

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASES OF FORMATION OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN STUDENTS

No'monov Istiqbol Iqboljonovich

Andijan State University, Faculty of Pedagog, Department of Music Education.

Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

ANNOTATION

This article analyzes a number of listening comprehension problems and solutions for musicians and students studying in this field. It is widely covered as an example of contemporary and 20th century music.

Keywords: listening music, pop, jazz, understanding text, Exposure to Music, Musical Language, mosaic of colours.

Аннотация: В статье анализируется ряд проблем восприятия речи на слух и их решения для музыкантов и студентов, обучающихся в этой области. Он широко освещается как образец современной музыки и музыки XX века.

Ключевые слова: музыка для прослушивания, поп, джаз, понимание текста, воздействие музыки, музыкальный язык, мозаика цветов.

INTRODUCTION

Developing good listening skills is important for musicians at all stages of development. Since day one of learning music, it was probably drilled into you that you need to listen. Second after second, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, the words, "You need to listen" will haunt you. As a musician there is no escaping you will always be a student of listening, and we must never try to devalue its musical currency and put down in the cellar for occasional use.

Understanding How we Listen

Us human beings like to think of ourselves as special, and as such we can sometimes falsely qualify our ability. In short, we are never as good as we think we are. Music is one of those cases where we feel it comes natural to us; for this reason, we can sometimes overlook what seems simple, rudimentary, even arbitrary. After all, no one wants to think of themselves as a person who cannot listen. Listening happens on two distinct levels: proactive and reactive, the ability to concentrate deeply on what we are hearing; and then to evaluate, qualify and make judgement. As musicians, it should be more natural for us to be better listeners, although not all good listeners are musicians.

Develop Your Musical Preferences

As musicians, we have to understand that it's not so much musical taste, but more about musical preferences. From this perspective, we are allowing ourselves the privilege to indulge in as much music as we can learn. Just as no one wants to hear that they cannot listen, they also don't want to hear that they don't have a broad range of musical preferences. People stick

with what they know, and whether they realise it or not, generally follow some level of mass appeal despite any protestations to the contrary. This is in no way a slant on people; it's an observation on how music is consumed and opportunities for exposure. This starts to become quite noticeable when we consider different versions of a song. Probably the hardest thing for a non-musician to consider is that the original version of a song is just that; a version. Albeit the first one. And certainly, if we allow ourselves the indulgence of enquiry, we have to ask, what if these jazz versions were actually the original versions? Would it make it any less of a pop song?

This brings about a key point in the way we listen and the way we interpret what we hear; a [popular] song is more than just the song itself. Its appeal is largely down to idiomatic presentation. Adele's Chasing Pavements is a typical easy-listening modern pop song. But is it? If we listen closely, particularly to the chorus, we can clearly hear the root of the song is steeped in jazz. It even utilises the ii-V-I bass pattern! Change the drum sound and groove, and replace the vocal performance, and you've got yourself a reasonable smooth jazz song. One that would probably not gain chart success. We haven't changed the song, it's still the same song, but we have changed the idiom and style. Does this therefore make it a different song?

Exposure to Music

Exposure to music, particularly when we are growing up, has considerable impact on our musical preferences. This happens in two directions; the music our parents and society exposes us to, and the music of your childhood era. The latter is what I like to call the 'child-of effect'. For example, an 80's kid, a 90's kid, etc.

Popular music has an epoch of around 10 years, as signified by the decades. We all recognise the difference between 70s and 80s music, and likewise between 80s and 90s. If you were born in 1980, your formative years would be the 90s, and therefore be a '90's kid' growing up with 90s music. Now consider your parents era, approximately 2 decades or so earlier than yours. You will have likely been exposed to the music of their formative years. And so it goes, back and back the generations. But as each new generation is born, the decades of old are shedding its appeal as we lose touch with its relevance.

Proactive and Reactive Listening

Proactive and reactive listening needs a little help. These are the mechanisms, but it needs something to glue it all together. It's like being in love; you can kiss and cuddle and do the other things, but that is not love. Love is the thing we feel but can't explain. I don't want to get too touchy-feely here, but the thing I'm talking about is a love of music. Not a love for music, but a love of music.

Some will profess that this love of music is a natural-born thing; you either have it or you don't. This is highly simplistic and furthermore, there is no specific music gene. What music is however, is a bona fide self-fulfilling prophecy. The more involved you are in music, the more the appetite awakens and the more things start to click. This is where you have a distinct advantage; you're already a musician. Not only do you understand what I am saying, but you can relate to it. The opportunity here is to accelerate those listening powers to explore new music and make new connections between disparate idioms. This is all fair and well, and it's easy to put into words, but how does one put it into practice? Just as in learning an instrument,

we have to practice , and practice all the time. So is also the case in improving our listening powers. At once we must surrender ourselves to the notion that we do not listen well enough to appreciate the entire scope of the musical language. Sure, we will inevitably be drawn to some particular styles more than others, that must be taken as a given; an excuse of, “Well I can’t like everything I hear!” should only be uttered from the musically illiterate.

Musical Literacy

Being musically literate does not necessarily mean to possess the knowledge and understanding of music theory, certainly there is a case to be made of this, but I mean musical literacy in a broader sense. One where there is some level of understanding of the interplay between a piece of music, its realisation, and ultimately its effect on listeners.

For example, a musically literate person may not necessarily understand cadences and the like, but they understand how to acutely interpret what they hear. By contrast, a musically illiterate person simply takes music at face value without qualifying its being. They either like it or they don’t, and furthermore will be unable to expand deeper on why they like or dislike a piece of music. Musical complexity is a factor here; ‘classical music’ is not always straight-forward to listen to. Each new bar tells more of the story, and as each bar, phrase and section pass, a dialogue is entered into between the music and the listener. Only the listener can make the music into being. The journey will involve complex melodic structures, beautiful architectures of form, colourful harmonisations , an interplay of rhythmic variety, a labyrinth of voice-leading paths, and a mosaic of colours, texture and pitch. This is a lot for the brain to process. The thing that gets in the way however, is prejudice. It is impossible to irradiate, try as you might, it’s always there somewhere. When we listen to new music, particularly that of which we are unfamiliar, we must try to listen with an open brain. That’s right, an open brain. Or if you prefer, an open mind. I know the saying is ‘open your ears’, but it’s just a saying. The ear cannot process sound, it merely allows sound waves to get to the brain. The brain then processes these sound waves. It’s all acoustic impulses until our conscious and subconscious gets to work on it and changes it into electrical impulses.

Developing Your Musical Language

As a musical arranger, you have some level of understanding of music theory. You will no doubt be able to name cadences when they occur, hear particular harmony systems at work and have some level of appreciation for deciphering the texture within the instrument groupings. You will also be able to hear key and tonality, time signatures and meter, and understand the interplay of the dialogue within the music. This level of musical literacy is what really starts to sort the men from the boys and the women from the girls. An understanding of musical theory, and the ability to instantly decipher music in this way without the aid of a score, is a remarkable skill that will make you perfectly positioned to absorb the music you hear. Remember, we are not necessarily concerned at first if we like it or not; if we are concerned with this from the outset, we are not listening. We would be simply passing judgement based on prejudices.

Primal Instincts

There are a select amount of musical events that are universal. The presence of a beat or certain rhythmic structure appeals to our primal instincts, where as symmetry appeals to our want for completeness and singular containment. Short repetitive phrases are also very universally

powerful. Humans feed on familiarity, so a short repeating ostinato is immediately arresting to ones primal instincts. The interval of a minor 3rd, the pentatonic scale and the presence of deep bass are also universally-hard-coded musical attributes everyone can instantly relate to. Instinctively. There is a reason why electronic dance music has 4 beats in the bar, driving ostinatos and powerful deep bass.

These primal universal musical instincts are still at the heart of humanity. We have not evolved to decipher large complex musical tones and textures, with story and dialogue. Even in Mozart's time, the music and orchestral format was far simpler. In effect, Mozart was a chamber composer by today's standards. Go back to the birth of Christ, only a couple of thousand years ago, the concept of a score specifying instruments hadn't yet been initialised. In fact, the invention of our modern music notation would take several hundred years henceforth! To put this into context, humans evolved from some common ancestor of the modern ape some 200,000 years ago, at best. Music is the language we invented to describe musical events, much like mathematics is the language to describe the physical world. Both languages are an invention of relatively modern times; a far cry from our ape-like beginnings.

Next Steps

Perhaps one of the strongest forces in expanding our musical preferences in to be conscious of our musical phases. We all go through phases of either liking a particular artist or a style, or music from a particular period. If we learn to recognise when we are in a phase, we can then make a conscious effort to turn this into a learning opportunity. This is the beauty of music, you never stop learning. It is probably the most fun part of it. A big part of learning to expand our musical preferences is to allow ourselves to make connections between different genres. At no other point in history has this been more accessible, fun and inexpensive. Always Remember to Re-internalise Music

All we have said so far is not the whole story. There must be some level of interaction and some recognition of what is being heard. Many a time we hear a piece of music, or even just a few notes of a piece, we utter the words, "I quite like that!", or, "What a nice set of chords." Great, but who is the artist/composer, what's the title of the music, what other music of their can you find? Which artists are similar to them, who are their influences? Do you see how just listening to a few bars can open up many possibilities for new music? We just have to make the effort to seek. In this way, we can train ourselves to be better listeners. It won't make us like everything we listen to, but we'll be better equipped to qualify our opinions. But as Leonardo Da Vinci said:

The greatest deception men suffer is from their own opinions.

...we must be careful not to fall foul of opinion; such a word best be used for socially-acceptable chit-chat on the occasions we use tact and politeness. The much over-used and totally ugly, "In my humble opinion..." In reality, it's not opinion anyway, it's the verbal incarnation of prejudice. It need not be thought of as a bad thing in moderation, but it should be acknowledged and used as a tool for progress and self-development. I use this word to deliberately provoke, but if you prefer a softer term, "bias" is equally as correct. Opinion is a bias. It's a prejudice. It's a nuisance. After all, we put trust in doctors to perform surgery; you and I can have an opinion about how they do it, but that does not give us authority on the matter.

The point I'm making here, is we sometimes get bogged-down in, "It's my opinion." So what! Who cares? The problem with this statement is with its automatic protection from argument. It is socially undesirable to argue with someone's opinion. However, it is good at closing down a conversation politely. But we want to achieve the opposite here. We want to talk about music, and be open to any and all possibilities. Moreover, there is no one person that is a supreme authority. Your 10-year-old son has a different way of looking at music; maybe you can pick up tips! So maybe there is something deeper to this "You have to listen" thing we have in music. As a people, we do not want our soul attacked by hearing that we do not listen well. As musicians, it is critical we take heed and not let our ego get in the way.

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