mobile Phone Orchestra](#), with its avant-garde compositions and electronic renditions of popular songs like [Led Zeppelin](#)'s "Stairway to Heaven," is trying to push the frontiers of the four-decade-old field of computer music.

While computer music composers once spent hours programming giant mainframes to synthesize a single sound, advances in hardware and software have brought powerful and easy-to-use music tools to personal computers and now, to smartphones.

Ge Wang, the assistant professor of music who leads the two-year-old Stanford group, says the iPhone may be the first instrument — electronic or acoustic — that millions of people will carry in their pockets. "I can't bring my guitar or my piano or my cello wherever I go, but I do have my iPhone at all times," he said.

Professor Wang said he would like to democratize the process of making music, so that anyone with a cellphone could become a musician. "Part of my philosophy is people are inherently creative," he said. "It's not just people who think of themselves as artists."

To pursue that goal, he co-founded [a software company, Smule](#), which makes applications that turn iPhones into simple musical instruments. Although the consumer apps are less sophisticated than the custom creations of the Stanford orchestra, users have been fascinated by them.

The most popular Smule app, Ocarina, turns the iPhone into a flutelike instrument played by blowing across the microphone, touching virtual finger holes and tilting the phone. Another Smule app mimics a trombone. The two programs, which cost 99 cents each, have been downloaded about two million times.

Other software companies have hopped on the bandwagon. [MooCowMusic](#), for example, makes apps like Pianist, Guitarist, Organist and Bassist, which sound like traditional instruments. With a program called [Bloom](#), created in part by [Brian Eno](#), the musician and producer, users can tap their phones to create drone sounds that loop and become a piece of music.

Stephen Tramontozzi, who teaches at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and plays double bass in the [San Francisco Symphony](#), questions whether iPhone instruments can viscerally affect an audience the same way as the vibrations of traditional instruments in a concert hall.

“The response of traditional instruments is so subtle to the movement and the sensitivities of the being playing it, so it therefore can express much, much more and be more touching than something that produces sound electronically,” he said.

Professor Wang, who still plays the guitar he learned in middle school, acknowledges that “nothing is better than a cello at playing the cello.”

Still, he hopes that his ensemble — which builds the instruments, writes the music and performs it — will invent the instruments of the future.

While the Ocarina app is simple enough that anyone can easily play it, the Stanford orchestra is studying the potential of more complex iPhone instruments and pushing the limits of the type of music that can be made with them.

To play one of the instruments, called the non-gamelan, musicians tilt the phone to create sounds of drums or bells and surround audience members to give them the feeling of being in the middle of a digital-age drum circle. Another instrument takes advantage of the iPhone’s touch screen. The musician taps different parts of the screen to create notes that resemble a piano or the chirps of the R2-D2 robot in “Star Wars.”

Cellphones are appearing in other ensembles across the country. A [mobile phone orchestra at the University of Michigan](#), led by a co-founder of the Stanford group, will perform on Wednesday. And a big-band jazz group called the John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble used smartphones as instruments during a [recent performance](#) in New York.

“It is too early to make any judgment on” such ensembles, said Paul Lansky, a composer and professor of music at Princeton who was a pioneering figure in computer music but [recently abandoned the field](#) to focus on traditional instruments. “You can make great music with a rubber band and terrible music with a

Stradivarius violin.”

In the future, Professor Wang said, a music ensemble could be made up of any group of people playing music together, no matter where they are physically.

Users of Smule’s Ocarina software can already listen to other people, anywhere in the world, who are playing at the same time. Professor Wang has talked to the San Francisco Symphony about a joint performance, with traditional and iPhone instruments, and he hopes to someday host a concert with musicians and amateurs from across the globe playing their iPhones all at once.

“A concert anywhere, anytime,” he said. “Let’s jam.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 9, 2009

An article on Saturday about the increasing use of iPhones and other smartphones as musical instruments gave an incomplete name for a jazz group that used smartphones in a recent performance in New York. It is the John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble, not the Large Ensemble.

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