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## It's Got That Swing : Jazz & Pop

Bradley Sowash, Editor

### Unlocking the mystery of playing by ear

Playing by ear is a musical skill that teachers often overlook. If you are not teaching “off the page” at the same time that you teach traditional reading skills, perhaps you've unknowingly bought into some common myths about teaching and playing by ear.

#### Myth #1

*Playing by ear is an innate gift.*

Musicians who can play by ear are accustomed to people assuming they were born with this capability. They often hear comments like, “Well of course you can do it...playing like that comes to people like you naturally.” While it's true that some individuals possess extraordinary musical ears, most of us fall somewhere between “prodigy” and “tin ear” on the bell curve of musical aptitude. In my 30-year career I've known hundreds of professional jazz musicians who play by ear and improvise every

harmonic concepts, unusual scales, and complex syncopations are prerequisites to improvisation. While it's true that the music of jazz masters often contains very complex material, students can begin improvising in their very first lessons. Initially, it's not any more difficult to improvise than it is to acquire other musical skills. Beginners do not experience the panic felt by many classically trained musicians when asked to “fake it.” When aural skills are introduced early, students simply regard them as just another aspect of music making along with reading, rhythm, and other skills. If improvisation starts in the very first lessons, students don't feel anxious about improvising.

#### Myth Buster:

*Everyone can improvise. Start your students early, and improvising will be a natural part of music making.*

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day. As students, only a handful of these colleagues began with anything more than average musical talent. I can also confidently assert that not one of them was hit by a lightning bolt that magically unlocked mysterious musical gifts. They developed their skills through study and practice.

#### Myth Buster:

*Musicians who play by ear have learned, practiced, and refined their skills in the same way that musicians learn other musical skills.*

#### Myth #2

*Improvisation is difficult and intimidating.*

Many believe that mastering advanced

#### Myth #3

*Only experts can teach students how to play by ear.*

The biggest obstacle for students seeking to learn aural skills is finding proper instruction. This was certainly true in my own experience. As a boy, I had an earnest desire to make my own music without the aid of notation. When I asked my teacher to help me learn to play by ear, I was told to stick to the method books. As an interested and obedient student I tried to stay on track, but I was always looking for the section in the book that would deal with improvising. When it became apparent that aural skills were not likely to be a part

of my formal training, I began “cheating” by imitating recordings, composing, and “improving” my assigned written pieces with embellishments and cadenzas.

My search for more open-minded musical instruction led me to seek advice from professional jazz musicians. Advice was not forthcoming. For whatever reason (ego, desire to protect trade secrets, or perhaps just the fact that they were not educators), the jazzers I met seemed unable to explain their craft. Their comments—“Jazz is something you feel,” or “You either have it or you don’t”—only made me feel hopelessly suburban, square, and boring. So I continued with my traditional lessons and wondered when I would “have it.” When I still didn’t seem to have it in my teen years, I quit piano lessons.

Unfortunately, my experience is still all too common to many students. We all know the pattern: students begin lessons enthusiastically only to end up quitting later because they can’t play the music they hear on their iPods.

It doesn’t have to be that way. You, the readers, are the real teachers. You know how to introduce new concepts. You know how to pace lessons to individual learning styles. You keep abreast of new teaching techniques and resources. You are the true professional music educators. Most of us, however, teach to the eye at the expense of the ear.

Reading music requires precision and forethought. We know how to teach reading because reading is objective: notes and rhythms are either right or wrong. Teaching a student to recreate a tune from memory or to tap creative, improvisatory impulses is more difficult, but we should not be discouraged. Teaching creative capabilities will serve two purposes. First, it will save the students who are frustrated with merely reading. Next it will expand the skills and interest of your most committed and best readers. Ideally, of course, these skills would be taught as a regular part of a standard curriculum rather than as a supplement offered by only a few

teachers.

So why are we resistant to playing and teaching off the page? If it is because we’ve bought into common misconceptions or are afraid of the unknown, perhaps it is time to reconsider. The rewards of creative music making are many. For one thing, developing the ear is fun for students and teachers alike. This “pleasure factor” really struck me at a music education conference in Las Vegas. After a long day of enlightening presentations, I went out with a few colleagues to listen to live music. Since it was early by Las Vegas standards, the band was still setting up when we arrived. The two keyboard players were ready to go, so they started trading improvised licks on a two-chord vamp while waiting for their bandmates to finish tweaking their gear. The difference between these two smiling musicians, obviously having a great time jamming together and the “expert” music teachers right next door at the conference, many of whom would have been uncomfortable trying to “jam,” was striking. Why should there be such a gulf between these two approaches to music making? The sooner your students consider playing by ear to be as normal as reading music, the better.

#### Myth Buster:

*Playing by ear can be taught, and you don’t have to be an expert to teach it.*

#### Myth #4

*Improvising is only for jazz musicians.*

This one is easy to dispute. Improvising is downright useful. I learned this in music school when I performed a fugue at my final jury. I could hear the scratching pencils of the four piano faculty members every time I wavered. This rattled me, and I became quite

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## Tips on Teaching Pianists to Play by Ear

Begin by selecting a simple tune. Look for melodies in major keys that use only primary chords. I list examples below:

### One-Chord Tunes (I)

Frère Jacques

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

### Two-Chord Tunes (I, V7)

Have You Ever Seen a Lassie?

London Bridge

Mary Had a Little Lamb

### Three-Chord Tunes (I, IV, V7)

Joy to the World

Oh, Susanna!

This Old Man

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star

In the spirit of the season, I’ll illustrate teaching procedures with some holiday favorites.

### A. Work Out the Melody

1. Establish the key. Everything is easier in C, and you can always transpose later. Begin by asking the student to play the C major scale to establish the sound of the key in her ear.

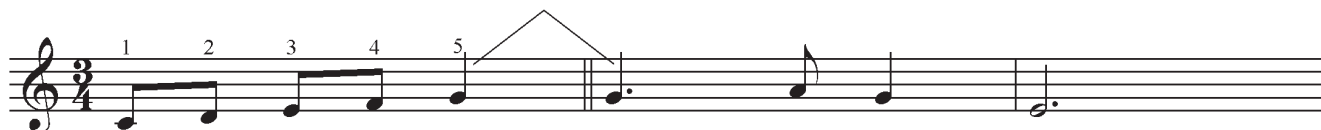
2. Have the student sing the tune in the key of C to determine the “home” (tonic) note. Work backwards. The last note of most simple, recognizable melodies is nearly always the tonic. Make sure this last note is C.

3. Find the first note. A lot of people get into trouble by assuming the first note of a piece is the tonic, but that’s not always the case. With the sound of the key still in the student’s ear, have her play up the C scale until the first note of the tune is located. For example, “Silent Night” begins on the fifth scale degree (see Example 1).

4. Hunt and peck the melody. If the student gets stuck, guide her by asking, “Does the melody go up or down at this point?” If indecision persists, ask the student to sing the melody while

Example 1

*Silent Night* begins with the 5th note of the C major scale.



# Tips on Teaching Pianists to Play by Ear continued

playing what she knows so far.

5. Memorize the melody. Students should be able to play the tune by ear with a steady beat before thinking about chords.

## B. Add Harmony

1. Look for chord tones. When melody notes on strong beats coordinate with notes in one of the primary chords, there's a good chance that chord will work as harmony (see Example 2).

2. Choose a chord. If the melody has a note on a strong beat that could be in more than one chord, ask the student to test which chord he prefers. For example, the first F in the fifth measure of "Jingle Bells" could be harmonized with either an F chord or a G7 (see Example 3).

3. Combine the melody and chords. The student plays whole- and half-note primary chords using common left-hand inversions. If the student has trouble changing the left-hand chords, call out the chord name or number a beat or two before the change (see Example 4).

## C. Add Style

1. Accompany your student. Play a common left-hand pattern while the student continues to play held primary chords. Consider using Alberti, boogie, Latin bass lines, or perhaps a simple root-fifth pattern. These types of teacher accompaniments can be used with any of the activities below.

2. Early-level students can begin by combining a left-hand pattern with the right-hand melody. The pattern may be broken chords or blocked chords in a simple rhythm. Here are examples of chord accompaniments for students of varying levels (see Examples 5-8).

3. Intermediate students can start developing a sense of style by changing the rhythm or embellishing the melody (see Example 9).

4. Advanced students can learn to include harmony in the right hand. Demonstrate how to keep the

Example 2  
Here We Come A Wassailing

\* Strong beats belong to the C chord.

Example 3  
Jingle Bells

Example 4

In measure 2 of *Deck the Halls*, teacher prepares the student for the next chord by saying: "Here comes G7."

Example 5 *O Come, All Ye Faithful* with Alberti bass

Example 6

*Go Tell It On the Mountain* with student repeating block chords and teacher playing boogie bass

Example 7

*Deck the Halls* with broken chords and Latin bass

## Tips on Teaching Pianists to Play by Ear continued

melody in the top note of the right hand with the harmony in the notes below. Students then add a simple left-hand bass line. Teachers can alternate accompanying the student on a keyboard or with a small drum or shaker. Students also can improvise a right-hand melody while playing left-hand chords (see Example 10).

Example 8

*Jingle Bells* with broken chords and root/5th pattern

Example 9

*Good King Wenceslas* with embellishments

Example 10

*Angels We Have Heard on High* with right hand harmony

lost. Rather than stop and start over, however, I did my best to improvise in Baroque style until I could resume the composition as written. When I eventually reached the double bar line, the head of the piano department looked over her glasses and flatly stated, “How dare you do that to Bach!” My teacher then countered, “Everyone gets lost now and then. It’s useful to know how to keep it going.”

Improvisation comes in handy in other situations as well. What pianist hasn’t been asked for an on-the-spot performance of “Happy Birthday”? What happens when friends or relatives ask your students to “play something” and they haven’t got their music tote bags with them? How many of your students can accompany singers at an impromptu holiday gathering? Can your students personalize a written melody with embellishment, improvisation, or a change of key? Can they create a fill when a high-school musical actress misses her song cue? Would they know what to do when the bride is only halfway down the aisle as the final bar of the march approaches?

### Myth Buster:

*Ear skills are as musically essential as eye skills. All musicians eventually are called*

*upon to improvise.*

### You Can Do It!

A colleague of mine often tells his students, “You think too much; just play.” In other words, you don’t have to know everything about ear playing and improvising to teach these skills. If you and your students understand a few chords and diatonic scales, you already have enough background to begin playing by ear. You just have to be willing to dive in and explore

with your students. Recall the folk wisdom, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” Do you have students who seem to be standing before the music well but not drinking? Your job as teachers is not to make them drink. Your job is to make them thirsty. Integrating ear skills into your teaching approach is an effective way to create that thirst and motivate your students. ▲

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