Analysis

An algorithm visualiser designed to demonstrate and display the process behind a variety of sorting algorithms and to play an audible ‘tone’ corresponding to the value of the current data being compared. The software is designed with students and classroom use in mind - to be used as a learning aid / demonstration tool for those interested in a more in-depth approach into learning the workings of how data is sorted (each individual comparison and write/read operation being made) beyond the usual whiteboard demonstration. Similar applications have previously existed, however these have been almost entirely accessed through simple website demonstrations or YouTube videos – these have the downside in which they can not be slowed down or often lack finder details in the visualisations.

The user will be able to select the algorithm to sort by as well as the method used to ‘shuffle’ the data accessed via drop down menus. The user will be able to control sliders to determine the time between each step in the sort; the size of the array to be sorted; the pitch of the tone played. The user, through the use of buttons, will be able to start and pause the sort; step through the individual steps of the sort; reset the array back to the original state; mute the sound of the tones; select a random sort. At the end of each sort the data will be saved into a csv file for later comparisons by the user.

Objectives

1. Display the current state of the array, representing each element as a bar with the height corresponding to the value of the data element
2. Create a control/settings panel allowing easy customisation and live alterations of the sort parameters
3. Information panel to display statistics related to the current sort
4. File saving system to store statistics related to previous sorts for comparison
5. Implementing a variety of ‘shuffling’ algorithms to manipulate an array out of order
6. Implementing a variety of sorting algorithms to manipulate the shuffled array into the correct order

User Interface

To construct the mock-up UI, I used the [Figma web application](https://www.figma.com/) as it is a purpose-built design tool for interface designing. The UI is composed of 2 major components – The control / setting panel and the graph visualisation, this allows for the parameters to be easily visible at all times and changed live without obstructing the visualisation. The UI is designed with the ability to be controlled and navigated using solely a mouse however I do plan on binding certain common actions e.g. start/pause to keyboard inputs as well.

Initial design concept - Figma

A red and white lines on a black background

Description automatically generatedA screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

I chose the primary method of representing the individual data values in the array as bars similar to that of a bar graph as this was the easiest way to convey the value associated with each element in an intuitive way to the user. In order to highlight any extra/important pieces of data within the sorting algorithms e.g. current element and boundary elements the colour of the corresponding bar is changed to either red or green depending on the circumstance. The narrow nature of the bars allows for more elements to be visible at once on the display leading to larger array sizes being visualised without cluttering the visualisation.

The secondary option of visualising the array data is through the pixels of an image uploaded to the program by the user. This will provide a more creative and potentially engaging approach to visualising the data at the detriment to highlighting finer details in the sorting algorithms as opposed to the bars e.g. the change of colour on certain bars to represent key values.

Application Framework

For the rendering I am using the libGDX application framework in which uses the Lightweight Java Game Library (LWJGL) as the backend. I have chosen this platform due to the ease of use of its shape renderer component which renders simple shapes such as rectangles in batches to speed up performance. Due to the vast majority of the application being displayed to the user consisting of vertical rectangles I felt this to be an acceptable decision combing ease of use with reliable performance. I also chose to use libGDX as it provides input handling through the input processor.

An example piece of code using the shape renderer to render a simple rectangle at position (50, 100) with a size of 200 x 200

A screen shot of a computer program

Description automatically generated

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

Audio

An audible tone is to be played upon each comparison made, corresponding to the values of the date being compared. Initially I was going to accomplish this through utilizing a sine-wave to generate the values for the tone and use the OpenAL library to play the tone through the system speakers. This approach had numerous drawbacks resulting in highly reduced performance, high system recourse usage and as a result offered subpar audio performance and undesirable sounds due to the large volume of requests being made by the program in quick succession overwhelming the system. The solution was to use the built-in midi library as this offered a solution to the majority of issues encountered. The instrument I eventually selected for the midi audio was ‘Square Wave Lead’ (abbreviated as ‘Square’) as after numerous trials with other sounds, this was found to be easier on the ears than most while providing an ‘8-bit’ like quality.

Algorithms

Initial shuffling of data

In order for the data to be correctly sorted, it first must be shuffled. To accomplish this I have taken the decision to give the user the choice to either reverse the order of the array or to create a ‘truly shuffled’ array in which every permutation is equally likely.

To reverse the array I increment through from the start to the midpoint, swapping each element with its equivalent from the end point.

To truly shuffle the array I decided upon a variation of the ‘Fisher-Yates shuffle’. In the original shuffle:

* You have a list of numbers arranged in order from 1 to N (number of elements)
* Select a random number between 1 and the remaining number of elements, X
* Remove the number in the X position of the list and copy it to the end of a separate list
* Repeat the previous 2 steps until all numbers have been moved to the new list

Whereas in a more modern approach devised by Richard Durstenfeld, the algorithm I chose for the shuffle, has been proven more efficient when performed by a computer as instead of counting the amount of remaining numbers in the list every iteration, the number to be moved is instead swapped with the last unaltered number at the end of the list each iteration. In doing so the time complexity of the algorithm has been reduced from O(n^2) to O(n).

Implemented sorting algorithms

Bogo, Bozo, Bubble, Cocktail Shaker, Comb, Exchange, Gnome, Insertion, Merge, Odd-Even, Pancake, Quick, Selection, Shell, Slow

Bubble Sort & variations

Bubble sort is a simple in-place algorithm in which iterates over an array of elements comparing each element to the next and swapping accordingly, causing the largest element of each pass to ‘bubble’ to the top. Bubble sort is often used in an educational setting due to its simple implementation but suffering from being inefficient in real world use cases.

The average time complexity of Bubble sort is O() and has a space complexity of O as it has to iterate over the whole array for each element in the array. A simple optimisation would be to have it finish each subsequent iteration 1 element sooner due to the final element of each pass being in the correct place.

Here is an example of the Bubble Sort algorithm with the explained optimisation written in Java

private void bubbleSort(int[] array) {  
 int end = array.length - 1;  
 boolean swap;  
 do {  
 swap = false;  
 for (int i = 0; i < end; i++) {  
 if (array[i] > array[i + 1]) {  
 int temp = array[i];  
 array[i] = array[i + 1];  
 array[i + 1] = temp;  
 swap = true;  
 }  
 }  
 end--;  
 }  
 while (swap);  
}

Several other sorting algorithms can be categorised as variations/optimisations of bubble sort such as ‘Odd-Even Sort’ and ‘Cocktail Shaker Sort’ in which the latter repeatedly performs a bubble sort going from left to right followed by a bubble sort from right to left, causing smaller values in the array to more quickly reach the start of the array.

Another, more effective variation is ‘Comb Sort’ in which allows turtles (small values at the end of the array) to move more positions per iteration. It does this by performing a bubble sort but instead of comparing and swapping one element to the next (gap of 1), it implements a much larger gap between the elements. This gap is initially the length of the array shrunk by the scale factor and is further shrunk by the scale factor each iteration until a gap of 1 is reached, in which case this pass is equivalent to a standard bubble sort. The scale factor is most optimal at a value of ~1.3 as too small a value would make many unnecessary comparisons and too large a value would mean the turtles are not effectively dealt with.

While the worst-case time complexity of Comb Sort remains as O(), the average time complexity is improved to O() where p is the number of gap increments. The space complexity remains O

Here is an example of the Comb Sort algorithm written in java

private void combSort(int[] array) {  
 boolean sorted = false;  
 int gap = array.length;  
 do {  
 gap = (int) Math.floor(gap / 1.3);  
 if (gap <= 1) {  
 gap = 1;  
 sorted = true;  
 }  
  
 for (int i = 0; i + gap < array.length; i++) {  
 if (array[i] > array[i + gap]) {  
 int temp = array[i];  
 array[i] = array[i + gap];  
 array[i + gap] = temp;  
 sorted = false;  
 }  
 }  
 }  
 while (!sorted);  
}

Impractical sorting algorithms

The following three algorithms do not operate in polynomial time and are therefore highly impractical.

Bogo Sort is a highly impractical sorting algorithm in which may never produce a sorted array due to the random nature of it and as such is only useful in an educational setting. However the average time complexity to produce a sorted array is O(). Bogo sort works by generating a permutation of the array (shuffling) and then checking if said permutation is sorted, if not this cycle repeats until the array is sorted.

A slightly optimised, but still highly impractical variation on Bogo Sort is ‘Bozo Sort’ where rather than shuffling the whole array, two elements are randomly selected and swapped each iteration. The algorithm still may never produce a sorted array but the average time complexity to produce a sorted array is improved to O().

Here is an example of the Bogo Sort algorithm written in pseudocode

while not sorted(array):

shuffle(array)

The third highly impractical sorting algorithm implemented is Slow sort. Slow sort operates on the principles of ‘multiply and surrender’ – a parody of the ‘divide and conquer’ paradigm. The best-case time complexity of Slow sort is O()

Here is an outlined version of the Slow Sort algorithm

1. Recursively sort the first half of the array
2. Recursively sort the second half of the array
3. Compare the results of step 1 and 2, to find maximum and place at end of the array
4. Recursively sort the whole array excluding the maximum at the end

Other notable Sorting algorithms

Insertion

Insertion Sort has an average time complexity of O(), however it is very efficient if the array is already sorted to a large degree or very small in size, and as such an optimised Quick Sort implementation will utilise Insertion Sort for arrays below a predetermined size. Insertion Sort possesses a unique property in that it is considered to be ‘online’ – the ability to sort data as it is input.

Insertion Sort operates by for each element to be sorted, from start to end of the array, an ‘insert’ operation is invoked to insert the element into the correct position. The ‘insert’ operation works by starting at the end of the sorted portion of the array and moving each element one position towards the end until a suitable position is found for the new element and storing it there.

Merge

Merge Sort follows the ‘divide and conquer’ paradigm and has both an average time complexity and worst-case time complexity of O() while having a space complexity of O(). The implemented merge sort algorithm uses a recursive top-down approach,

Here is an outlined version of the Merge Sort algorithm

1. Starting with the original array, split the array into 2 sub-arrays and invoke a Merge Sort on each sub-array until a length of 1 is reached (sorted)
2. Involve a merge procedure on the sub-arrays – merging 2 sub-arrays into one larger array with the elements correctly ordered
3. Repeat step 2 until only one array remains – the sorted output array

Quick

Quick Sort follows the ‘divide and conquer’ paradigm and has an average time complexity of O() and a worst-case time complexity of O() while having a space complexity of O() due to the implementation of Hoare’s partition scheme. In the traditional naïve implementation of Quick Sort, only 1 pointer is used whereas in Hoare’s implementation 2 pointers are used – one from each end, moving towards each other.

Here is an outlined version of the Quick Sort algorithm

1. Pick a value in the range to use as the pivot point (I used the middle value for simplicity)
2. Initialize pointers at start and end of the array
3. Increment the left pointer until an element is found greater than or equal to the pivot value
4. Decrement the right pointer until an element is found less than the pivot value
5. Swap the values found at the two pointers
6. Repeat steps 3-5 until the left pointer is greater than or equal to the right pointer
7. Repeat steps 1-6 recursively for the two sub arrays formed by splitting the array at the pointer value (steps 1-6 are known as partitioning)

Design

Introduction

Overview

The project is an educational tool centred around the visualisation of a variety of sorting algorithms. The user has the ability to choose between which sorting algorithm to visualise; the method in which the data is shuffled; the number of elements and the parameters for the visualization – speed, audio volume and pitch. The user will also have the ability to play and pause the visualisation at any time while also stepping through it step by step while being able to toggle between two modes of visualisation – bars and image. The program will display various statistics related to the current visualisation in an easily readable format e.g. number of comparisons and time taken. The final statistics at the end of each sort are to be written and saved to a file for future reference.

Programs and libraries

The program is written in Java and uses LibGDX as a framework. Audio is handled using the Midi package.

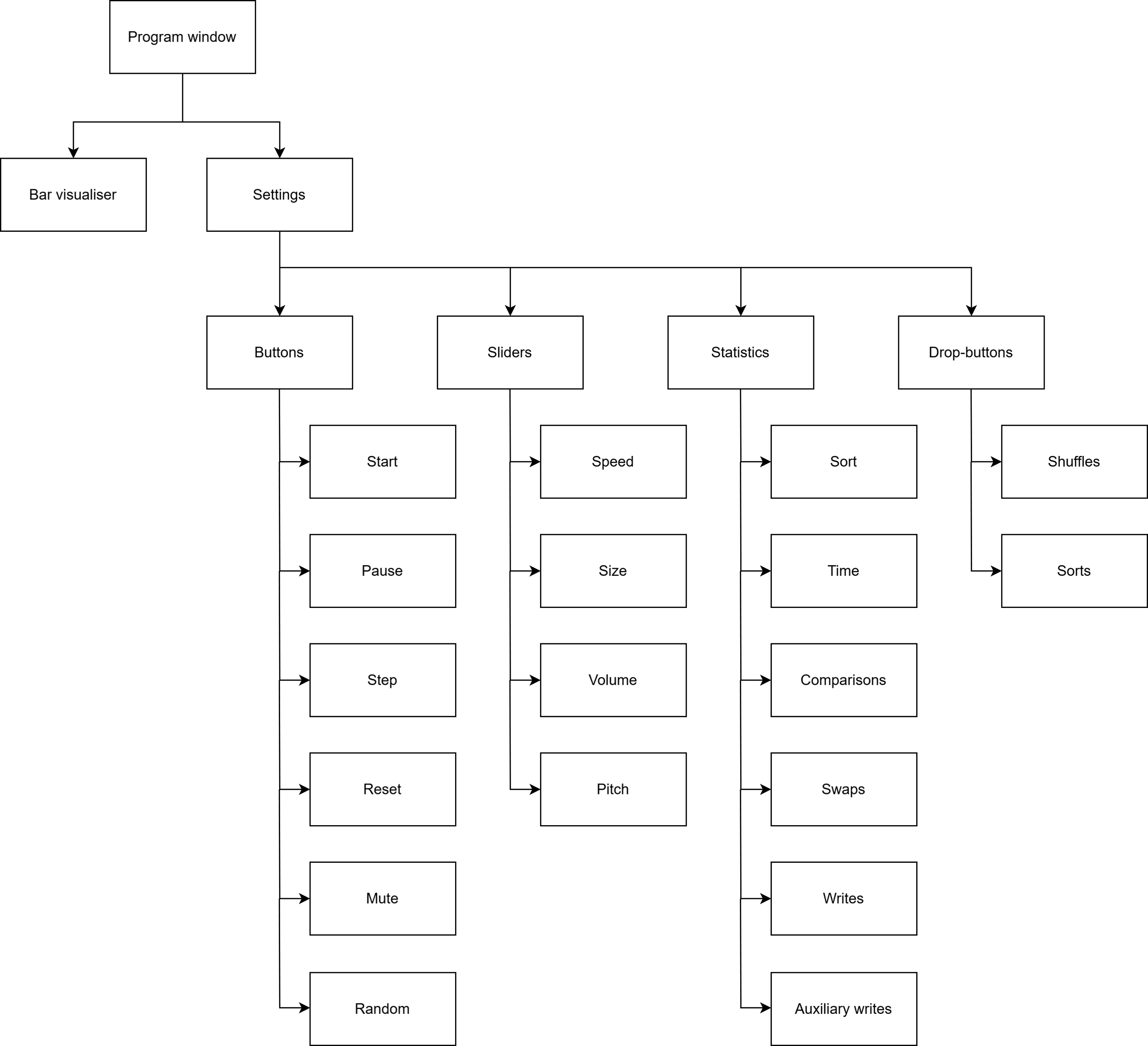
System overview

This section will contain flow charts to visually represent various components of the project.

User interface

Program window structure

Hierarchy chart containing the UI components



The visualisation bars will take a prominent place on the window with the settings panel situated to the right-hand side. The user will be able to access the settings panel at any point during use without obstructing the visualization of the sorting algorithm. This will also allow the statistics relating to the sort to be permanently visible.

Overall User interface



The program in the default state with the sort and shuffle drop-downs expanded

Settings panel

The buttons can be activated using a left mouse click with each of the main 6 buttons being also bound to a corresponding keyboard input. The drop buttons can be expanded and collapsed by clicking on the corresponding label and are scrolled by either using the scroll wheel or the arrow keys. The sliders can be adjusted by either clicking and dragging the small position indicators or when using the arrow keys the last interacted slider will be adjusted.



UI Input implementations

The UI Input classes consist of the Buttons, Drop Buttons, Sliders, Input Manager, Button Methods and Text Method Pair. These classes have been designed to be modular and easily implemented into future programs.

The Input Manager class handles all the input detection for the program including mouse and keyboard events. This class would need to be modified if implemented into a future program to accommodate the program specific button methods and if not all the input modules are to be included.

The Button Methods class stores the enumerators and corresponding method calls for every method that can be activated by the other input classes (buttons and sliders). This class would need to be modified if implemented into a future program for the correct methods and enumerators to be referenced.

The text Method Pair class acts as a utility container class allowing text (Strings) and the Method enumerators (from the Button Methods Class) to be stored inside a single object to be easily pared up and passed through as a single array into a drop-button instance.

The Button class acts as the primary and most basic form of interaction between the user and the program allowing control over the main aspects of the software. The current implementation of buttons allows them to be any colour but in this instance they consist of a light grey rectangle with white text rendered on top.

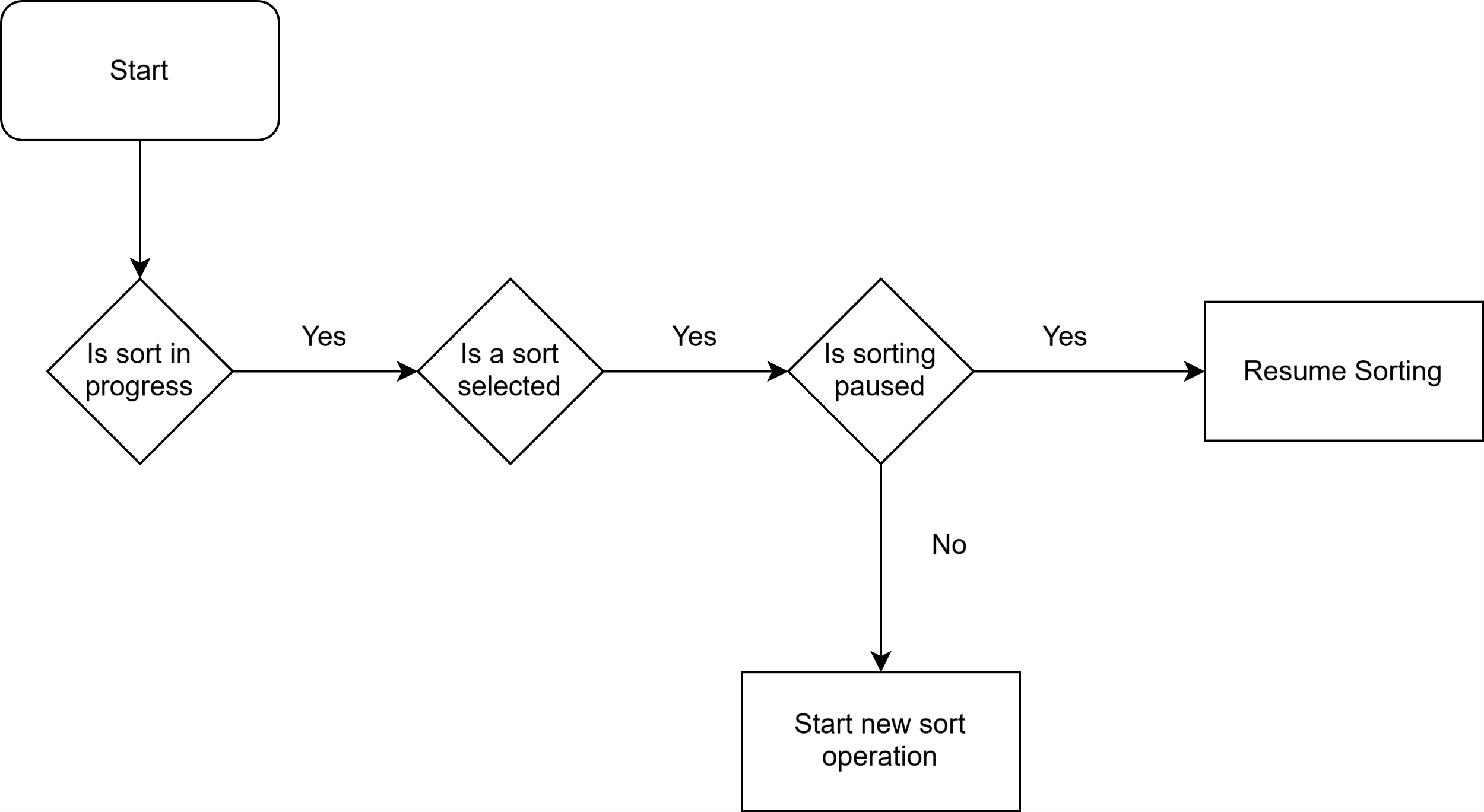
The Drop Button class extends the Button class and toggles a dropdown of sub buttons (Button instances) upon being clicked. The drop downs can be scrolled through using either the scroll wheel or the arrow keys.

The Slider class allows for finer control over certain aspects of the program. Each slider consists of a thin rectangular bar with a small circle acting as the pointer for the current value. Text is rendered above the slider to indicate the current value and its function.

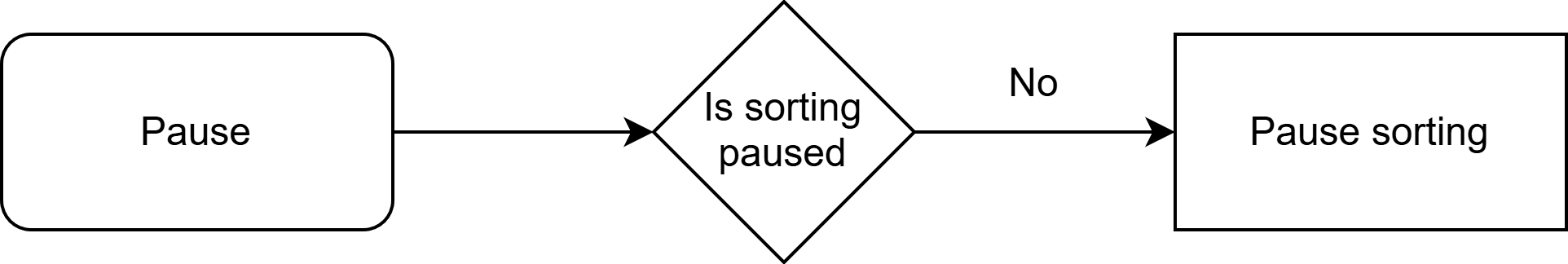
Button implementations

Various flow diagrams demonstrating the algorithms performed when each main control button is used.

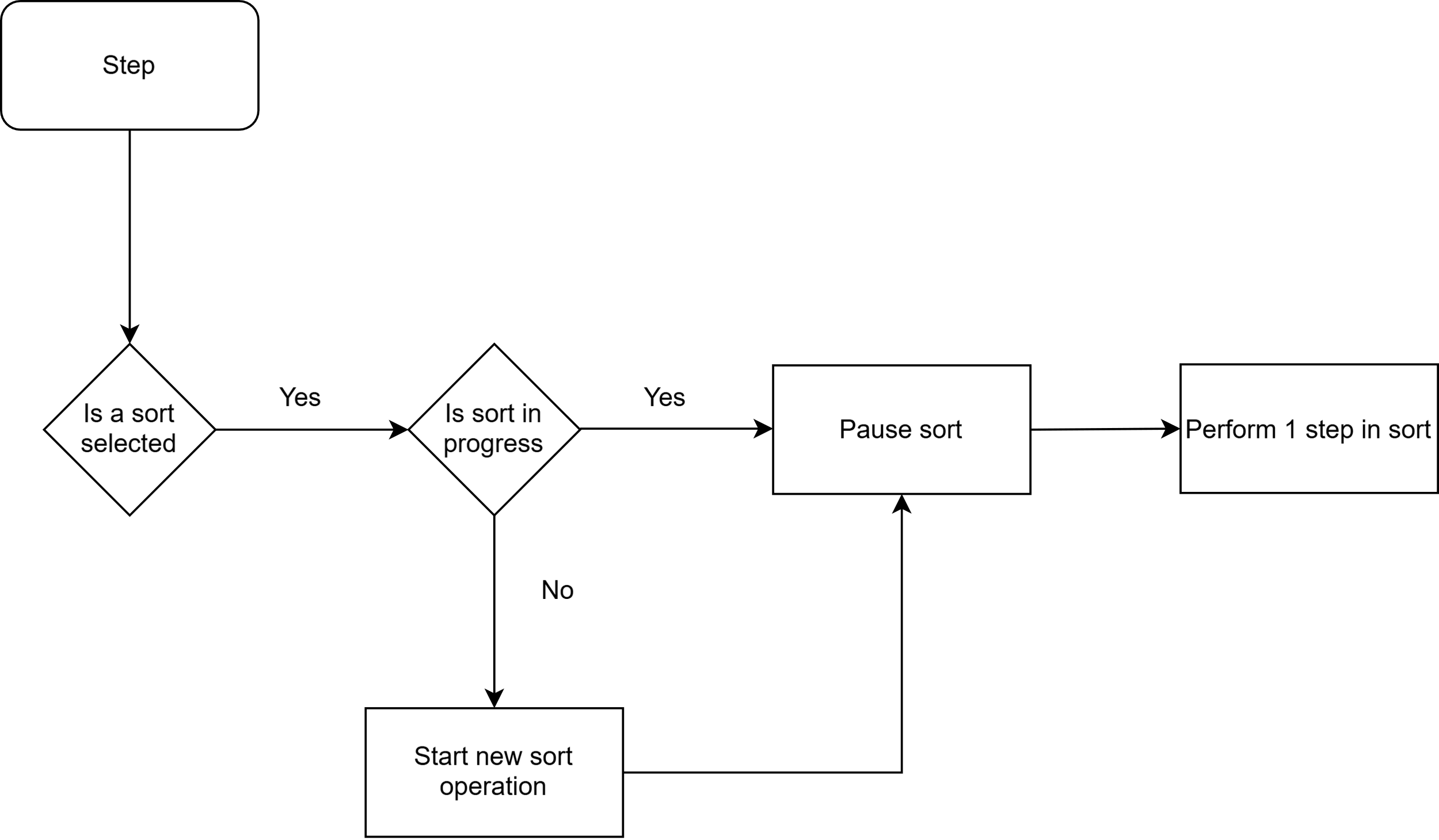
Start button



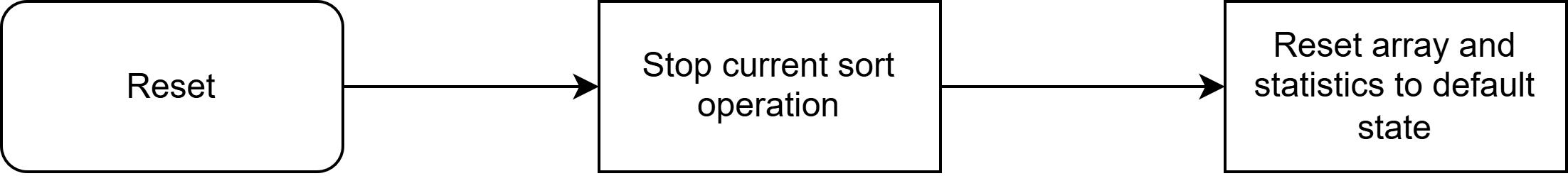
Pause button



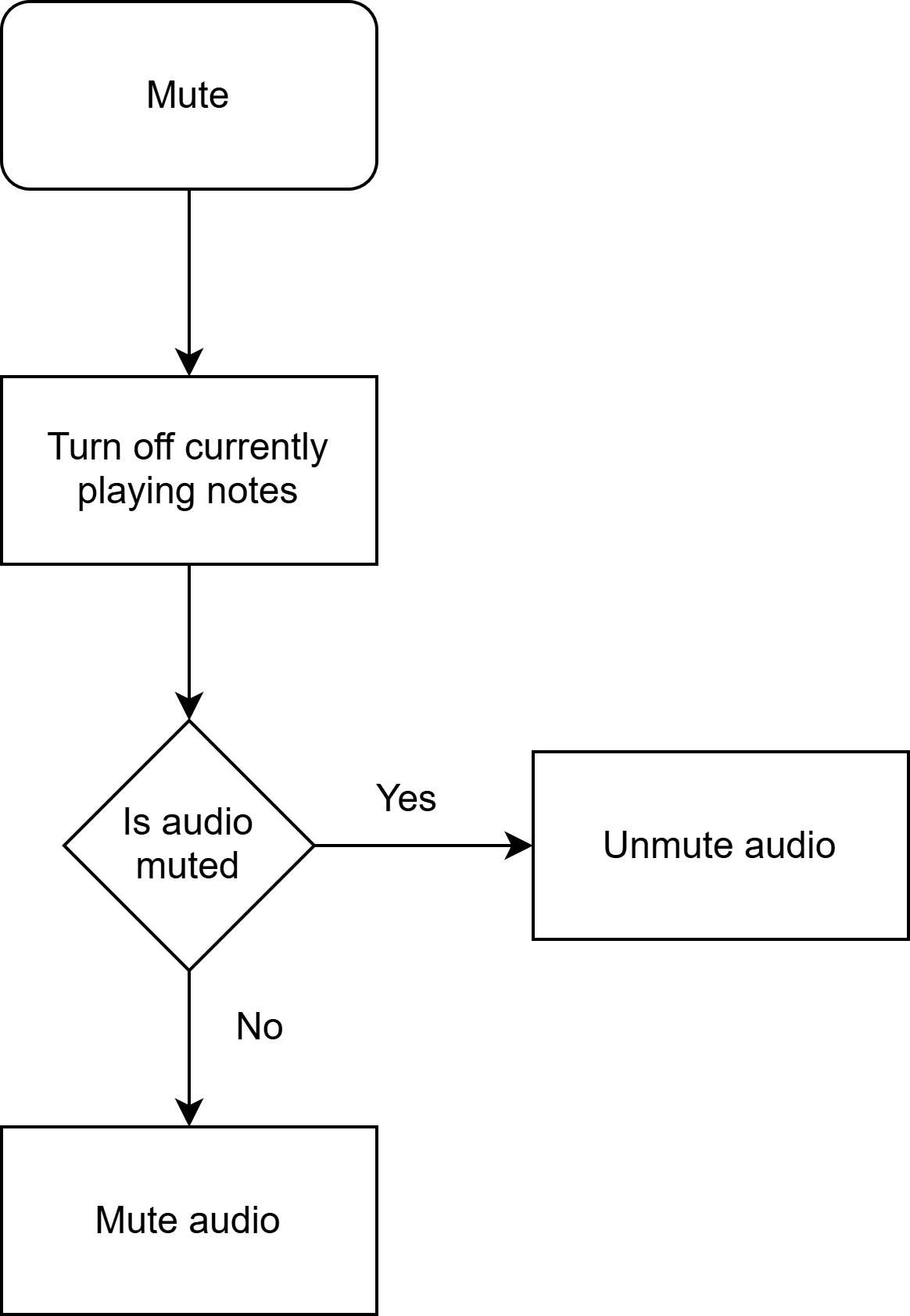
Step button



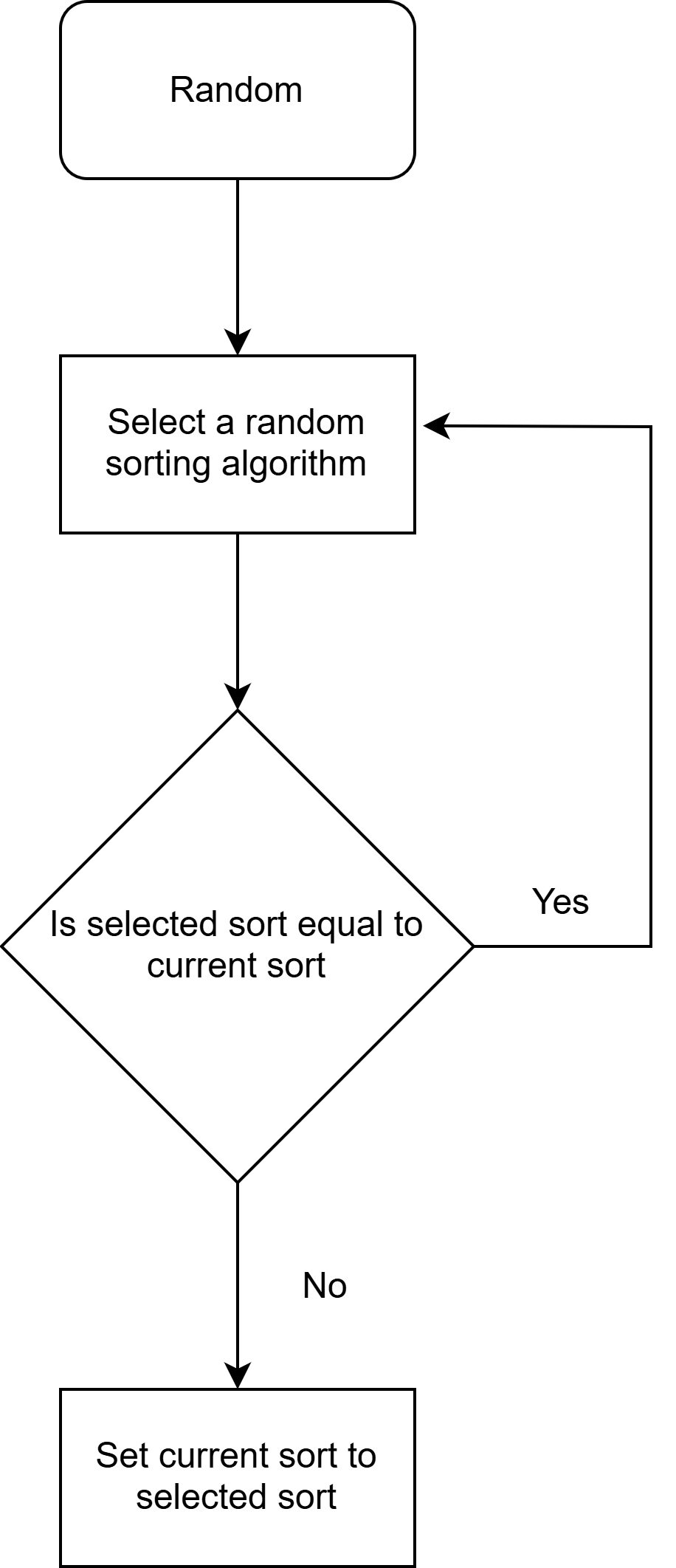
Reset button



Mute button



Random button

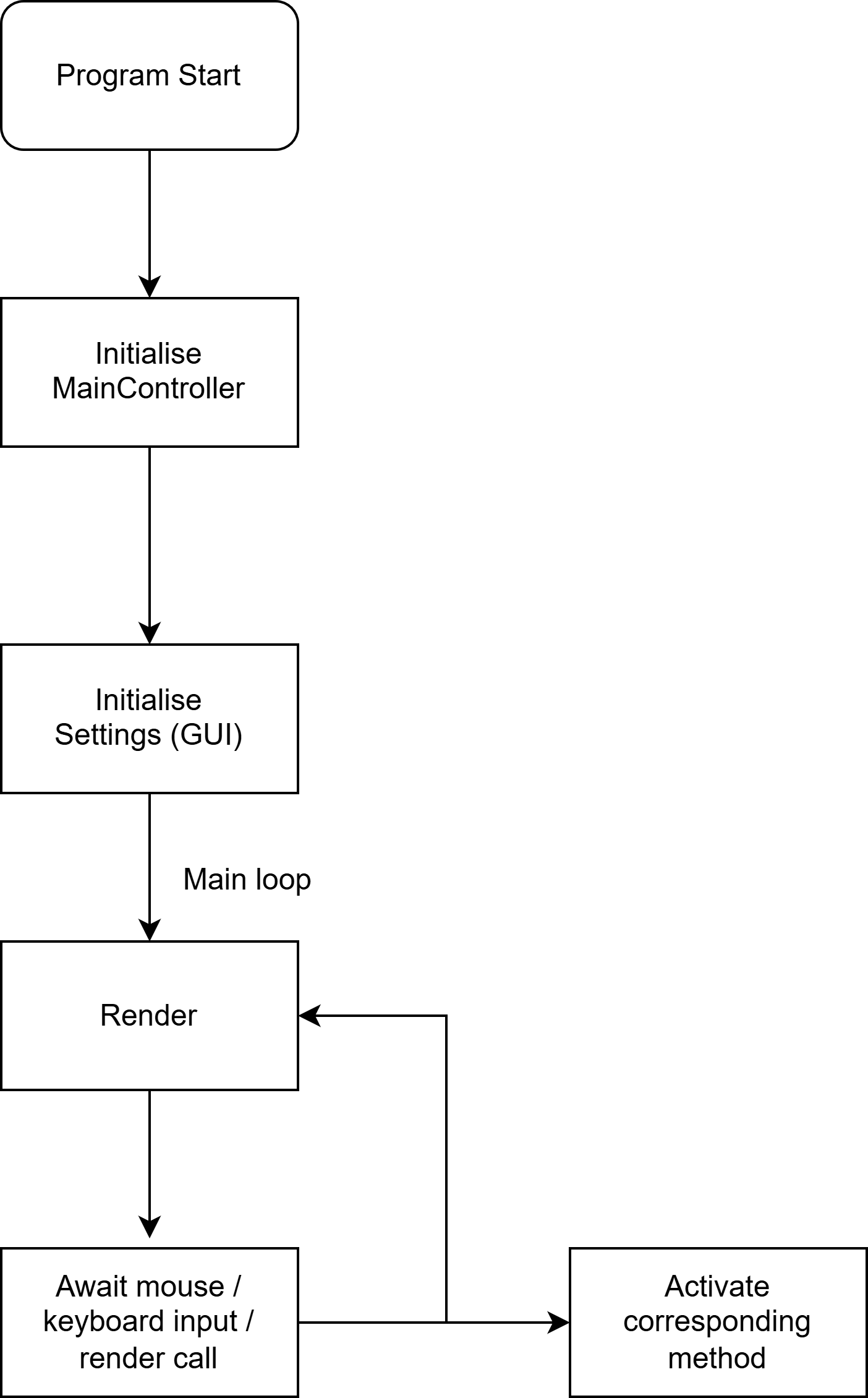


Main operational algorithms

Key algorithms for the operation of the program.

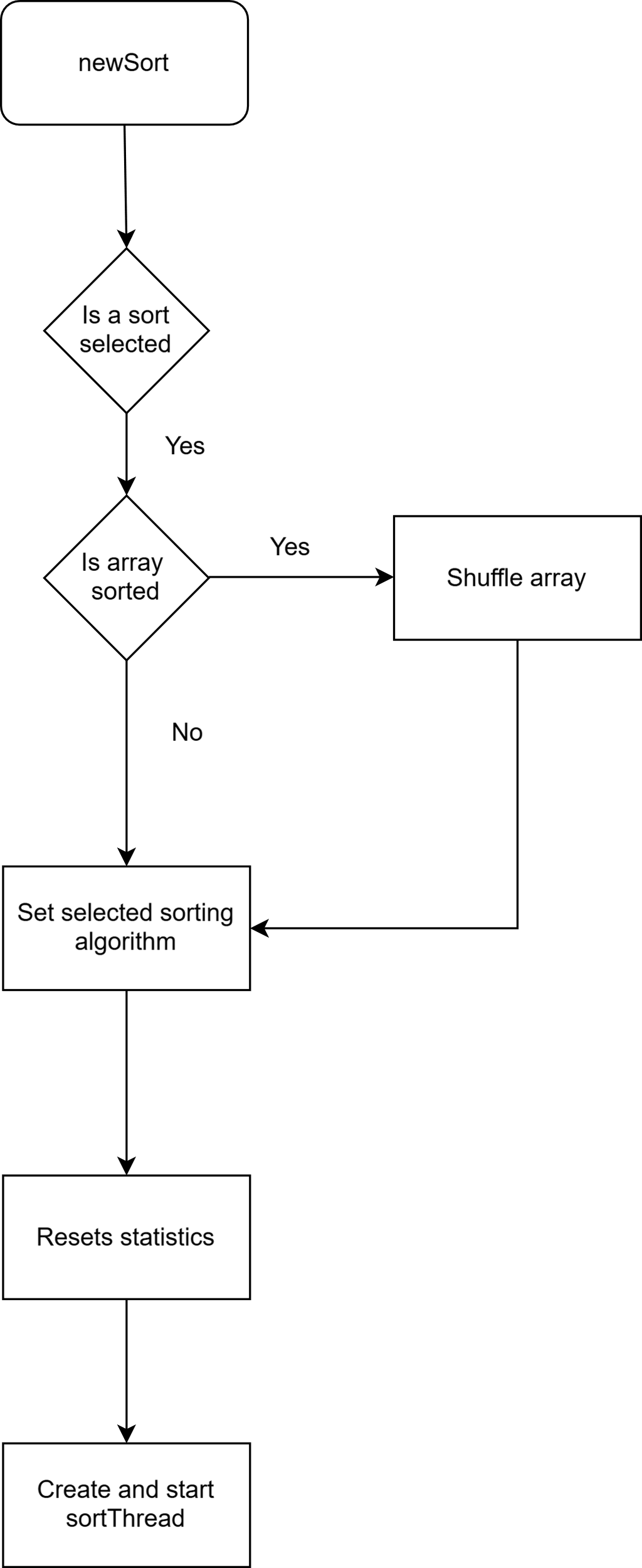
Program start

Performed on opening the program. The main loop continues to run until the program is exited.



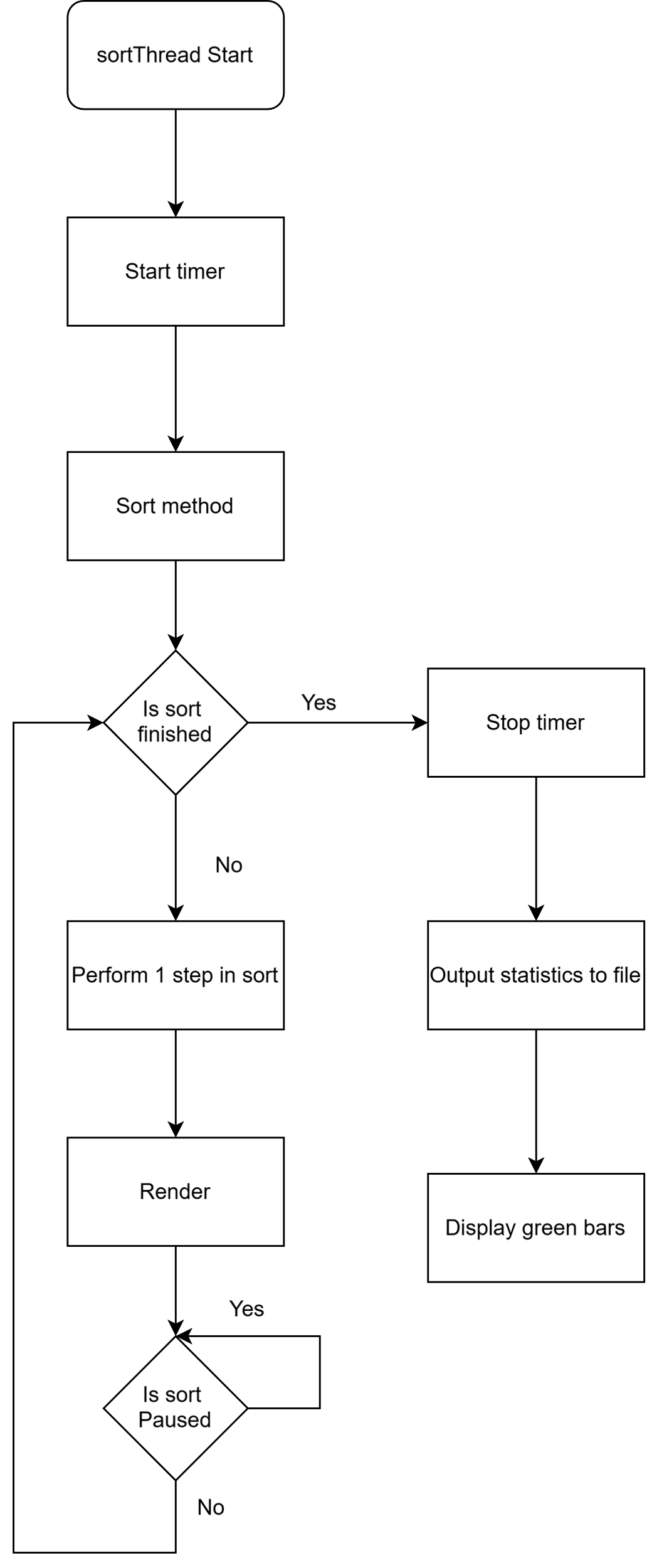
New sort

Called whenever a new sorting algorithm is to be visualised.



SortThread start

Called on starting of a new sortThread. Contains the logic for the sorting algorithm and runs until the sort is finished or reset.



Visualisation

The user has the ability to toggle between two distinct visualisation methods at any point – bars and image with bars being the default option.

Bars

This is the default method used in the program as it provides the clearest visualisation of the sorting algorithm whilst showing the greater level of detail.

The bars visualisation method utilises tall rectangular bars to represent the data values in the array with the height of the bar being determined by each element’s value – the greater the value, the taller the bar.

Sorted array Shuffled array

The default colour of each bar is light grey, with red and green being used to indicate any special values within the array corresponding to the current sorting algorithm e.g. the boundary positions in a merge sort. The data corresponding to these special values is stored in a separate arrayList – specialElements and is rendered over the top of the original bars rather than replacing the existing ones.

Image

This is the secondary method used in the program as whilst it provides a less detailed view of the sorting algorithms it is potentially more intriguing to watch and allows for a more interactive user experience.

The image visualization method allows for the user to input an image file into the program and use the image’s pixel positions / colours to represent the data values in the array with the smallest element being the bottom left pixel (0, 0) and the largest being the top right pixel (w, h) (where w is the width and h is the height of the image).

Each pixel in the image is linked to a value in the array using the following code

imageArray[(arrayController.getElement(i) - 1) % (width)][(arrayController.getElement(i) - 1) / width]

When the array is shuffled this will also result in the pixel positions being randomised in the same manner, creating a jumbled-up version of the image which is slowly returned to its original state as the array is sorted.

Sorted array (32x32.png) Shuffled array (32x32.png) 

In the case no image file is currently loaded, the following message is instead displayed to the user indicating as such



In order to ‘move’ the individual pixels of the image I cannot render the image in an ordinary fashion so instead each pixel is individually rendered as its own rectangle with the colour being set using a Color object of the corresponding pixel’s ARGB value. Whilst the colour value of a pixel can be accessed directly from the image each time it is needed to be rendered, this is an expensive operation that will drastically slow down the program when repeated for every pixel of the image for every rendered frame. As a result it made more sense to access the colour value of each pixel directly from the image only once and store it in a 2D array of Color objects (RGBA values) to use as a lookup-table for an access time of O(1). This approach may lead to a slight loading time for larger images while the pixel array is generated, however due to the image size constraints set in place as to allow the sorting algorithms to complete in a reasonable length of time and to not cause graphical bugs with the bars visualisation method, this does not occur to a noticeable effect.

The following method handles generating the pixel lookup-table

private static Color[][] convertImage(BufferedImage image) {  
 Color[][] pixels = new Color[image.getWidth()][image.getHeight()];  
 for (int x = 0; x < image.getWidth(); x++) {  
 for (int y = 0; y < image.getHeight(); y++) {  
 int rgb = image.getRGB(x, y);

// converts ARGB to RGBA  
 rgb = (rgb & 0x00FFFFFF) << 8 | (rgb & 0xFF000000) >>> 24;  
 pixels[x][image.getHeight() - y - 1] = new Color(rgb);  
 }  
 }  
 return pixels;  
}

File handling

File output

After a sorting algorithm has successfully finished the statistics relating to the sort are output into a csv file to be further analysed and compared by the user. I chose to use the csv file format (comma-separated values) as it is supported by all major spreadsheet software and is straightforward to implement due to only consisting of plain text formatted with commas.

The following method handles creating and writing to the csv file.

private void fileOutput() throws IOException {  
 File file = new File("data.csv");  
 boolean fileFlag = file.createNewFile();  
 FileWriter writer = new FileWriter(file, true);  
 if (fileFlag) {  
 writer.write("Date,Sort,Elements,Time (Short),Time (Raw),Comparisons,Swaps,Writes,Aux Writes");  
 }  
 String currentTime = LocalDateTime.now().format(DateTimeFormatter.ofPattern("yyyy/MM/dd HH:mm:ss"));  
 writer.write(("\n" + currentTime + "," + name + "," + arrayController.export()));  
 writer.close();  
}

The layout of the csv file using data generated by the program.



File input

In order to input a file into the program, the file has to be dragged and dropped onto the program window. I chose this method of inputting the file as it requires no additional UI as to not clutter the existing interface and is natively supported by creating a new windowListener using the LWJGL3 backend. Rather than directly inputting the files data, this method only obtains the path of the file and passes it to the relevant method to be accessed in an appropriate manner – in this case the selectImage method of the Image class.

config.setWindowListener(new Lwjgl3WindowAdapter() {  
 @Override

public void filesDropped(String[] files) {  
 try {  
 Image.selectImage(files[0]);  
 } catch (IOException e) {  
 throw new RuntimeException(e);  
 } catch (NullPointerException e) { MainController.setErrorCode(MainController.Error.UnsupportedImage);  
 }  
 }  
});

Exception handling and event notification

When an error occurs during the running of the program that would be expected to occur during normal operations the user is notified within the program itself, and it will continue to run without unexpected closure. In order to notify the user about non-error related but still key program events the same system is used. There are six error codes in place:

The first error code is ‘*SortEnded*’. This occurs when the SortThread is terminated during a reset operation.



The second error code is ‘*FileBad*’. This occurs when the data.csv file is unable to be opened / not found – usually when opened by another program.



The third error code is ‘*FileGood*’. This is not caused by an error but instead uses the error system to notify the user the data.csv file has successfully been written to.



The fourth error code is ‘ImageReset’. This is not caused by an error but instead uses the error system to notify the user the image used for the image visualisation method has been reset to the default state (no image) upon the size slider being adjusted.

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

The fifth error code is ‘UnsuportedImage’. This occurs when the file dragged and dropped into the program to use for the image visualisation method is either of an unsupported format or an error occurred when reading the file’s data.

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

The sixth error code is ‘BigImage’. This is not caused by an error but instead uses the error system to notify the user the resolution of the image used for the image visualisation method is too large (total pixels is greater than the maximum array size).

