

Edinburgh Inventor Pioneers Musical Inclusion

✘ A team of Edinburgh academics has spent the past few years developing a brand new musical instrument. It's called a skoog, and with it even people with severe additional support needs can make music.

We spoke to psychologist and co-inventor Ben Schogler ahead of his trip to the [NSBA 2011 Conference](#) in San Francisco to find out how years of academic research became an innovative business venture, and full time job.

“Music is good for you, and we need to get kids engaging with it, but essentially instruments are hard to play.

The skoog is the culmination of a long line of research in psychology, music, physics and anthropology. We were interested in the importance of music in communication, and the need to engage from the human point of view.

Our research got funding from [NESTA](#) in 2006, but there were a few conditions on that money. We had to come up with an object that was commercially viable, had to cover as wide a range of ages and ability as possible, and it had to enable people to learn and grow through using it.

There was a melting pot of ideas and to an extent we were in the right place at the right time. The project itself happened between 2006-2008 but it had been bubbling away for 10-15 years before that, and after the funding was up we were keen to keep it going and developing further. The only way to do that was to sell it commercially.

Myself and David gave up our academic careers and formed a business, bringing us into the ‘real world,’ as I think people call it? So we came out of the closeted world of academia to

make a prototype, and found ourselves learning how to pitch and market and do all kinds of other stuff.

We are still closely involved with the academic world – we know where we came from, and we want to keep on developing the IP and so on. But we are able to be a bit more hands on now than we were when working in the university, which is good. ☒

We work closely with the Music Department at Edinburgh University, and some of the students on the [Music in the Community](#) course are trained in how to use and teach the skoog so they can share it with other people. The department have two for their outreach work with schools.

There is a lot of goodwill around the skoog, just because of the nature of the project. We make no secret of the fact that this is a business, but there is a strong altruistic basis to it. Because Edinburgh is so small we've been able to put the word out quite effectively. Contacts at a few advertising agencies have given us bits of informal advice here and there to help generate contacts, and the university has helped with that too. Internet and social media have been hugely useful – there was a time you'd have to [go on national TV](#) to get the exposure we're really looking for, but now there's no need because you can engage with your audience immediately.

When we were researching the skoog we did a lot of work with schools and local authorities, so they all knew about it already and kept asking us when they were going to be able to buy one. Now they're dotted about all over the place – local authorities have them in Orkney, Falkirk, South Lanarkshire and Edinburgh.

We do get a lot of feedback and suggestions, which we try to use as much as we can – that's why the skoog can do voice recording now.

The business has doubled in size since 2008. It started out

as myself and David Skulina lovingly hand crafting every one in a house on Albert Street in Edinburgh, and now we also have help from Maggie Tam who is a recent music graduate and we've just hired a new programmer. We're also about to hire someone to take the non-technical role of admin, sales and marketing, so if you're interested then keep an eye on [our website!](#)

I am a musician first, and a psychologist second. For me, psychology is there to pay the bills, but even then a lot of my academic research was into the psychology of music and how it can be used to communicate.

I play bass in a jazz trio called The Dyad, and we were recently involved in a project called The Secret Sounds of Spores, which was a music installation created by a guy called Yann Seznec. You can see [footage of it on Youtube](#); the first human/mushroom improvisation act ever, I believe. It sounds mad, but it was very interesting! The mushroom has actually gone on tour now, but we weren't invited. Not that we're bitter...

The future of the skoog looks good. We're hoping to get it out into more and more schools, where it can be used for early years learning as well as encouraging inclusivity in music, but we're really keen for the professional music world to start playing around with it too – it is a musical instrument in its own right. I'm travelling out to an event in San Francisco to promote it, and there are already skoogs in Norway, Cyprus, Hong Kong and Australia.

I'm really excited to see what people will do with it. There's no Hendrix of the skoog yet, but it has so much potential. What we're looking for, basically, is the first skoog virtuoso playing the Albert Hall."