

Assorted Listening “tricks”

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Introduction

Whether you are a professional musician, an amateur hobbyist or listener/aficionado, your listening experience can be made more enjoyable by sensitizing your ears to the music you are hearing. Listening is a skill, and like any skill, it improves with practice. The following “tricks” and “games” are designed to help you improve your listening skills. With these improved skills, you can absorb more music through fewer listenings. The more you absorb, the more you can appreciate.

1) Basic musical concepts

Try to figure out what time signature the piece is in. Is it in major or minor? How many measures long is the chorus or the tune? Are there verses? Interludes? Introductions and/or codas? If it is a piece of classical music, what type of form is it? Rondo? Theme and variations? Sonata-allegro? If it is a jazz tune, is it AABA, ABAB, 12-bar blues, or something else? How many instruments and vocalists are present, and which instruments or voice ranges are these? First try and answer as many of these basic questions as you can. That may involve a bit of homework if terms like Sonata-allegro are confusing to you.

2) Isolation

Try this experiment: listen to a piece of music, focusing only on one instrument - the bass, for example. Listen to the bass, focusing on it until everything else sounds like background music. Imagine yourself standing directly beside the bass player during the recording session for this piece. Start with something simple, like a pop or rock tune. After you've mastered focusing on one instrument in this way (and it will probably take many tries to do so without losing focus), try switching instruments. Try listening instead to the drumset until everything else becomes background, or lead guitar, etc. Try this with orchestras – this is lots of fun! You'll rack your brain trying to hear those second violin parts. At first, don't attempt to try and figure out what notes they're playing. Just see if you can isolate the part in your head. If you're listening to a recording instead of the radio, listen many times to one track, attempting to isolate each instrument in your head. Then listen once more at the end, reveling in your newly acquired skills and increased perception.

3) Fun with pitch pipes

When a song comes on the radio, grab your pitch pipe and try to figure out what key the

song is in. This is easiest with blues or rock tunes, which have few chord changes. You can figure out what key the tune is in most easily by figuring out what notes the bass player is playing, since he usually plays the roots of the chord. When you've gotten the roots, determine the quality – i.e., major, minor, dominant, etc. – of those chords. Construct a mental lead sheet in your head. Again, this will take many tries. Less frustrating might be to try this exercise with a recording you own, so you can rewind at will. Once you've gotten the bass notes and chords, try and follow the contour of the vocalist's line, and see if you can pick out key notes. You may want to try, with your own recordings, actually writing out lead sheets of some of your favorite songs. The more you do of this exercise, the faster you will be at it. I've seen someone (who doesn't have perfect pitch!) listen to a song once and write out an entire lead sheet, complete with melody, changes, and form.

4) Play along!

Get out your instrument (or voice) out and play (or sing) along with the radio. Imagine yourself in the studio, and the track is complete except for your sax solo/horn kicks/background vocals, etc. You have one pass to try and overdub something tasteful. Again, like everything else, the more you do it, the better and faster you'll get. This exercise is a great help for gig survival. You'll often find yourself playing unfamiliar tunes with no sheet music. You have a very short time to figure out the key, the form, and a way to play something appropriate over it.

5) Evaluate

The highest level of understanding a concept is evaluating. Don't think that, just because you're not the player John Coltrane is, you can't make remarks – good and bad – about his playing. Also, don't think that just because your teacher or a mentor of yours says a particular album is good or bad means you have to agree. Listen to your favorite recordings, evaluating them. If you had to give the Beatles feedback on their Sgt. Pepper album, what could you have said? It's not such a far-out concept, because I'm sure they critiqued each other and were critiqued by the producer and engineers. If you have alternate takes, listen to them. Why do you think the artist may have chosen one take over the other? There has to be a reason. If you can think like this, you're starting to think – and hear – like a great musician.