

# TRANSCRIBING FOR GREATER MUSICALITY

*Bob Hinz explains how transcribing can be an effective tool for music students and gives some helpful suggestions for teaching it.*

BY BOB HINZ

**T**ranscribing is the practice of notating the performance of a musical composition or improvisation as the music is grasped aurally. The term “transcribing” may also describe any other process used by instrumentalists and singers to learn to play music from a recording without the use of notation.<sup>1</sup> The essential element of transcribing is *very careful listening*.

Transcribing is particularly effective for high school and college students who wish to become more familiar with jazz techniques and styles and want to incorporate many facets of a particular jazz soloist’s musical vocabulary into their playing. It benefits students who wish to become more capable improvisers because the process acquaints them with playing by ear. Playing or singing along with recordings has always been considered an important educational tool and should also be considered a useful technique for developing overall musicianship in vocal or instrumental music students. Singers have often observed that they began learning song repertoire and vocal styles (often at a very young age) by singing along with recordings made



Transcribing helps students become more aware of pitch and rhythm as well as aspects of the music that are not notated.

by well-known singers.

Playing or singing music requires techniques to express a musical idea either spontaneously or in a carefully planned manner. The technique acquired through transcribing fosters musical intuition through the expansion of basic aural skills and abilities. Transcribing promotes an awareness of many unnotatable facets of dynamics, rhythm, articulation and accent, phrasing, pitch, and intonation (with

respect to instruments with varying intonation) because the student is forced to listen carefully to these facets of the music while trying to imitate them. Additionally, it expands the awareness of pitch relationships and heightens sensitivity to the overtone series.

Transcribing also creates a more appropriate balance between musical concepts and musical intuition through repeated exposure to aural

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experiences and the direct application of these experiences to a musical instrument. By transcribing exemplary improvisations and simple compositions performed by great players, we more easily understand the shaping of a musical phrase, and we develop the ability to shape phrases in our own playing. We connect with the performance on a deep level by closely examining the sound of the actual music.

## Experiencing the Music

Rhythm (and its articulation) is perhaps the most essential aspect of musical expression assimilated through transcribing. The imitation of a performance that is grasped aurally provides for a subtlety of rhythmic expression and articulation that is difficult to represent in notation. Furthermore, rhythmic articulation becomes more natural in its expression because the movements required for it are acquired instinctively—that is, the sound gestures on the recording are heard and imitated before they are observed in notated form. The imitation of these sound gestures, moreover, fosters a more natural understanding of the language and vocabulary of the style. Rather than being explained, they are shown. The student goes for the sound first, and the gesture naturally results, as opposed to being shown the gesture that produces the sound. Moreover, certain rhythmic styles and “feels” can only be learned from recorded renditions. Accordingly, verbal descriptions of swing can never substitute for listening to recordings of great jazz artists performing swing.

Through transcribing, visual representations and concepts—visually recognized patterns, notational concepts, and visually memorized chord structures—gradually give way to the experience of music as sound. The student *aurally* grasps melody, motives, harmonies, chords, rhythms, articulations, dynamics, and other facets of musical expression. The transcribing process balances the approach more typically used by music teachers when they place the score before the student and say, “This is the music.” As the experience of transcribing becomes an integral part of practice, the student comes to know his or her instrument

intimately in aural terms, not only with respect to a given melody.

Along with this new understanding, the music student becomes more adept at expressing spontaneous musical ideas on his or her instrument. The student also becomes more “in tune” with aural patterns, voicings, rhythms, harmonies, and other aspects of the music. These aspects are often taught at a conceptual or verbally descriptive level. Transcribing enables the student to come in touch with the subtler aspects of music by enhancing musical sensitivity in the *aural* domain of experience. Although the directly observable elements in music are important, the elements that make a great improvisation or composition are never obvious; they are in a sense intangible, intuitive, and less directly observable. Transcribing connects the student with these intangible elements.



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Written music can never accurately depict all of the subtleties and nuances that a performer brings to a performance. Dynamics, touch, accent, variations in tempo, chordal balance (on polyphonic instruments), subtle rhythmic relationships, articulation, and other facets of musical expression are difficult to notate exactly and are grasped mainly by listening to other performers. Since these subtleties are not depicted in a written transcription, simply reading a transcription done by someone else doesn't yield the same benefit as personally undertaking all the steps involved in producing the

transcription and then learning to play it.

Traditional notation, for example, does not indicate the dynamic balance of notes within a chord. The notation may help the pianist play and perhaps remember a chord or note combination that is used at a particular point in the recorded performance, but the dynamic balance the pianist uses (creating shadings of tonal color) can only be grasped through a continual exposure to the sound of the music.

When a student undertakes the transcription of a musical part, the activity should begin with a grasp of the more general facets of the part: key, large sections and key changes, chord progressions, and, in the case of an improvised jazz solo transcription, the awareness of the original melody and chords of the piece. The student should then proceed to the more specific aspects of the music: individual chords, melodies, motives, rhythms, and chord voicings (in the case of piano transcriptions). In addition, the transcription of an improvised jazz solo is more valuable and more easily grasped if the chord progressions and the melody of the piece have been previously played and memorized by the transcriber. (See the Teaching Transcribing sidebar for specific ways to instruct students.)

## Jazz Transcription

In jazz performances, study of the originally published sheet music usually helps the transcriber understand the differences between the performer's recorded version and the original composition. The awareness of these differences contributes to the transcriber's knowledge of the artist's style, including harmonization, chord substitution, and his or her approach to melody.

Within jazz improvisation, the practice of placing numbers above each note of a completed transcription to show its intervallic relationship to the root of the chord may be useful, but the practice also removes the transcriber somewhat from the sound of the music and focuses on a conceptual understanding. Although the awareness of the numerically expressed relationship may enhance the transcriber's ability to recognize repeated melodic pat-

terns and other motivic relationships, the essential task that will enable him or her to aurally grasp the solo is the performance and memorization of it. Additionally, instrumentalists who sing the solo, or its individual patterns, develop an even deeper and more direct connection to the music.

Besides being a useful practice for acquiring techniques and abilities used in jazz, transcribing aids in the memorization of notated compositions. As a piece is learned and performed, a musician who has taken the time to transcribe the piece from a recorded version is more readily drawn to the correct notes because his or her aural memory was strengthened in the transcribing process. Audiated notes are more readily discovered because transcribing develops the ability to find pitch, to audiate pitch, and to recognize it in one's listening. The repeated use of the student's instrument in doing transcriptions fosters an ongoing exercise in ear training applied to the instrument.

The transcription of an entire performance of a work that already exists in notated form may provide enormous insight into the divergence between the composer's original notation and the actual performance. That is particularly true with respect to the harmonization of a jazz standard. Music educators teaching jazz are also much better off transcribing a composition from the composer's recorded performance of a piece ("going to the source") rather than using a fake book, many of which are often inaccurate. Through transcribing, teachers are also able to make available to students music that has been recorded, but doesn't exist in notated form.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reaping the Benefits**

Although transcribing an entire recorded performance is an important aspect in the development of the skills necessary for improvising, any student can benefit from a limited approach to transcribing: simple imitation. The spirit that a great artist brings to a phrase, for example, can be acquired by imitating by ear short phrases or sections recorded by the artist without notating them. This approach more closely corresponds to the process

## *Teaching Transcribing*

1. Have the student learn a phrase, rhythm, chord, chord progression, or any combination of these from a recorded performance. This could entail learning to reproduce the phrase or rhythm with the voice, on a musical instrument, or in notation. Remember that the process of transcribing begins with training the ear to listen, even if the material only involves a few seconds of recorded music.
2. Next, have the student learn a short piece of music from a recording. Obviously, the student should be at a level that would enable him or her to do so without an inordinate amount of frustration. If the student is particularly weak with regard to aural skills or instrumental or vocal technique, the recorded version of an extremely simple piece can be given.
3. Have the student sing or play a section of a piece along with a soloist's recorded performance of the work. Younger students could be encouraged to clap or tap along with the rhythms embodied in a recorded version of a piece before learning it.
4. Assign high school or college students a transcription project that involves notating a melody or melody-chord combination from a recorded version supplied by the teacher (played on the piano or a monophonic instrument). Besides developing aural skills, students can also be taught notation through such experiences.
5. Give students who wish to develop their improvisational ability an improvised jazz solo to learn from a recording. Less experienced students might be asked to learn only one or two phrases or riffs from the recording. Advanced students might, on the other hand, also notate the recorded performance and then analyze it.
6. Consider using the variable-speed tape recorder. For melodic figures that move too quickly to hear clearly, it can be used to slow down the solo to make it intelligible. If the recording is slowed down to one half of its original speed, the music will sound one octave lower. Variable-speed tape recorders are also useful for tuning the recording to the instrument if tuning becomes difficult.
7. Provide instrumental ear training in a private lesson by having the student sing or play back short phrases that you sing or play on your instrument. Besides being instructive, the process can be a lot of fun.
8. Keep in mind that quality is more important than quantity. It is more valuable to have a student notate or play back two measures of a recorded performance correctly than to write out twenty measures that are inaccurate.

composers use in searching for interesting sound combinations as well as the actual musical circumstances of an improvised or rehearsed performance, in which the performer attempts to play what is audiated at any given moment.

Although the term "transcription" usually refers to the actual notation of the music embodied in a recorded performance, musicians frequently render a musical part directly from a recording without writing it out. Though notating a recorded performance may be useful for musical analysis and as an aid in learning to play what is heard, the student benefits enormously when the recorded performance is learned without necessarily being notated. This practice aids in the development of the ability to imitate pitch, rhythm, and other elements of expression available on the student's instrument. The practice also strengthens pitch memory. In any event, developing musicianship involves not only learning to read and write music, but also acquiring the ability to translate what we *hear* to our voice or instrument.

While it is possible for students to learn a piece from a recorded performance without notating it, it is often more practical to notate it, particularly for certain instruments. The logistics of fingering, for example, make it difficult for a piano student to learn an entire piece without writing out fingerings, particularly when both hands are transcribed. Moreover, because of the textural and harmonic complexity of piano music, remembering it, let alone transcribing it, is particularly difficult. Saxophonists, flutists, trombonists, and other performing instrumentalists who play monophonic instruments, however, should be occasionally encouraged to learn entire pieces from recordings without ever using a score.

After the completion of a notated transcription, mistakes in pitch, rhythm, and voicing are more easily identified by allowing some time to pass, playing through the transcription a few times, and then relistening to the recording. During the relistening, the transcriber will usually identify any discrepancies fairly quickly, since

he or she can more objectively compare the two versions.

Understanding music entails acquiring an awareness of musical materials and the ways they can be used by a composer or improvising artist. Often, the mastery of the material itself (for example, the performance of a particular piece of music or the completion of a transcription) does not result in a direct application of what is learned to a subsequent musical undertaking. Rather, the musical knowledge and skill gained through the activity shapes and influences the student in a subtle fashion and becomes used to a degree that he or she may not be immediately aware of.



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In transcribing, the student is shaped by the specific musical elements and performance parameters that are imitated, which, in the case of an improvising musician, aid in the development of a musical vocabulary. Yet the student also develops skills and abilities that are even more fundamentally related to the process of musical expression. While musical preferences may influence the student initially, the musical skills that are fostered through the transcription process determine how deeply and effectively a preferred style is encountered and explored. Transcribing encourages the student to move away from concepts and musical systems and into the world of sound and movement and the direct experience of the dynamic quality of each tone.

Transcribing different artists and styles contributes to the student's ability to bring forth many different musical styles, dialects, and gestures. Through transcribing, jazz improvisers become more fluent at creating stylistically appropriate phrases and melodies, while for the classical music performer, dynamics and articulation may take on a new meaning. Transcribing may also be combined with the exploration of musical ideas found within the transcription itself. Thus, it evolves into a creative activity that allows the improviser to work more directly with the improvisational process.

According to Karl Orff, "Three quarters of mankind needs no and knows no written music."<sup>3</sup> In light of this, transcribing may play an important role in the study of music and musical styles that are transferred largely through an oral tradition. Moreover, transcribing is the only way to learn to play musical styles that rely on recordings as the principal means by which their musical forms and ideas are embodied and transmitted.

The process of transcribing can often be tedious and difficult.<sup>4</sup> If the student perseveres, though, a clearer recognition of performance elements and an enhanced ability to express a wide range of musical ideas and articulations will result. Many great performers acknowledge that the recordings of a particular artist were an important influence on their own musical development. Recordings of great musicians are often studied and emulated by other great musicians. It is, accordingly, somewhat ironic that the skill developed by emulating recorded performances actually contributes to a greater sense of freedom and spontaneity in performance.

## Notes

1. The term "transcription" is also used to refer to the reworking of a composition for a medium other than the one that the composer originally intended. Transcribing in this discussion, however, will refer to the two descriptions mentioned.

2. Students or teachers who transcribe music by emulating a recorded performance or by notating it do not normally need to be

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concerned about copyright laws. While the composer, the improviser, the publisher of the composition, and the record company may each have some rights (or all rights) to the sound recording or the music embodied in the sound recording, performing or notating music privately with respect to a commercially released recording is not normally a cause for concern with respect to copyright violation.

Under the “fair use” doctrine, in some teaching circumstances the limited use of copyrighted material that is not harmful to the copyright owner’s rights may be allowed without the permission of the copyright owner. For example, a short extract or phrase may be duplicated for the purposes of illustration or comment. On the other hand, if a transcription of a recording is done and the author of the transcription duplicates it and makes it commercially available, the author is in violation of copyright because the transcription is based on (is a derivative of) another copyrighted work. Publishing companies that publish transcriptions based on recordings will often work out an agreement with the copyright owner of the recording that entails a royalty payment based on the number of copies sold in exchange for permission to make copies. In such a scenario, the transcription itself may also be copyrighted to protect the rights of the transcriber.

3. Taken from Peter Michael Hamel, *Through Music to the Self*, trans. Peter Lemesurier (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1976), 26.

4. There are methods and techniques that assist the transcriber, and these can be found in a variety of published sources. Some suggested publications include *Jazz Transcription* by Niels Lan Doky and Jeff Gardner and *Training the Ear* by Armen Donelian, both published in Germany by Advance Music, 1992. See also Gary Keller, “Transcribing and Studying Jazz Solos,” *Jazz Educators Journal* 26 (March 1994): 27–31. Additionally, there is a wide variety of published transcriptions that music educators can use to assist their students in getting acquainted with musical styles that do not typically exist in notated form. ■