

Developing Meaningful Listening Skills

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As younger performers, our goals mostly center on building a skill set that allows us to play difficult music at the highest level of proficiency possible. The time-honored traditions that measure musical achievement have been auditions and competitions. We understandably spend an inordinate amount of time perfecting fundamentals, developing technical proficiency and learning repertoire. However, operating the instrument is only half of this journey. The sometimes-forgotten part of the equation for musical success is learning how to listen. By listening, I am referring to four basic tenets:

- The art of discerning what we, ourselves, sound like
- The knack for making positive contributions to a musical fabric (“fitting in”)
- Appreciating what to listen for when we study recordings
- How we talk about music with other musicians.

Some important questions I invite us to consider include:

- Why do we neglect the importance of good listening skills?
- Why is it important to be a good listener?
- How do we teach listening?

Our Cultural Dilemma

From a cultural, non-musical perspective, we are not always the best listeners. In a conversation, we often concern ourselves with a self-generated contribution of spoken words, without realizing that a conversation can't happen unless there is one speaker and at least one listener. How many times have we all found ourselves noticing that when we want our conversational partner to be listening to us with empathy, we instead feel that they are thinking about what they will say next in a conversation? Listening requires concentrated awareness, humility and finding value in “the other” and “in the moment”.

Have you ever experienced this sensation in a musical situation? Listening on a personal OR musical level requires us to put as much stock in *the community* as we do in ourselves.

Evolution actually has wired us to be contributors to a community, to travel in packs and be part of the herd. St. Augustine reminds us that “A community is a multitude of rational beings united by the common objects of their love”. A tribe, on the other hand, is usually a group of people unified by what they dislike (being “tribal” is not a compliment!). Music requires community! Witness this simple task of saying the Pledge of Allegiance in unison.....

We very quickly find mutual cadence points and a rise and fall of the phrases. But saying the Pledge is built on a type of aural tradition. Let's see if it works with something we are less familiar with that requires us to listen and read at the same time:

Abraham Lincoln was an American lawyer and statesman who served as the 16th president of the United States from 1861-1865. Lincoln led the nation through the American Civil War and succeeded in preserving the Union, abolishing slavery, bolstering the federal government and modernizing the United States economy. Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC just one month into his second term of office and a few short days after the Civil War had ended. He is remembered as a martyr and hero and is consistently ranked as one of the greatest leaders in our country's history.

You can see that our natural tendency is to want to fit in and create something larger than ourselves. Yet over the last 50-60 years, our culture seems to be pushing us in a different direction. Society invites us to invest more and more in the importance of self-affirmation and an ever-increasing sense of self-worth. While there is nothing wrong with being partially focused on ourselves, our ability to look outward and value the contributions of others with a sense of humility and modesty has markedly lessened. Ego and self-gratification are watchwords holding a more prominent place in our daily lives than ever before. For example:

In a 1950 Gallup Poll of American high school seniors, 12% of those polled declared themselves as “important” people; when the same poll was taken in 2005, that number had sky-rocketed to 80%.

In a recent poll of American college professors from many disciplines and many different types of institutions of higher learning, 96% of those interviewed said they possess “above average” skills in the areas of teaching and research.

Google and other search engines provide a service where books and magazine articles are scanned to measure word usage. In the last two decades, there has been a sharp increase in the words that denote a sense of individualism.....self, personalized, myself, me. The frequency of more communal words has plummeted..... share, kindness, community, common good. And incidentally, economic words are on the rise.....productivity, output, profit. Words that hone in on our morality are also really declining.....bravery, gratitude, humility, kindness.

Random facts like this point to a concerning migration away from a caring, communal mindset. And this mindset takes its toll on our ability to be good listeners. And if this phenomenon is shaping our culture at the most basic level, what makes us think it wouldn't also affect the way we make music? The good news that we demonstrated in our reading and speaking exercises though, is that our natural setting is NOT to be this way.

Anthropologists remind us that the most notable signs of the formation of “a civilization” are not cave paintings or the invention of implements and tools. Instead, the advancement of a civilization is measured by looking closely at fossils and skeletal remains found in archaeological digs. When scientists first discovered that a human being's femur had been broken and healed, it was a sign that ancient peoples had reached out to one another. The only way for that healing to happen is for another person to pull an injured person out of harm's way and attend to the needs of their fellow woman or man.

How To Listen

“The key to good decision making is not knowledge; it’s understanding. We are swimming in the former; we are desperately lacking in the latter.”

Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (2005)

Deep listening is a complex act, requiring us to interpret a product as a whole, while simultaneously concentrating on the fine, granular details that comprise that whole. It takes years of experience to achieve that depth. French-American trumpeter Roger Voisin joined the Boston Symphony in 1935 at the age of 17, though he claimed that he didn’t really learn to listen across the ensemble until he became principal trumpet of the same orchestra 15 years later.

Developing the ability to listen with a discerning sensibility requires us to first define the difference between our objective values and our subjective values. Objective values (“facts”) include correct notes, intonation and steadiness of pulse, when the music calls for it, of course. Subjective values (“opinions”) include sound/ tone color, use of vibrato, articulation style, note lengths, phrase shapes, blend and balance. It’s important for the zealots among us to not push elements of a more personal, subjective nature into the commonly sourced objective world. In other words, while it’s wonderful to have preferences, our subjective values should not be mistaken for objective values.

I’d like to speak about developing strategic skills in three specific areas:

- A) listening to ourselves in real time and in recordings
- B) listening to others in real time.
- C) listening to recordings for study purposes

A. Hints for Listening to Ourselves in Real Time and In Recordings

We can all relate to the difficulty of judging what we are doing, while we are doing it! It’s impossible to have our filters working while we are trying to be creative, especially in the early stages of our development. This is the reason that recording ourselves is so important as it allows us to make artistic, creative decisions knowing that we can then step back and listen to ourselves as an almost different person.

As we listen to recordings of ourselves, we can segment our listening assignment. With multiple listenings of the same recorded passages, we can assign ourselves specific tasks by concentrating on different elements of music: tone quality, dynamic contrasts, intonation, phrasing, etc. Otherwise, the act of listening can seem too overwhelming and even oppressive. That’s a lot of stimulation at one time!

One effective strategy is to strike a balance between white collar recording (and practice time) with blue color recording (and practice time).

In an effort to segment our listening skills, try practicing with a sporting event or podcast on in the background.

Mature listeners can switch back and forth between the contrasting worlds of passive listening for entertainment and active, critical listening to establish higher artistic standards.

B. Hints for Listening to Others in Real Time

We have to be so comfortable with our own part so that we can devote the largest part of our finite brain power into listening to others with true awareness.

It is imperative that we know our musical role in a piece of music at any given moment.

In a chamber music setting, playing through pieces in pairs can simplify the levels of complication and awaken our appreciation for other parts in the ensemble.

Score study is important!

Never hesitate to try different physical set-ups.

We make better music when we play the accompaniment softer, rather than inadvertently forcing the melody to be played louder or more forcefully.

To paraphrase Malcom Gladwell, good listening is about assembling as much information as possible and then acting on that information with a sense of urgency.

C. Hints for Listening to Recordings for Study Purposes

Be aware if your judgments are objective or subjective.

Listen with an awareness of *the whole*; in other words, context matters.

Segmented listening is critical. Decisions are best made when we listen whole-part-whole. The *part* aspect of this format can rotate between different musical elements.

Communal listening can be either a hindrance or an inspiration, depending on the company we keep!

From *The Most Essential Instrument* (1965), Duke Ellington:

“Soul is very important. And first to play music, you have to love music. So if you love music, then it follows you love to listen to it, which makes the ear the most essential instrument, the most essential musical instrument in the world.”

