YOU TUNES

Is everyone musical? One sonic pioneer thinks so. And he has the technology to prove it.

By ROB WALKER

In a dimly lit conference room in the Palo Alto, Calif., offices of Smule, a maker of music apps, Ge Wang was sitting in a meeting with his colleagues, humming, singing and making odd whishing noises into the microphone of an iPad, checking the screen, and then pounding fingers of code into an attached laptop. Poking at his devices, he reminded me of a child obliviously amusing himself while the grown-ups sat on around him. Nobody else in the meeting seemed to notice Wang’s behavior as they listened to a debriefing about recent updates to Smule’s Mini Magic Piano app.

When the guy at the head of the table mentioned that the graphics on the welcome page now subtly pulse, Wang looked up. “Yeah,” he said. “Classic Smule,” he added in a mutter to nobody in particular. “Everything needs to pulse.” Then he blew into his iPad mic and banged some more code.

Wang, who is 34 and a founder of the company, often leaves an impression of childlike distractness. But in fact he’s distressingly productive. He was coding in someone else’s meeting in July because he had just two hours to prepare for a presentation on a new Smule product, code-named “Project Oke.” His company has been remarkably successful, but the app’s universe is more competitive than it used to be, and there was a lot riding on his coming up with another hit — ideally by year’s end.

Wang likes to say that he has two full-time jobs, and they seem wholly distinct. At Stanford University, where he is an assistant professor, he teaches a full course load through the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (usually referred to as CCRMA, pronounced “karma”), presiding over a highly experimental “orchestra” that performs with cleverly customized laptops, cell phones and other electronics. It’s very cutting edge and, in terms of audience, very rarified. At Smule, a profile-driven, private company that recently raised its second round of venture-capital financing, he devises applications bought by millions.

Founded in 2008, Smule released several apps in rapid succession, but its breakthrough was the Ocarina. Exploiting the iPhone’s microphone as well as its touch-screen interface, Wang converted the device into an easy-to-play flute-like instrument. In what has become a Smule signature, the app also included a representation of the globe, with little dots that light up to show where in the world someone is playing the app at that moment. With a tap, you can listen. It’s also possible to arrange a duet with an Ocarina user thousands of miles of way, whom you’ve never met. The Ocarina was downloaded half a million times, at 99 cents a pop, in its first couple of months, making it the top-selling app for three straight weeks; a new artist selling that many downloads of a single today would probably end up on the cover of Rolling Stone.

The common aim of Smule’s products is to prod nonmusicians into making music and to
Wang was not happy with the visual signals indicating a user had the right note. We need," he announced, "to make the graphics more pot-smoking!

In a departure from past practice, Smie plans to make Sing, Robot, Sing! available through Apple’s Store. Smie’s business strategy is to generate money as users buy more songs and custom accouterments for their robot avatars—so the more users, the better. As the company is not dealing in physical goods, it has no relationship with other Smie customers (and more to the point) with social-network “friends” who might regularly purchase the same songs

This is also better for Wang’s more ethereal mission of helping millions of people enjoy making music. “Can we make musical interactions that weren’t possible ever before?” he asks. “Can we have people who don’t know each other, across different cultures, coming to a way that you can do in any other way?”

That depends on people not just downloading an app like Sing, Robot, Sing! and forgetting about it. Wang admits that this happens, and while encouraging users to connect with one another is key to keeping them engaged with (and buying) Smie products, it also relates to Wang’s grand experiment. His favorite example so far involves the Glue Kats, a group of reggae-oriented musicians Responding to the nuclear disaster in Japan earlier this year, one user organized a group version of the song “Learn on Me” and invited other users to add their voices—something that had once happened in a century—Wang predicts. “It’s a way that we can get,” he asks, “like, 10,000 people to make music together in a way that’s meaningful?”

At the turn of the 20th century, Perry Cook, a composer who has been a pioneer in the use of digital audio software as a musical instrument, said: “I’ve been trying to get them to do something that we think is in every- one.” Sometimes the success of the mod depends on who you talk to, because it’s they’re packaged and presented. If it works, users “will smile,” he continued, “for the very simple reason that it works.”

But “I stopped. ‘You know for no reason, actu- ally. That’s the best reason to smile!’

Sonata for iPhone: Ge Wang, app designer, plays his Ocarina.