BLOG POST HANDOUT

GARAGEBAND CHORDS: HOW SMART INSTRUMENTS HELPED MY KIDS

Grasp Music Theory

Katie Wardrobe

Midnight Music

Guest author: Sarah Joncas

This article has been written by a guest author. If you're an educator or music industry professional who is interested in contributing an article to the Midnight Music blog, you can apply here.

Welcome to another blog post written by a guest author. The author of today's article is Sarah Joncas - a K-5 music teacher from Massachusetts, USA.

In this article, Sarah shares how to access and setup GarageBand Smart Instruments and how she uses this feature as part of her music instruction.

- Katie Wardrobe

About the author

Sarah Joncas is a music teacher from Massachusetts, USA. She teaches kindergarten through fifth grade general music, fifth grade chorus, fifth grade band, and percussion ensemble. Before becoming a teacher, she worked with technology and educational software.

In 2014, she was named a TI:ME Technology in Music Education Leadership Fellow, which allowed her to attend a music education conference in Texas and explore cutting edge music teaching technology. She has earned degrees in Music Education from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Boston University. You can connect with Sarah on Twitter or her blog Teaching Music Musings.

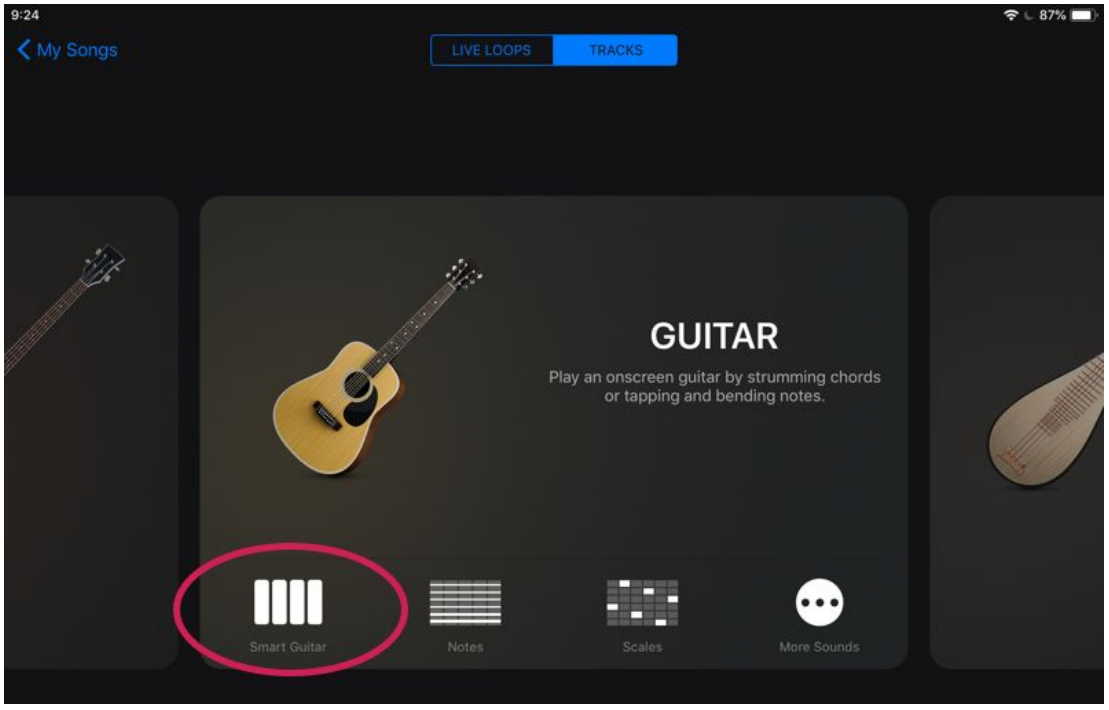
GarageBand Chords: How Smart Instruments Helped My Kids Grasp Music Theory

GarageBand is a music making program by Apple. It is available for free, but must be run on an Apple operating system (OS). GarageBand can run on Mac computers with MacOS, and on iPads and iPhones with iOS.

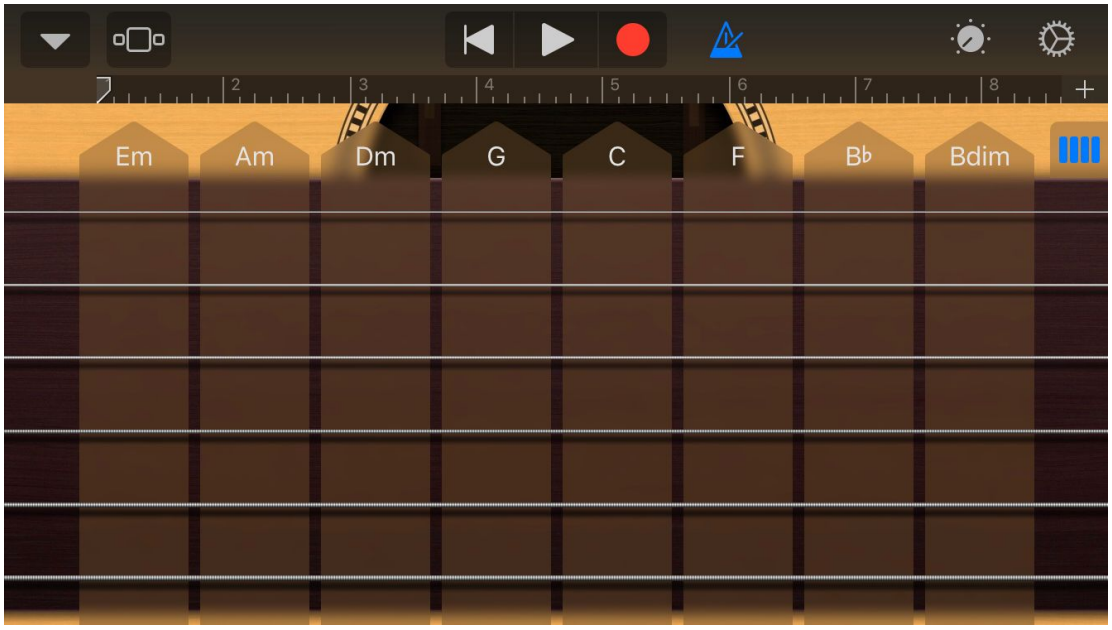
Today we'll focus on the iOS version of GarageBand, including the powerful Smart Instruments feature that allows students to make music just by touching the screen. Smart Instruments allow students to play chords by tapping a chord strip on the screen. Available Smart Instruments in GarageBand include Smart Piano, Smart Strings (which includes violin, viola, cello, and bass), Smart Guitar and Smart Bass.

How to Access and Setup Smart Instruments

Accessing Smart Instruments is simple! Open a song in the GarageBand app, and scroll through to an instrument you'd like to use. Select the Smart option on the left.



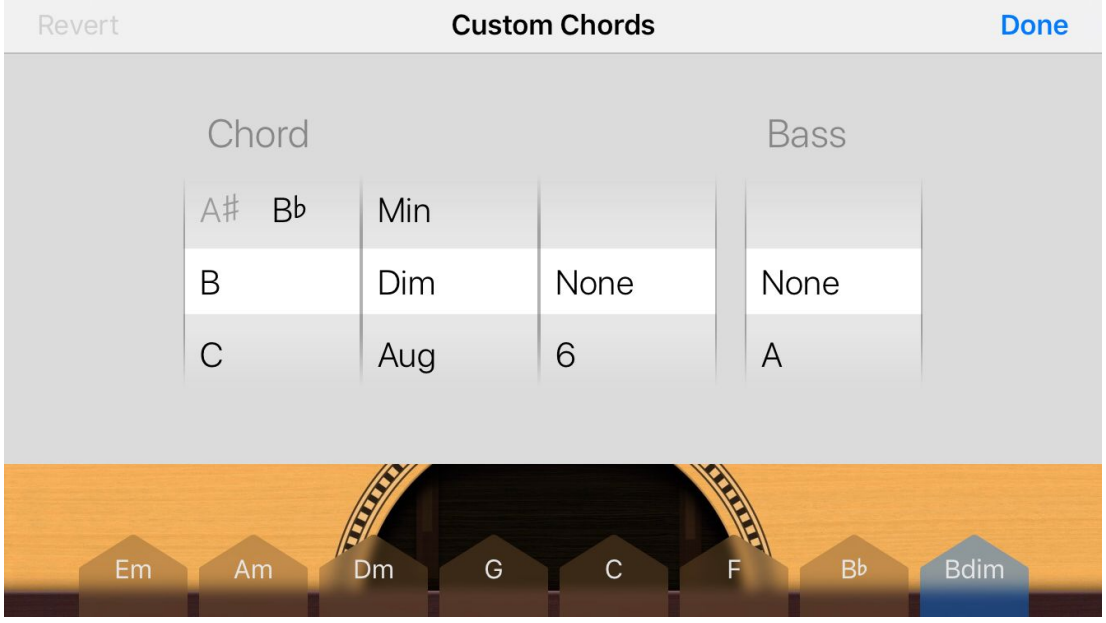
A screen that shows part of the instrument selected and various chord strips will appear.



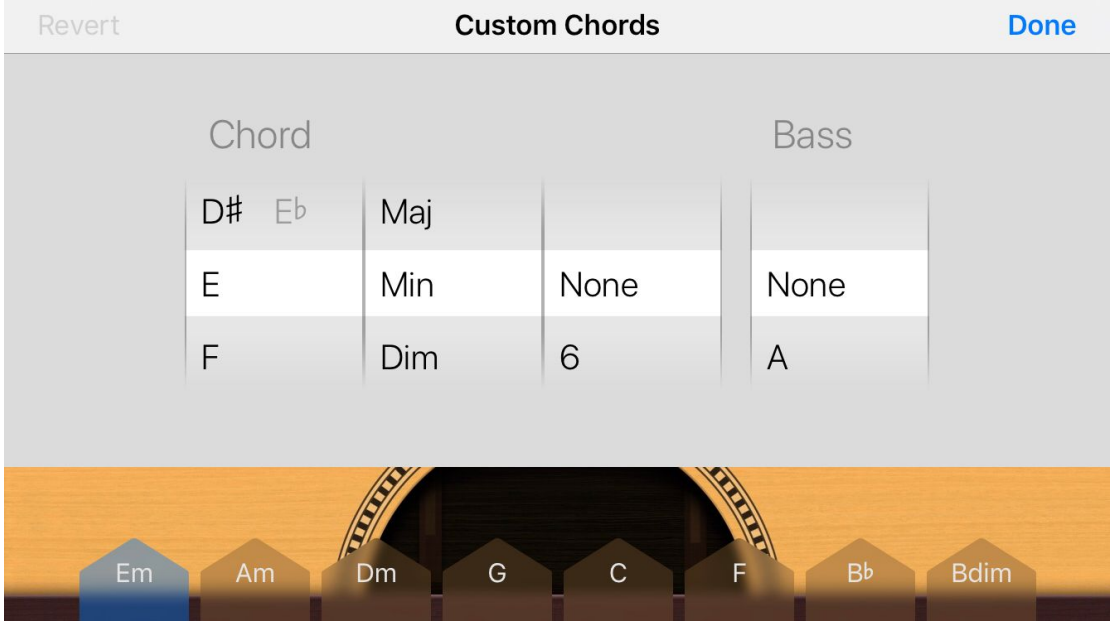
In this Smart Instrument setup, tapping or strumming will produce chords. This means students can perform chords without worrying about exactly which notes spell a C Major chord, and can focus on following along with an ensemble or track rather than finding all the notes in time.

Changing Available Chords

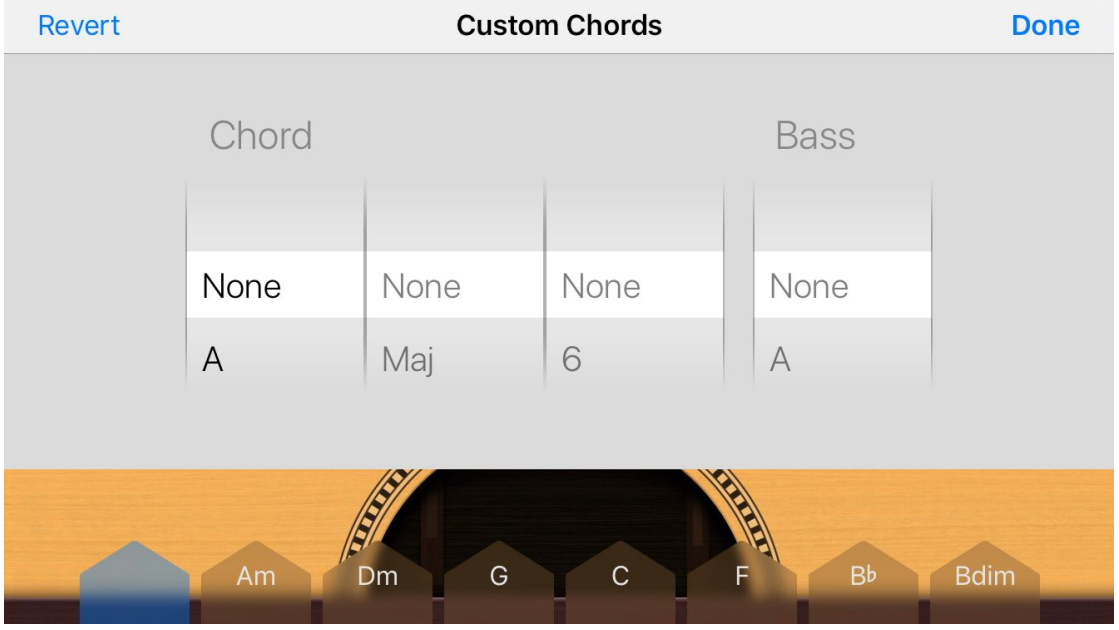
If a song or activity requires different chords we can change the chords that appear on the screen. Start by tapping the Settings icon (the gear icon at top right). Select Song Settings in the menu that appears. Scroll down the menu and tap “edit chords”. You’ll see an interface that allows you to choose chords by turning the dial:



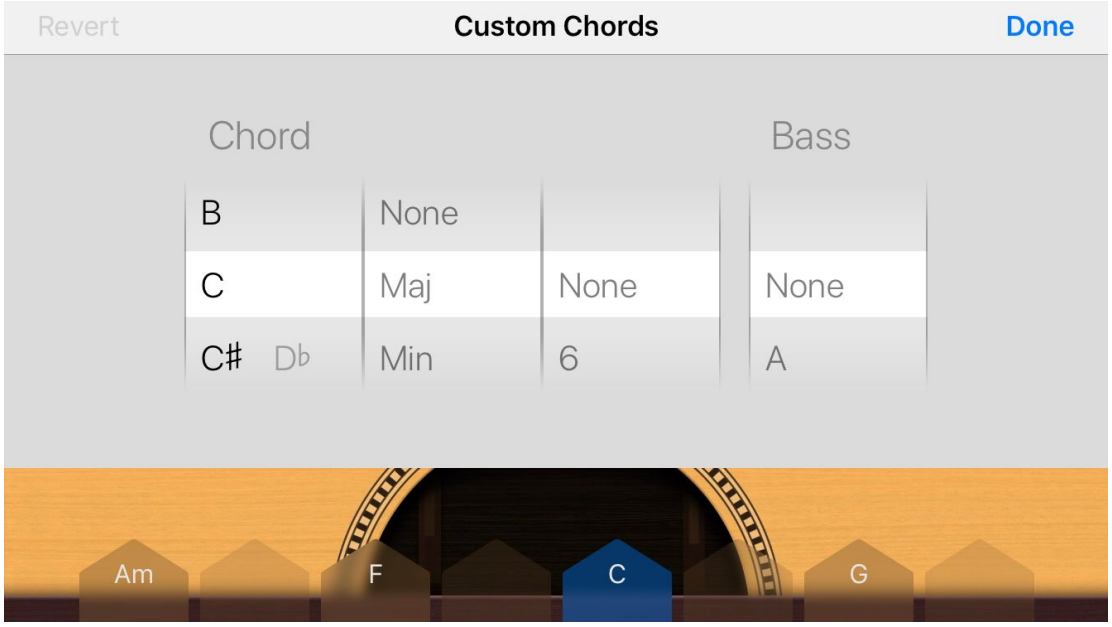
In this screenshot, I am editing the Bdim chord all the way to the right. To change a different chord, just tap on its label at the bottom of the screen. In the image below, I selected the Em chord strip on the left.



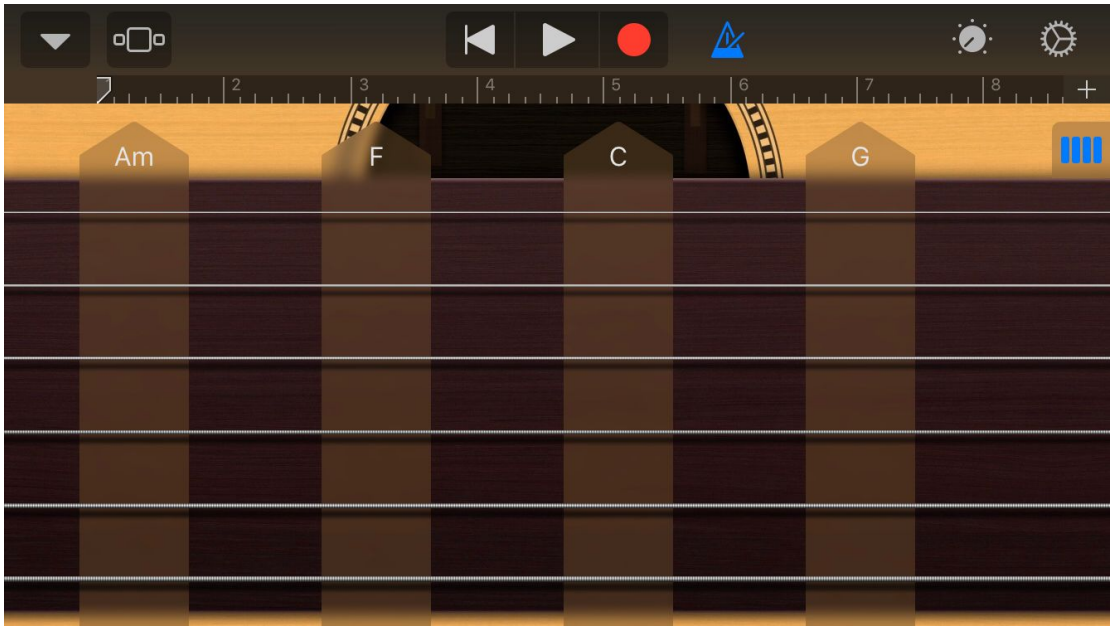
To edit the chord strip, adjust each dial. In addition to the various chords, chord qualities, extensions, and bass options available, there is also a “None” option at the very top of the first chord dial:



Selecting none means that the strip will disappear from the screen once you tap Done. This is very useful for elementary students, who are unlikely to need the full 8 chords available for most applications. I might even set up the few chords I need with spaces in between so that motor skills do not get in the way of being able to play a song accurately. For example, I might set up a song that uses C, A minor, G, and F chords like this:



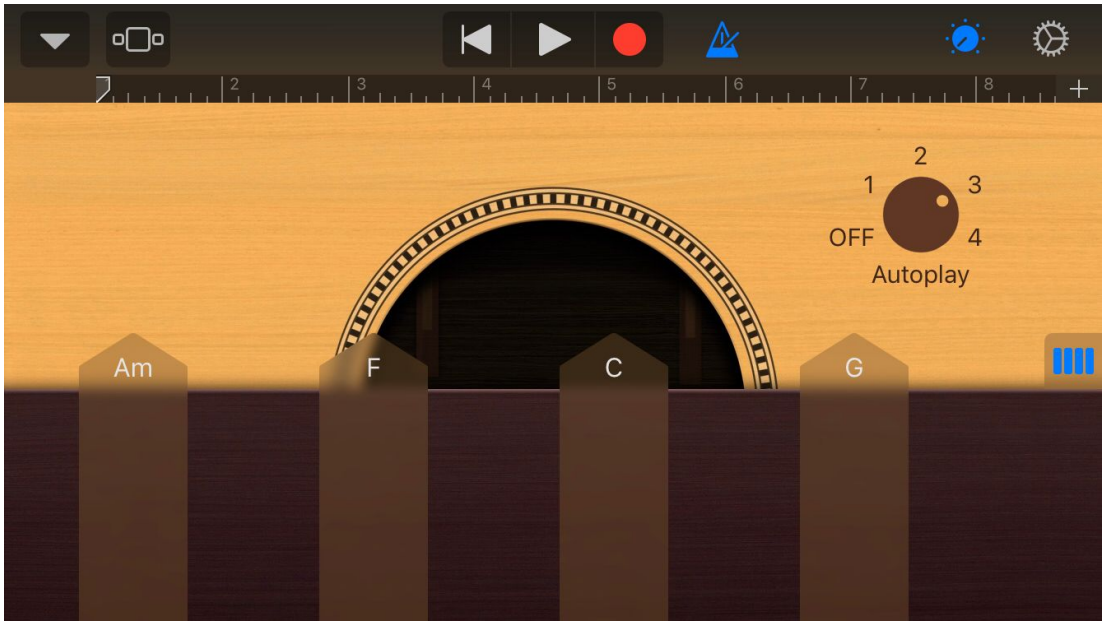
After tapping Done, the resulting Smart Instrument looks like this:



The extra space between chords allows students to use different fingers on different chords, and would be especially beneficial for students who struggle with fine motor skills.

Autoplay Patterns

With the Smart Instruments in GarageBand, the user can play a chord by tapping it. There is also the option of using Autoplay patterns, which play a repeating rhythm on the selected chord automatically. To use an Autoplay pattern, tap the dial icon (the dial is always displayed on iPad, but not on iPhone) and then select a pattern on the dial. Here I've selected pattern 3.



Tapping on any of the chord strips with Autoplay enabled will play a repeating musical pattern that stylistically matches the instrument sound you have chosen. To change chords, simply tap on another chord strip. Pressing the chord strip with two of three fingers will play a variation of the selected Autoplay pattern.

Keeping Students on Task with Guided Access

When using technology, it is important to help students stay focused on the task at hand, rather than everything else available on a device or the internet. iOS has a built in tool called Guided Access which allows educators to keep a device limited to the use of only one app until a passcode is entered. This can make sure students stay safe and are not distracted when working on assignments using GarageBand.

Apple has a simple tutorial for how to set up Guided Access. There are many different options available, which makes it a truly customizable way to keep students focused on what they should be working on.

Using Smart Instruments with Students

There are many different ways to use Smart Instruments as a part of music instruction. With GarageBand Smart Instruments, students can play chord progressions, practice rhythms, and compose.

Playing Chord Progressions

Smart Instruments help students play chord progressions without getting bogged down by complexities in written music theory. Students need only to know that the next chord is D, not that the notes of a D chord are D, F sharp and A. Whether it's an accompaniment for a song they will sing or beginning to hear chord changes, Smart Instruments allow students to play chords right away.

Playing chord progressions with Smart Instruments is especially useful for having students figure out the accompaniment to a given melody. Because playing different chords in GarageBand is so simple, students can focus on what they hear rather than worrying about the specifics of playing a chord. After figuring out a chord progression using GarageBand, performing it could be transferred to acoustic instruments if needed.

Playing chordal accompaniments is also useful in differentiating instruction. If some students are able to perform chords on acoustic instruments but other students struggle with this, the students who need more support could use GarageBand to play chords while other students work with acoustic instruments. Since there are so many Smart Instrument options in GarageBand, it is easy to find an instrument that works well with whatever acoustic instruments other students are using.

Smart Instruments also allow students to figure out chord progressions through different keys and understand the idea of movable chord progressions and intervals. I've given this worksheet to my students to have them explore the same pop progression in multiple keys.

Name: _____ Class: _____

The chord progression is:

I	V	vi minor	IV

Example - G is do, so G is I:

I G	V D	vi minor e minor	IV C

What if C is I (C is do)? Fill in the letter for each box.

I	V	vi minor	IV

What's really nice about something like this is that students can work out their answers, then check them on the iPad and hear what they've notated. It takes chords from an abstract concept to something they can play and hear.

Rhythm Practice

Need a new way to practice rhythm reading with students? Strumming chords on iPads is a great way to change things up from the usual clapping, saying, or rhythm stick routine. Students can read or rote-echo rhythmic patterns with Smart Instruments, and since strumming patterns often repeat it makes for a great authentic way to add repetition of tricky rhythms.

Composing

Smart Instruments are also a great tool for students to use when composing. They can create their own chord patterns, trying out different possibilities easily before deciding which ones they like. They can also combine

chords on the iPad with acoustic instruments, voices, or other electronic instruments to create larger-scale compositions. When creating songs where the focus is not chords, Smart Instruments make playing chords very accessible so students can focus on creativity and experimenting with their musical ideas rather than technical skills.

Smart Instrument Advantages

Smart Instruments have several advantages over traditional acoustic chorded Instruments.

Because of the GarageBand interface, no knowledge of notation beyond chord symbols is required for students to perform using Smart Instruments. Instruction in key signature and detailed written music theory can be delayed with an emphasis on practical knowledge and the ability to actually *make music* rather than know about music.

This use of Smart Instruments is a modern example of the "sound before sight" music philosophy in action, allowing students to do music and hear music before they learn the written theoretical concepts. After actually doing the concept in question, students can learn the written theory and refer back to their previous hands-on experience. My students are always much more willing to work hard on the details of a concept once they have heard and experienced how that concept actually works in music, so this process of doing before labelling helps them understand why we are learning certain things.

Smart Instruments are a flexible tool for students of different ability levels. They allow for differentiation by having different numbers of chords available. It is especially helpful for students who struggle with fine motor skills or motor planning to have a limited selection of chords so that they can achieve success in a reasonable amount of time. If playing as a group, students who have limited motor skills could even focus on just one chord and only play when that chord happened in a piece. Students who are more advanced could also have differentiation through the use of acoustic chorded instruments or other more advanced features within GarageBand.

Conclusion

Smart Instruments help students make music and perform chords in an accessible way. They are a useful feature of GarageBand that has many applications in music education. With the various features of GarageBand, Smart Instruments add another tool to teachers' arsenal. They can be combined with loops and drum beats to open up even more musical possibilities.

Related:

- 9 Things You Didn't Know About GarageBand for iPad
- 9 More Things You Didn't Know About GarageBand for iPad
- Getting started with iPads in music education: our best resources
- 9 iPad Apps Music Teachers Love and How To Use Them (free online webinar with PD certificate)

Want More?

Hello! I'm Katie Wardrobe – an Australian music technology trainer and consultant with a passion for helping music teachers through my business Midnight Music.

I'm a qualified teacher but no, I don't currently teach in a school. I help teachers through my online professional development space - the Midnight Music Community - where there are tutorial videos, courses, links and downloadable resources.

I like to focus on **easy** ways to incorporate technology into *what you are already doing in your music curriculum* through a range of creative projects. I also run live workshops and have presented at countless conferences and other music education events.

If you want simple, effective ideas for using technology in music education, I would LOVE to help you inside the Midnight Music Community.

Learn more and take a sneak peek inside