

Listen, Then Play By Ear

BY ROBERT HINZ

One of the most natural things for a child to do is go to the piano and plunk out notes. I've seen curious toddlers grin with delight as they push keys and realize this produces sounds from the instrument. By the time these youngsters are five or six, many have figured out by themselves and entirely by ear the opening notes for "Twinkle, Twinkle" or the theme song of a favorite television show. It is around this time that parents call a piano teacher for lessons to help their child. Unfortunately, when it comes to playing by ear, many music educators think in terms of black-and-white: students either have a sense of pitch or they do not; some are born with naturally good hearing and the others are tone deaf. This is simply untrue.

Most students can develop the ability to play by ear with the help of a teacher, but in truth, few teachers have specific plans for teaching this area. Part of the problem is that it's challenging enough to teach rhythm and note reading and to develop the finger coordination to play a phrase. All of these are strange to a beginning student, so playing by ear either gets either overlooked or put aside for later. Even in demonstrating how a melody moves up and down, teachers generally stop short of singing along with the pitches. However, this is a good opportunity to introduce playing by ear that is usually put aside for a later date.

I believe that playing by ear should be a regular part of lessons. In the beginning I meet with families to discuss setting aside time to listen to music with their children. It is a good idea to use many styles, including classical and jazz piano performances, and chamber groups, symphony orchestras, and big bands. The variety is a wonderful way to appeal to different tastes. Three or four-year-olds might enjoy sing-a-long tunes, while older students like pieces by Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven.

I start with some easy games that involve playing by ear during the first lessons. The student covers his eyes or turns away from the piano, and identifies which of two pitches is higher (or lower). I adjust the intervals to make this easy or difficult. When a student recognizes large intervals, I narrow the intervals in the same register. If a student has trouble deciphering small intervals, I go back to wide intervals at least two registers apart. It adds excitement to the game to keep score. Some students try the game at home with friends and later tell me whether they improved. With young students I choose activities that appeal to their imagination, such as playing intervals that imitate animal sounds or a perfect fifth in the bass as an

accompaniment to an Indian dance. The possibilities are as endless as the teacher's imagination.

I include singing as a part of ear training in beginning lessons. If teenagers are embarrassed to sing, I let them hum, whistle, or make a buzzing sound, anything to show they can match pitches.



The truth is that too many youngsters who play well cannot even sing the melodies of pieces they know from memory. I find that students who can sing a piece are more likely to phrase naturally, and those who move with the music are usually more rhythmic than those who do not. Even Glenn Gould and Vladimir Horowitz sang as they performed, probably because the music seemed to be part of them.

Students become accustomed to intervals by playing the white key intervals from middle C up an octave. When these are easy, we work on descending intervals and chromatic intervals from C to any black key, eventually including all the diatonic and chromatic intervals from C to an octave higher or lower.

Imitation and call and response exercises, which are sung and played back and forth, can be used in private as well as group lessons. I play short phrases of three notes on the piano, then students play or

sing them back. The number of notes is increased to five or more as the imitation continues. The next big challenge is to first sing the phrase correctly, then play it.

Another activity is to select a simple tune the student knows but has not tried on the piano. I play the first two measures and the student does his best to play the second two measures by ear. Next I perform successively longer melodies and the student plays or sings them back.

Transposition is one of the most useful techniques for teaching to play by ear. Once the student knows a simple piece, I move his hand to the position for another key so he replays the piece, relying solely on the ear. Advanced students can work on transposition by playing chord progressions, such as I, IV, V/V, V, I, through the cycle of fifths.

Singing scales and chords, including triads and seventh chords, also develops the ear. Play only the root of a scale or chord, then have the student sing the scale or outline of a chord. If this is too difficult, play each scale note or arpeggiate the chord, so the student can match the pitches.

In the beginning stages of playing by ear, some students are able to recognize the difference between the correct pitch and one that is out of tune, even though they have trouble matching pitches with the piano. In this case I show students how to adjust their voices higher or lower to match the pitches as they practice.

Singing develops the ear, but it also acts as a guide for phrasing. Once students can sing memorized melodies, themes, phrases, and motives in their music, they will more easily understand how to crescendo to the high note of a phrase. As an exercise in chordal pieces, the student sings the melody while playing the supporting harmonies on the piano. Advanced students can be challenged to sing four measures of one part of a Bach *Two-Part Invention* while playing the other part, then reverse the parts.

Teachers who have two pianos might demonstrate phrasing, articulation, and dynamics on one instrument, asking the student to imitate what he hears on the other instrument. By listening the student knows exactly how to play the piece rather than go through a detailed verbal explanation of how it should sound. Playing for students is an excellent way to demonstrate dynamics, the balance between the hands or the different voices in a piece, the use of the pedal, and the colors of different parts.

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Just as jazz artists learn music directly from recordings, a student might listen to a tape recording of a short piece, then try playing it without the score. The recorded piece should be at a level below the student's playing ability, such as an easy Bach minuet or a popular melody. Once the student plays the melody without a score, challenge him to decipher and play the accompanying harmony by ear. Advanced students might enjoy creating their own transcriptions from the recorded performance of a piece that is not too difficult.

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To not confuse students, always work on playing by ear and sight-reading as separate skills, using different pieces for each area. It is counterproductive to have a student hear a piece as a part of ear training, then use it for sight-reading, or to sight-read music before using it to play by ear. Both areas contribute to good musicianship, but students who aren't pushed to develop both areas tend to rely solely on one of these skills, becoming either better readers or better at playing by ear.

Just as students will not put effort into practicing pieces they don't like, most will not work on playing by ear if they don't care for the music. It may seem obvious but choosing enjoyable music encourages practice. Piano study should center on learning to read notation and finding comfortable fingerings as well as playing by ear.

It is best to start newcomers with activities for playing by ear within the first few lessons, when it is easier for them to imitate sounds than decipher music notation. With some practice it is no more difficult to learn a short piece by ear than using music; but when students have studied for three or four years without learning these skills, playing even a simple tune by ear is formidable.

In *The Selected Writings of Zoltan Kodály* (Boosey & Hawkes), the Hungarian music educator writes, “The psychological procedure of our whole music-making is faulty – it must be inverted. So far it is the fingers that have run ahead, with the head and the heart hobbling after them. The way of the true musician is the opposite: he starts with the head and the heart and from there directs the fingers, the larynx, or whatever instrument.” Kodály says that creative ideas begin in the head and heart, but creative ideas will not grow without a foundation that is built with lessons to develop playing by ear. □