

Using an Audio Recorder to Develop Your Ears

rewind/replay

An article by:

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Based in the jazz teaching of David Baker and Mick Goodrick, this article develops strategies for using an audio recorder (tape, computer, minidisc, or CD) to sharpen your ears.

Take a tune you want to learn. Presumably we're talking about something for which you have sheet music but not a recording, or which for some reason you want to learn from the notation (don't ask me why!). See previous postings for thoughts about learning tunes from recordings or from notation.

With a metronome running at a slow but regular pace, the notation in front of you, turn the tape machine on "record," and do the following:

- 1) Play the first phrase by itself (say, 4 beats) and then count four 4 beats of silence
- 2) Play the first phrase by itself, and then count 4 more silent beats
- 3) Play the 2nd phrase by itself, and then count 4 more silent beats
- 4) Repeat step 3
- 5) Continue this process phrase-by-phrase until you've gone completely through the tune. Stop tape and rewind.
- 6) Play back the tape. When the tape is playing a phrase, listen hard (maybe sing along quietly). When the tape is supplying 4 beats of silence, play back the phrase to the best of your ability. Sing along with your playing. If you can't play it at all, sing it as accurately as possible. When the tape repeats the phrase, LISTEN BUT DON'T PLAY OR SING; try to absorb the notes you were struggling with on the first playing. When the tape repeats the four beats of silence, play/sing (or just sing) the phrase with the corrections, as accurately as you can. Continue until the end of the tune.

That's the guts of the process. You can modify it by adding more repetitions on a given phrase, to give you more time to concentrate, or by playing no repetitions, to force yourself to grab things

on the fly as in the session. You can play the phrases at half speed (8 beats), and play them back at half speed (allow 8 beats silence) or full speed (allow 4 beats silence). You can tape the phrases in reverse order: phrase 8 of the tune, then silence, then phrase 7, then silence, then phrase 6, and so on; this forces you to really learn to hear and control each phrase, and be able to recognize and juggle its location (very useful when you realize a given phrase you already know is recurring in a new tune or different location).

You can expand the exercise and "raise the bar" by doing 2 tunes at the same time:

1) Go through steps 1-6 above for Tune A and Tune B.

2) Now, rewind tape, press "record," and go through with the following alternation:

- Play phrase 1 of Tune A
- Play 4 beats silence
- Play phrase 1 of Tune B
- Play 4 beats silence
- Play phrase 2 of Tune A
- 4 Beats silence
- Phrase 2 of Tune B
- 4 beats silence

Continue until you've gone through both tunes to their ends in this "back and forth" fashion.

Play back the tape and do "call-and-response" in the above alternation.

3) Now rewind, press "record," and do the following:

- Phrase 1 of Tune A
- 4 beats silence
- Phrase 2 of Tune B
- 4 beats silence
- Phrase 3 of Tune A
- 4 beats silence

Continue until you've gone through both tunes to their ends in this "back and forth" fashion.

Play back the tape and do "call-and-response" in the above alternation.

4) Now rewind, press "record," and do the following:

- Phrase 8 of Tune A
- 4 beats silence
- Phrase 7 of Tune B

- 4 beats silence
- Phrase 6 of Tune A
- 4 beats silence
- Phrase 5 of Tune B
- 4 beats silence

Continue until you've gone through both tunes to their ends in this "reverse-order, back and forth" fashion.

Play back the tape and do "call-and-response" in the above alternation.

NB: you can also do this randomly, running through phrases from 1 or more tunes in non-sequential order. E.g., Phrase 8, then 2, then 4, then 1, then 6, then 5, then 3, then 7, or whatever.

All of these are forcing you to understand and "control" your playing of this tune at a very deep level. I guarantee that you will "know" the tune and its components far better through this method than you can through just endlessly playing it from first-note-to-last.

Note: the above ideas are based in the jazz pedagogy of David Baker. Jazz players have to have a very deep understanding of the tunes they play, their construction and implications, in order to be able to improvise on them. If you really want to "get serious" about learning to play by ear, David Baker or Jerry Coker's ear-training resource materials are a gold mine. Celtic Backup also has more material on this; also look for other articles on related topics on www.irishmusic.com