

# Guidelines for Learning Melodies

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### DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILL – TOWARDS INSIGHTFUL LISTENING

Listening and hearing are not the same. As musicians, we are most concerned with developing our listening skill. Developing listening skill is a conscious activity that requires effort.

Developed listening skill equates to an increased appreciation of music, as well as an increased competence in creating it (through composition, performance, improvisation, sound design or any other performative means).

Insightful listening moves away from shallow emotionally-orientated responses (such as “I didn’t like that”) toward a more open, nuanced type of perception. Enjoyment is derived from the listening process itself, regardless of personal preference toward any kind of style, genre, etc. This is because the insightful listener recognizes and makes connection with the fundamental ways in which music is organized and realized, and takes pleasure in experiencing the myriad of different musical approaches. The insightful listener is also engaged with music intellectually as well as emotionally.

Insightful listening understands that we may experience a feeling of preference, but that feeling often arises from experiencing music of familiarity. We understand more about that with which we are familiar, but that does not mean the unfamiliar is “bad”. Insightful listeners seek to suspend judgement when experiencing the unfamiliar.

Insightful listening requires your attention. Development of attention span itself comes with effort and practice. This involves repetition, and a lot of it! Do not under-estimate the complexity of even the most simple-sounding music. There is complexity in even the simplest monophonic melody. Even a single note warrants repetitive attentive listening!

Ran Blake recommends keeping a listening journal to track progress and plan your listening practice (see Blake’s *The primacy of the ear*, chapter 3).

## **ACTIVE AND PASSIVE LISTENING**

Music can be listened to actively or passively. Active listening is concentrated, insightful listening. Passive listening can result in emotional responses but one's awareness is usually at least partially on non-musical aspects (be they other tasks, visual aspects of performance, etc). All approaches are useful – even for musicians concerned primarily with developing listening skill.

Active listening involves full concentration, alert, and in a quiet space, free of distractions. Active listening may be participatory, and may involve an instrument (such as a piano) to help identification of musical features. Active listening often has a goal, such as to analyse the harmonic progression of a tune, but it can also be holistic and simply have the intention of a deep listening experience. Active listening may involve repeated listening to only a small excerpt of material. Beware of waning concentration – it's better to take a break than to “space out” during active listening.

Passive listening involves listening in a casual manner, perhaps while doing some unrelated quiet activity (reading, cleaning, driving, etc). The music's general aspects will still be registered while it sounds on the peripheries of your aural awareness. Preceding active listening with passive listening is a useful practice that can ultimately result in a more rapid understanding of music. Passive listening breeds familiarity, which leads to some level of understanding, which is deepened by following it with active listening.

## LONG-TERM MEMORY

“As musical understanding increases, so does musical memory.”  
(Karpinski 2000)

Much has been written on the topic of memory (see also Blake). Essentially, the development of long-term memory is seen to be fundamental to the development of personal style, and ultimately, musicianship. This is because that which requires our conscious retrieval in performance is not utterly and completely absorbed by us, and also requires “thinking time” – a luxury not afforded in real-time musical performance. Furthermore, such conscious thinking becomes reactive and can sound contrived, especially in spontaneous group music-making such as improvisation.

Coming to terms with what you *really* know, drawn from your long-term memory, can be a humbling experience. Fear not, and make it your goal to really *own* the music that you play and write. Use active listening as the tool to awakening and developing your long-term memory. Once lodged in your long-term memory, the music you have studied becomes a permanent informant of your musical perception and conception.

There are no short-cuts. Awakening and developing your long-term memory is a slow process that requires regular and repeated effort. Work within your concentration ability and listening skill to select appropriate portions of music, “chunking” it appropriately before re-synthesizing it into the whole.

## GUIDELINES FOR LEARNING MELODIES

1. The development of aural skills is a gradual process. Best results are achieved by a little work done every day. This applies to the memorizing of the repertoire melodies - listen a little every day, and don't cram just before class.

2. The aim is that the repertoire melodies will enter your long-term memory. Activating your long-term memory via repertoire memorization deepens your aural awareness. It takes longer for material to be absorbed by your long-term memory than short-term memory. Short-term memory means you can instantly recall a phrase or passage of music after it is played, and perhaps a minute later. Long-term memory means that 10 years from now you should be able to effortlessly recall the repertoire. The process is to work on the repertoire melodies frequently and methodically.

3. Music can be either listened to actively or passively. Both approaches are useful for learning the repertoire melodies.

a) Active listening involves your full concentration, when you are alert and in a quiet space, free of distractions. Beware of waning concentration – it's better to take a break than to “space out” during this type of work.

b) Passive listening involves listening in a casual manner, perhaps while doing some unrelated quiet activity (reading, cleaning, driving, etc). The music's general aspects will still be registered while it sounds on the peripheries of your aural awareness. I recommend that your initial listening of a new melody to be passive, and not too analytical. Progress with active listening will be so much faster thereafter.

4. One active listening strategy is “chunking”. Listen to the melody in its entirety several times, and then break it down into phrases or sections. This process of “chunking” involves splitting the music into meaningful, digestible parts. Ensure you have identified the correct commencing and ending pitches and rhythms, and their placement in the bar. Resynthesizing the chunks into greater sized portions is invaluable for progression towards eventual performance.

5. Try singing with the recording, and stopping it before answering each phrase. Listen back to the recording to check what you've sung for accuracy (pitch, rhythm, intonation etc). Don't forget that we all think we sound great when singing along with recordings! Work towards no reliance on the recording whatsoever. When properly absorbed, it should feel like the accompaniment is playing in your head as you sing alone.

6. When you feel the melody has begun entering your long-term memory (so that you can sing it the next day without prompting from the recording), try recording yourself singing it, and comparing it with the original. Also, you should get together with your practice partner at least the day before class to check each other's renditions. Experience has shown that different people have different levels of aural awareness in specific areas. It is likely that your partner will always be able to offer advice on how to correct some specific aspect of your rendition.
7. Try to limit the use of the piano or any instrument when learning melodies. Use instruments perhaps for getting starting pitches, but avoid playing along with yourself as you're singing.
8. Melodies can be sung in whatever key is comfortable. However, experience has shown that most people find it best to keep to the key of the original melody and change octave where necessary. Get used to changing octave at important structural junctures in order to keep the melody within your vocal range. Aim to sing the melody at around the original tempo (unless advised otherwise by your teacher).
9. Each week you are expected to come to class prepared to sing the due melodies from memory.
10. The only visual aid that may be accepted in the presentation of the melodies are lyrics (where applicable). You needn't sing the actual words of songs ("la" or solfege will suffice), but you may write the words down if you like.
11. The aim is to learn each assigned melody permanently, with an awareness of: metre; form; rhythm; pitch; intonation; microtonal inflection; articulation; duration; dynamic; and timbre. A reasonable degree of accuracy in regards to pitch and rhythm is most critical, but absorption of the other parameters will not only aid memory (by giving phrases and notes a special character), but will also deepen your awareness of the language of the particular style. By following the correct regime and placing all of these characteristics into your long-term memory, you are actually developing your musicianship and personal style.
12. You should know the title and composer of each melody, and perhaps a basic stylistic description, such as its geographic or cultural context.

## ACTIVE LISTENING GAME-PLAN

After some passive listening, use the following game-plan as a possible strategy for your active listening.

- 1) Form/Structure. Listen for repetition, contrast and development.
- 2) Metre/Time Signature. Tap your foot, conduct the music and try to discern the beat from the subdivision/pulse. Listen for chord changes, sectional changes, and points of emphasis in the lyric or phrasing.
- 3) Tempo. Start memorizing the sound of specific tempi. Use a metronome to match the tempo (at least of the start of the melody).
- 4) Subdivision, Feel, Rhythm, Groove. Observe other temporal characteristics.
- 5) Key. Is it of a major or minor quality overall? Some pieces don't start in their "home" key but move towards it some bars later. Others end in an entirely different key compared to where they began.
- 6) Function of the first note in the key or opening chord. Identify the degree of the first melody note, with respect to the key and/or opening chord.
- 7) Opening interval. Identify the interval between the first two (different) pitches of the melody.

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