

Playing by Ear

Foundation or Frill?

Abstract: Many people divide musicians into two types: those who can read music and those who play by ear. Formal music education tends to place great emphasis on producing musically literate performers but devotes much less attention to teaching students to make music without notation. Some would suggest that playing by ear is a specialized skill that is useful only to jazz and popular musicians. There are, however, many reasons to reconsider this position. Around the world, aural transmission of music and ear-based performance are the norm. Music pedagogues have described ear playing as a necessary developmental precursor to becoming a truly fluent music reader. Research supports the idea that playing by ear is a foundational skill that contributes to other aspects of musicianship, including improvising, sight-reading, and performing from memory. Ear playing has even been shown to be a contributor to skilled performance of rehearsed music, the traditional mainstay of school music. Ear-driven activities can involve student musicians in composing and arranging, musical collaboration with peers, and lifelong individual artistic expression.

Keywords: audiation, aural skill, by-ear playing, music-making, improvisation, inner hearing, performance, psychology of music learning

Learning to play by ear can give our students better skills both in the music classroom and when they engage in music on their own.

Skilled painters and sculptors possess an eye for detail. Great food critics have unusually refined taste buds. And it is easy to understand the phrase “hands of a surgeon.” In music, it is the *ear* that defines great musicianship. Sound is the material of music and what the ear is designed for. For understanding, creating, and expressively organizing sound as music, the ear is the musician’s ultimate asset.

In some ways, the music education profession has always recognized the importance of the ear to music-making. Most school ensemble directors feel they constantly implore their students to *listen*: listen to high-quality music recordings as homework outside of class, listen carefully during individual practice, and definitely listen when rehearsing with the rest of the

ensemble. These types of listening activities build students’ aural skills in critical ways.

When we speak of musicians’ being able to “play by ear,” however, we refer to a more specific feat. It does not mean they listen in order to make expressive decisions about, say, dynamics or tempo. Playing by ear means that the notes they play—that is, the pitches and rhythms—are informed by an inner hearing. Skilled ear players do not require cues from notation (or another source) to know what notes to play, but instead are guided by an internal model of what the music should sound like.

This aspect of musicianship has traditionally gone underdeveloped by school music instruction. In instrumental music classrooms, for instance, it is not uncommon for every note that students play to be indicated

by a printed page before them. If this is the exclusive classroom routine, students run the risk of never adding to their performance range the ability to play by ear, improvise, and perform pieces from memory. While notation-guided performance offers opportunities for aural skill development, it has limitations.

Formal music education has a long record of success in producing musically literate performers. In fact, it is rare that someone learns to read music without the instruction provided by a school curriculum or private lessons. Conversely, many accomplished “ear-only” musicians acquire their performance skills through informal learning experiences, such as are found in groups in places of worship, garage bands, and daily life in musically rich cultures and communities. It is no wonder that some see the musical world as divided into two types: those who can read music and those who play by ear.¹ Some members of each group view the other with a certain degree of contempt. When asked whether he could read music, jazz great Louis Armstrong is said to have replied, “Yes, but not enough to hurt my playing.” Coming from a seemingly opposite perspective, many teachers dismiss learning music by ear as a simplistic and inefficient alternative to doing it the right way, through notation.

Music educators generally endorse the importance of the ear in music-making and would appreciate if their students had stronger aural skills. Who would not want to lead an ensemble of young musicians who can *both* read music expertly *and* freely generate ear-based improvisations and rehearsed performances? Realistically, though, teachers must carefully choose how to use instructional time. If ear playing is primarily valuable only to jazz and popular musicians, then it seems unwise to devote too much attention to it outside those stylistic contexts. One might even think that getting students up to speed on reading music is enough of a challenge, such that also teaching ear playing and improvisation is impractical. This article offers a variety of reasons to reconsider the notion that playing by ear is a specialized skill with limited educational applications.

Cues from the Musical World

To judge the value of ear playing, we might begin outside our own personal experiences and beyond the confines of traditional school music. Is it possible to consider this issue globally? Around the world, most cultures pass on and advance their musical traditions from generation to generation through oral/aural transmission. This fact may be easily overlooked by those of us working exclusively in scholastic environments. Much in music can be learned by ear only, and it is the most common learning approach universally. Experienced musicians sing and play instruments, while younger people watch, listen, and imitate. It is natural and effective, and it has been happening as long as music has existed. Timeless musical values are passed down, complex physical skills are acquired, and huge song repertoires are learned.²

Of course, this is not just a characteristic of primitive cultures on far-off continents. Ear-based models of music transmission are commonplace in many corners of Western society. For example, most school playgrounds are symphonies of sound. The culture of childhood is extremely musical and is dominated by singing and playing by ear as well as improvisation, composition, and musical creativity that defies categorization!³ Even as they grow older, many young people continue this path of ear-driven exploration, though often outside school walls. A garage or basement becomes their musical playground, as groups of friends collaborate to reproduce their favorite songs on hand-me-down guitars, keyboards, and drum sets. A number of researchers have suggested that studying the learning processes of vernacular musicians has much to offer to classroom educational practices.⁴

This learning approach cannot be dismissed as merely being done out of necessity due to lack of resources. Its learners are not just kids who are too young to read and teenagers without access to private lessons. Many religious cultures around the world comprise amateur musicians who rely on their ears to learn music for worship services. Additionally,

performance skills in other sophisticated music styles—American jazz, Irish Celtic music, Argentinean tango, and Indian raga, among a myriad—traditionally have been aurally developed and maintained. While ear-based musicianship may be more common in informal learning settings, it is not always the case.⁵ In much formal instruction in Asian art music, for instance, the musical modeling of a teacher is offered to students for strict imitation, with little accompanying verbal instruction.

In general, as we survey the world of music, we see that aural transmission of music and playing by ear is the norm. It is perhaps more readily found in cultures outside the United States—especially the current formal education systems therein—but is by no means exclusively a non-Western phenomenon. Ear-based learning was more prominent in European society prior to the invention of the printing press and the increased availability of sheet music and instrumental method books.⁶ We have advanced so much in this way that a strictly notation-based musicianship has become a viable option to some. This has largely happened among school-trained musicians. The question, however, is not whether it is possible, but whether it is educationally wise. This is a question many have already sought to answer.

Voices Gone Unheard?

Educators have long questioned the specific role of the ear in music learning. American music educators might look to their professional origins in considering this issue. In the 1830s in Boston, Lowell Mason, commonly regarded as the father of public school music education, strongly advocated aural fluency before introducing music notation to students. Mason’s educational approach was based largely on the teachings of Swiss pedagogue Johann Pestalozzi, who promoted active experiences of concepts (e.g., creating and performing musical sounds) before introducing passive knowledge (e.g., symbols representing music).

In the early to mid-twentieth century, prominent British music educator

Ear-Building Strategies for Music Classrooms

Elementary General

- **Echo Sing-n-Play**—This can be done with students on recorders or at barred “Orff” instruments. Sing a short melodic phrase, have students sing it back, and then have them play it on their instruments. Depending on the level of the students, you can limit the length of the phrase and the melodic content. For example, give lower elementary students three-note phrases containing only *sol*, *mi*, and *la*. Move upper elementary students toward longer melodies that are pentatonic (and eventually diatonic).
- **Hidden Note Game**—When students are fairly adept at echoing melodic phrases, challenge them with this game. Choose a particular note that students must “hide” in their singing. If, for example, you designate *mi* as the hidden note and sing “*sol-sol-mi-do*,” the class would replace the *mi* with a rest (during which they mentally hear the pitch) and echo back “*sol-sol-[rest]-do*.” The game can be made into a fun competition; either the class or the teacher scores a point for each melodic phrase depending on whether students successfully hide the note in their echo singing.
- Elementary Instrumental
- **Ten-Tune Challenge**—Once beginners have learned how to produce a good number of pitches on their instruments, they can carry this out over several weeks. Assign the task of teaching themselves to play by ear ten melodies that they already know. The tunes may be ones from general music class, playground games, folk songs, melodies from pop music, television jingles, and so on. As students play each, you have opportunity to assess their developing musicianship in terms of tone production, sense of pulse, articulation, and intonation, among others. Boost student motivation by tracking their progress to ten tunes on an achievement chart.
- **A Root Awakening**—If using a method book, teach students by ear a “root melody” to accompany a melody or exercise from the book. A root melody is a bass line consisting of only chord roots, set to a complementary rhythm. Your aural model can be sung or played on your instrument. Creating the root melody should be quick work for you, as the chord changes of most method book melodies are not complex (a method’s accompaniment recordings can be helpful in this way too).

Secondary Instrumental

Blast from the Past—Student instrumentalists can build their ears by trying to play music they previously learned by notation. If, for instance, your middle school band students have moved on to book 2 of a method, ask them to recall some of the more popular melodies from book 1. At the high school level, months of ensemble rehearsal can pay dividends beyond the concert if, after printed parts have been collected from students, you have them play some of their favorite passages from past repertoire.

Eyes-Closed Warm-Up—Many bands and orchestras warm up by playing scales and arpeggios. Using varying rhythms and pitch sequences, sing or play patterns for your students to imitate. Control the difficulty through the length of your patterns and the complexity of the rhythmic and melodic content (e.g., stepwise versus larger intervallic motion). Playing Bach chorales is another popular warm-up approach among band directors. These can be taught by ear, especially if the group works on only a phrase or two of a chorale. Student musicians still reap the benefits, namely, the focus on tone production, balance and blend, and intonation. In fact, development of these skills may be enhanced if students close their eyes in order to open their ears even more.

Secondary Choral

Spot the Difference—Choir students can struggle when reading an arrangement of a song they “know” from a popular recording. Build their ear-based reading skills with this activity. Sing for your choir two versions of a phrase, differing only slightly in terms of rhythm or pitch content. Have students repeat each version until they can sing both version A and version B correctly. Then show them the printed notation for one and challenge them to decide whether it denotes version A or B. Prepare your choir for future classes by drawing the “correct” versions from the repertoire you will soon be rehearsing.

Vocal Improv Practice—Although we want choir students to read notation accurately, we do not want their singing skills to be entirely dependent on a written part in a choral score. Students often hear pop singers and gospel soloists vocally improvise, especially at the end of a song. Give your students opportunities to try this for themselves. To prepare them for this potentially intimidating experience, share with them some recorded examples. Guide them in identifying some of the more common vocal embellishments. Ease them into their own vocalizing by having them improvise along to familiar recordings, first silently (mentally hearing their improv ideas), then en masse so no one is put on the spot. Once they are ready to sing out, let them try in smaller groups. Of course, ultimate success in improvisation depends heavily on *listening*, so always encourage students to do much listening outside of class.

Note: Special thanks to James B. Karas (instrumental music teacher, Lefler Middle School, Lincoln, Nebraska) for his contribution to these strategies.