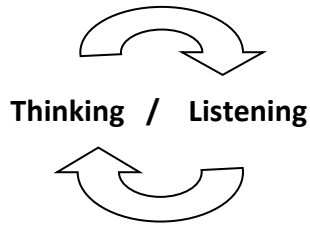
Strategies for Teaching Aural Skills

Overview

Good pedagogy dictates that we clearly identify learning objectives and creatively engage students in activities that bring about the desired changes in behavior or thinking. In an integrated theory program, the broad goal is for students to increase their understanding and awareness of the relationship of sounds in time. Aural skills are an intrinsically interrelated component of comprehensive musicianship (CM) training. Any distinction between written skills (part-writing, composition, analysis) and aural skills (dictation, sight singing) is an artificial one. The goal of music theory training is, according to Leonard Meyer (Explaining Music, 1973), "to refine the aural imagination, and to sensitize the cognitive ear." Bruce Benward called it the seeing ear and the hearing eye. Michael Rogers offers the following diagram as the goal of theory (musicianship) training:



What do we mean by aural recognition? The word recognition (re-cognition) implies that we transfer existing knowledge from an earlier context or experience; we cannot recognize what we do not already know. There are multiple contexts for learning in music. The music itself provides a momentary context, while the listener brings his or her own experiential context based on the music they have played, sung, heard, or analyzed previously. If we prescribe to a constructivist theory of learning, then this experiential context is a critical factor in devising learning activities. Coherence is based on each student's set of experiences.

It is the musical context that provides meaning for each element or component, and this allows us to accurately identify each element in relation to others. At the most basic level of knowledge we identify or label the building blocks of a piece of music. These are studied in the music fundamentals class, and students should be fluent in identifying intervals, triads, key signatures, and other basic facts. Prior experience with music determines what students have learned intuitively, and the ways they process aural stimuli. Aural stimuli are easily identified if related to known patterns that have been embedded since childhood.

At the next level, pattern recognition is the key to understanding grouped elements or combinations of pitches and rhythmic structures. The goal of aural skill training is to equip listeners to hear sound as meaningful patterns. Aural recognition is the ability to identify contextually a sound fragment or chunk of music. I refer to this as hearing in scale degrees. There is some debate as to whether practicing the identification of atomic particles, such as intervals or individual chord qualities, is valuable in itself, compared to dealing with individual musical elements in a larger tonal context. Both have value at different stages of development. As mentioned earlier, fluency with the basic building blocks is a precursor to more advanced aural discrimination, but does not need to be done outside of a musical context.

Strategies for Teaching Fundamentals

In teaching basic aural skills, grouping families of constructs that have some similarity but clear differences is a successful tactic. For example, work with upward intervals first, then downward. Avoid overuse of a crutch, such as using the first two notes of a familiar tune, to form the basis of understanding. This forces a context that is not necessarily appropriate. Group triads by stability (major/minor), versus their inherent tendency to resolve (diminished/augmented). If a student can audiate a major or minor triad, and compare external stimuli to their internal compass reliably, they learn to trust their ears. Compare the five common types of seventh chords to one another when learning to distinguish them aurally. It is better to teach the identification of soprano and bass factors in 4-voice chords while they are moving from one to another, rather than in isolation. In general, aim the teaching towards sources of directed motion, not frozen instances. Finally, the primary goal of basic ear training is to instill confidence in the student that their process for identifying sounds accurately is going to yield the correct result every time. Once a student believes this, they make virtually no errors.

Strategies for Melodic Dictation

In taking melodic dictation students should group pitches into recognizable patterns and focus on identifying the pitches as scale degrees in the key. Tonal dictation is hindered by reliance on identifying intervals between pitches. Encourage students to fiercely hold on to the tonic and dominant of the key as structural points of reference, and use them as a scaffold for other pitches. The idea of internal points of reference is a key to all aural recognition. The first step in taking melodic dictation is to listen and memorize, NOT to write anything down. Some students prefer to write just the rhythmic values first, then fill in scale degree numbers below. It is good to think about points of arrival, make quick estimates about the contour of a line, and refine it later. Exercises in error detection have practical applications. Hearing a melody and identifying wrong written notes, or vice versa, is something every conductor must be able to do. Reminding students that these exercises are preparing them for the work a musician does every day helps keep motivation alive. Another great activity for training the

musical mind is to have students notate familiar songs without a piano or any external sound source. Testing this skill may be the quickest way to measure comprehensive musicianship.

Strategies for Harmonic Dictation

Linear thinking is advised, just as if students were taking dictation of melodies. I usually start with the soprano voice, followed by the bass. As I play the excerpt, I emphasize one voice each time. After getting the outer voices, students should identify chord quality and inversion, and feel the flow from pre-dominant to dominant to tonic that pervades most tonal music. The final step is to check for part writing errors. It is very difficult to hear inner lines in a four-part texture played on a piano, or any monochromatic instrument. This is compounded by instruments with strong overtones above bass notes. Ideally, contrasting timbres would be used for each voice. Correctly identifying the bass line is typically most difficult for students, and singing along with it while playing chorale styles music helps build this aural skill. Starting with two-part and three-part music is a good way to build confidence.

Strategies for Sight Singing

There are two separate issues to address here. The first is reading the notation. This involves thinking in the key, audiating the sound, and mentally grouping the symbols. The second is vocalizing the sound. It is a good habit to practice silently, alternating with singing aloud. Wind and string players, as well as vocalists, must hear the pitch they plan to produce before playing or singing it. I liken this to shooting with a bow and arrow; to hit the bulls eye, you must know where it is.

Fluent sight singing depends on pattern perception, and it is a good objective for students to build a large vocabulary of known patterns that are typically found in tonal music. I use patterns to establish a firm grounding in the key before beginning to sing. Students should NEVER play a melody before sight singing it. This reinforces their ability to mimic sounds, and inhibits the development of audiation. If, after several tries, an interval in the music cannot be found, one or two pitches can be given as clues. This troublesome leap should then be drilled so that it becomes second nature. Descending perfect fourths seem to pose the greatest difficulty, in general. A recommended pattern to sing as a way of establishing the tonality is shown below:

DO - MI - SOL - MI - DO

FA - MI - LA - SOL - TI

DO - RE - DO - SOL - DO

One effective way to engage students in the activities of memorizing and thinking in scale degrees is to have them improvise collectively with solfege syllables. In this activity, one student sings a short 5 – 6 note melody of his or her own devising aloud. The next student sings it back and then creates a variation on it in solfege. This process continues until all students have sung. Every one conducts the same tempo, and they allow for a few beats between each rendition. In this fashion, it is also a rhythmic, musical activity.

I have found that singing canons in class is a great way to help students grow individually and also to find a larger external context of harmony and rhythm as they sing. It might be useful to sing the canon as a group before singing it in parts. As a rule, only in the earliest stages of sight singing is group singing on a single melody the most effective activity.

I do not recommend having a class sing melodies all together. When you do this, one or two singers find the pitch first because they are more skilled, and all the others imitate them instantly. This actually breaks down their individual capacity to audiate and sight sing. Vocalists who work with choral directors who play the parts on the piano to teach the music are severely handicapped, and have the hardest time learning to sight sing. They are looking externally for the cues that their thinking musical mind should be providing.

Solfege Systems

In tonal music, the most valuable method of sight singing is functional. Intervallic distances between notes are meaningless, as are discreet bits of information in a stream of data. The moveable “DO” system develops hearing skills, and provides a functional context for each pitch. The fixed “DO” system develops music reading skills, and note identification. The “LA-minor” system is weak, in that it does not reinforce tonic awareness.

Non-Tonal Ear Training

Some theorists contend that there is always some structural frame of pitch reference in music. In most cases, this can be demonstrated, if only as pitch centricity. It is useful for students to learn to identify common vertical structures found in contemporary music. I recommend starting with an assortment of trichords, or three-note PC sets such as [0, 1,6]. They each have a distinctive flavor, and many students who work at it can assimilate a large vocabulary of them. Quartal structures are also useful to practice. Each interval class (IC) is defined by the number of half-steps involved as follows:

1 = m2, M7
2 = M2, m7
3 = m3, M6
4 = M3, m6
5 = P4, P5
6 = tritone

Basic Instructional Tenets

Some final pieces of advice for developing aural skills:

1. Always establish a strict tempo and keep it throughout the exercise.
2. Conduct while sight singing, using standard patterns with a downward ictus.
3. Never play a melody that you are planning to sight sing before singing it.
4. First audiate the melody, singing it silently while conducting and naming syllables.
5. Always sing music in the key in which it is written, transposing by octave if necessary.
6. When taking melodic dictation, memorize before writing, and sing it back silently.

