Basic Aural Skills

Notes and Assignments for Week 01 (October 19, 2020)

**Introduction to listening**

Hello All!

The following are the notes for our class week of October 19th. Please read the notes and do the exercises below. The following quotes about the “art of listening” come from the book “The Mozart Effect”, first published in 1997 and written by Don Campbell. The subtitle for the book is: Tapping the Power of Music to Heal the Body, Strengthen the Mind, and Unlock the Creative Spirit”. Campbell is a professional musician who is interested in exploring the healing and restorative powers of music.

The following are excerpts from the book followed by my commentary.

**Quote number one from page 43:**

*How we perceive and process the sounds of nature, music, and the human voice is at least as important as the inherent quality of the sounds themselves. The same sound that magically empowers one person can scare another nearly to death. And yet, this most basic of abilities – teaching a child to listen, to pay attention to inflection, and to put sounds and speech into context – has been largely neglected by modern society.*

**Point number one:** There are two types of “hearing/listening” – hearing is passive and listening is active. As musicians we must train ourselves in the “art” of listening; meaning that we must not only hear music and react emotionally to it, but also to be able to engage with it intellectually; to be able to come to an understanding of what we are listening to. As musicians, we “train” various listening skills in order to develop our musical abilities and to progress with whatever we want to accomplish in music, whether it be to play an instrument (performer), write songs (composer), or to research and write about music for others (musicologist). Basic Aural Skills is the comprehensive attention given to the elements found in music and including melody, rhythm, harmony and form.

**Quote number 2 from page 43:**

*In fact, if we are deficient in listening (as opposed to hearing), we may be unable to progress to more sophisticated learning skills.*

**Point number two:**

The point here is that deficiency in listening can only be overcome through practice of various listening “skills” which must be addressed in a fundamental yet comprehensive way. Thus the various parts of Aural Skills include solfege (sight singing), rhythmic movement, and improvisation (creating music). Becoming proficient in these skills allows the musician to involve him/herself in all aspects of music.

**Quote number 3 from page 43:**

*The difference between listening and hearing cannot be overemphasized. Compared to hearing, which is the ability to receive auditory information through the ears, skin, and bones, listening is the ability to filter, selectively focus on, remember, and respond to sound. Besides receiving sound and transmitting it to the brain, our stereophonic ears give us awesome skills, including the ability to perceive distance and spatial relationships. This is nothing short of miraculous.*

**Point number three:**

**Quote number 4 from page 43**:

*Listening is active, while hearing is passive. Often we hear, but we don’t listen. We can take in entire conversations, newscasts, and background music without paying attention to the information presented. Faulty listening is the underlying cause of many difficulties in personal, family, and business relationships. How many times have you been told, “You’re not listening to me”?*

**Point number four:**

Just as we learn to listen for information in school and on the job, musicians must also engage in the gathering and interpretation of “musical” information. If the musician is unable to pay attention and identify and process what he/she is listening to, then the relationship between performer cannot be established in ways that are meaningful and will not lead to successful performances or other intended musical outcomes.

**Exercise from “The Mozart Effect”**

Comprehensive Listening Exercise: (Please complete the following exercise. Please take it seriously, especially the activity asked for in paragraph 7 – the idea behind the exercise is to experience the music in different ways – and paying careful attention to how you listen and how your body reacts to the music. We have all felt this when we listen, but we often don’t consider or reflect on how we actually experience the music – not only intellectually and emotionally, but also physically. And so much of this perception is a result of how we listen.

1. *Give yourself a relaxed afternoon or evening to explore a piece of music. Choose one about seven to ten minutes in length. I suggest something classical that features a solo instrument and ensemble: Mozart’s Eine Kleine Nachtmusik; Granados’s Intermezzo to the Opera for Cello and Orchestra; Faure’s Pavane; Beethoven’s first movement of the “Moonlight” Sonata; or the slow movement of a violin concerto by Dvorak, Brahms, or Mozart.*
2. *Darken your listening room and make yourself comfortable on a reclining chair or couch. Have a pen and. Paper close by. Close your eyes and listen to one movement.*
3. *Let your mind go where it will; you can even daydream.*
4. *After the movement is complete, write down your impressions. How did your body feel when the piece began? What did you notice about your body as the music progressed? Did any images enter your mind? Did you feel any emotions? Did you remember particular events in your life? Or did you simply “space out”?*
5. *Now bring up the lights and replay the same music. This time, sit up in a comfortable chair and gaze at a spot on the wall in front of you. As the music plays, keep your eyes focused on that one area.*
6. *When the music is complete, write down your experiences. How did they differ from when you first listened to the piece? What did you find most interesting about sitting up with your eyes open? Did you find anything annoying about it?*
7. *Now play the music for a third time. If it’s an orchestra or violin piece, stand. If it’s a piano work, sit on the edge of a straight chair. As the music starts, imagine you’re either the soloist or the conductor of the piece. Conduct the piece or play it on the imaginary instrument with feeling skill, and whatever interpretive facility you can muster. (Play it realistically; don’t “camp” it up.) Close your eyes if you with. Be sure to move your body and arms intuitively.*
8. *Now write down your impressions again after the music has stopped. What did you learn about music? Did you learn anything about the instrument?*
9. *Close your eyes and spend a few minutes being aware of your body. Does it feel different from the way it did when you began this exercise? Do you notice any changes in breathing, heartbeat, or temperature? Is your mood brighter, sadder, more even? Are you more relaxed, ore focused, more active?*

*Although there are no “right” answers. I think you will be surprised at how light, posture, and other variables subtly affect your listening*.

**Videos:**

Please watch the following three videos, all having to do with listening to music. Each narrator presents his or her reasons for why listening is important and how to improve this skill. When you have finished watching, please write down the most important ideas in each video. You need only write a few sentences.

**Wikipedia articles**

The following URLs link to articles that define (briefly) the concepts of ear training and listening. You do not need to take notes on these articles but there are lists of references and other resources (at the end of the article) if you want to do further investigation.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ear_training>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Listening>

*The exercises for this lesson will be due on Tuesday October 27th. Have fun!*