

Learning from recordings

How to use audio sources (tapes, CDs, and so forth) effectively and efficiently to enhance your ability to learn by ear.

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As I've commented elsewhere, a good way of learning to quickly and accurately assimilate melodies and play them "by ear" (either based on hearing them played by another person in a session, or on hearing them "playing in the memory") is to develop exercises that directly address melodic recognition, retention, and replication.

Of course one of the best ways is to have someone show or teach you the tune. This lets you pick up crucial nuances about phrasing, rhythm, articulation, and instrumental technique from both aural and visual sources, and get feedback from the other player. However, this is not always possible, and often times we must work from recordings without the benefit of having a live player in front of us.

1) If learning from a recording of someone else playing, think in terms of learning phrase-by-phrase, building each new phrase on to the previous ones.

(I like working w/ CDs because their "cue-and-reverse" function is fairly precise; both analog cassettes and minidiscs, by comparison, are not so handy in their stop-and-back-up-1.5 seconds-repeatedly characteristics. I also like to use headphones, one side on and the other side off the ear. This is a studio trick: it encourages you to listen closely BOTH to what's on the track and to what you're actually producing yourself. It's easy to kid yourself about one or the other aspect.)

a) Listen to the tune multiple times without trying to play it. As you begin to get the tune in your ear, start to sing the phrases that seem particularly clear to you. Try as much as possible to be aware of which specific parts of the tune are more or less clear to you, and make mental notes about the foggy parts which will require extra attention.

b) Listen to the tune several more times, playing along lightly and quietly, trying to get the "rough outlines" of the more obvious phrases, as well as starting notes and ending notes of phrases, high or low notes, familiar phrases, and other stuff that seems especially immediate.

c) Stop the disc. Now, having gotten the tune as much as possible in your ear, by listening, singing, and playing along, work one phrase at a time. Start the disc, and, with your finger poised over the "stop" or "pause" button, listen to the first phrase (try to learn complete organic phrases - usually 1- or 2-bars in length in the Irish repertoire). At the INSTANT that the phrase ends, before you hear any subsequent phrases, hit the pause button.

We want to leave the mystery note ringing "in the mind's ear." In other words, you don't have to try to hear the mystery note while listening through to the end of the complete phrase. Hit "pause" just as the mystery note sounds, so your ear is not confused by the notes that follow it.

d) Sing the phrase to yourself. Try to find it on the instrument. Don't cheat on tough notes: if there is/are a note(s) you can't be sure of, make a mental note, and try to get everything else you CAN be sure of. Play the phrase several times, trying to match not only the pitches but also the phrasing you recall from the recording.

e) Back up the recording to the beginning of the phrase. Play it back again, paying particular attention to the mystery note(s), even to the extent of mentally "blocking out" the notes you already know. Hit pause. Try to find/play the phrase with the mystery note(s) filled in.

f) If you still can't get the mystery note(s), back the recording up to the beginning of the phrase, and listen to just that phrase repeatedly, repeatedly hitting the pause/reverse functions. You are imitating the kind of repetition you can get when someone is singing or playing the phrase to you over and over again.

Continue this process with the second phrase. Periodically, rewind to the beginning and play the whole tune along with the recording up to the phrase you're working on, so you keep the individual phrases in perspective. Continue to complete the tune.

Realize that you may not get all the mystery notes in one sitting. That's okay; go ahead and play the tune along with the recording in multiple repetitions, staying conscious of the mystery spots. You can experiment with different note possibilities when those spots come up, or practice the mental discipline of playing along and STOPPING momentarily during those mystery spots. All of this will greatly enhance your ability to pay attention to the fine details.

Realize also that you should revisit your source recordings periodically fairly frequently, as things that were mystery notes in one session may suddenly become clear in a later one. There's some alchemical process set in motion when you learn this way: the tune keeps working in your ear/head even when you're away from the recorder, and things suddenly "click" when you revisit the source.

Note: The above is basically the same method that one uses, at a greatly accelerated pace, when trying to learn a tune on the fly in a session. The goal is to just do one thing at a time: JUST listen or JUST listen-and-lilt or JUST play the obvious phrases.

What this basically amounts to is highly intensified and elongated "conscious listening." This method will help prevent the inevitable temptation to shirk the details, out of a natural desire to move forward more quickly. If you really get into it, it becomes kind of meditative, and you stop feeling impatient or frustrated at lack of progress. It also, in my experience, gives one a greatly enhanced respect for the master players when you sit and listen to the minutiae of their approaches.

Suggestion

Look into alternate versions of the same tunes. If one is problematic, the other may answer your questions (however, you have to be aware that you are then jamming together two different settings which may not entirely suit one another).

Case in point: on Chulrua's Barefoot on the Altar, Tim Britton plays a stunning version of "The Humors of Ballyloughlin" on pipes, but he's such a virtuoso, in such control of piping nuance, and so good with melodic variations, that I found it very difficult to learn the tune from his recording, much as I liked it. In contrast, on Cran's Black Black Black, piper Ronan Brown and flutist Desi Wilkinson play a much more straightforward version.