

Why Work on Ear-Training?

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music
christopher.smith@ttu.edu
webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissemi
www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

Why spend time working on learning by ear that could be spent sight-reading tunes or practicing technique? Because it gives you skills that improve your musicianship in many areas, including repertoire, quick reactions, musical memory, and so forth.

For a whole raft of reasons, including the following:

- * It expands your repertoire, and in a fashion not tied to having access to sheet music for a specific piece;
- * It enhances your ability to learn quickly, picking up not only interesting phrases but whole tunes on the fly in the session;
- * It more closely imitates the way the music has traditionally been learned, taught, and passed on. If you spend a lot of time around the "crusty old boys" with the repertoires of three and four thousand tunes, you soon realize that they can manage this because their process of learning is very very quick and not tied to printed resources. These players got most of their tunes either by hearing and learning them in sessions and house-dances or by hearing and learning them from radio and recordings (78s, tapes, and so on);
- * It begins to dissolve the boundary between "lifting a tune by ear" and "memorizing and replicating a tune." Some of the people I play with know 1,500-2,000 tunes. Not all of those are tunes they can pull out on request (though Paddy O'Brien sure can); many of those tunes are tunes they can play if reminded. In the case of somebody like Grey Larsen, he's heard and played so many tunes by ear for the last 25 years that when a new tune comes up, and he listens to it through once and then plays it, it's not at all clear whether he's "remembering" a tune once learned, or learning it by ear for the first time right then--if you ask him if he previously knew the tune, very often he can't tell you. Or other times, he'll say, "Well, I've heard it before." The implication in this case is that, if he's heard it, before or right then, he can proceed to play it with no further learning.

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to get tunes that quickly?

- * In my opinion, it improves the musical memory. My experience, and those of my colleagues and students, suggests that a tune learned by ear, without the intervention of sheet music until much later in the learning process (if at all), goes into and "sticks" in the musical memory much

better. I also believe that learning a tune by ear as it is played by a master musician conveys a great deal of crucial information not captured in notation.

* Finally, and this is an as-yet-untested idea that I'm starting to work on, I think it is possible that learning a tune by ear from a recorded or live-in-the-room performance by a master player, changes the way the musical memory works. I play with several musicians who are lightning-fast sight readers, but who if offered sheet music for a tune will refuse it in favor of learning by ear.

This is for all the reasons listed above, but I think there's another factor, which I'm starting to see in my own musicianship after several years of learning exclusively by ear on a fairly intensive (2-3 hours/day, 6-8 new tunes/week). If you have spent a lot of concentrated time learning a tune by ear from a specific recording, then not only the tune but the specifics of that performance are imprinted in your aural memory.

I know at this point that if I am trying to recall how a certain tune goes (perhaps one I learned a long time ago but haven't played recently), I may struggle if I'm just trying to remember "the tune." But if I can recall just the opening two notes of a given performance I've studied, then the whole tune will pop into my head, with not only the notes but most of the phrasing, dynamics, articulation, and even recording idiosyncrasies of the original performance. At that point, it's just a question of "playing what I'm hearing in my head," because what's playing in my head is so clear and so precise.

I think that this sort of thing is the aural equivalent of a photographic memory. Someone with that kind of memory is not really recalling the page word by word in terms of its linear meaning, but rather calling up in the "mind's eye" a picture of what that page looks like, and then "reading along" from that internal picture. What I'm describing, and what I'm starting to see in my own practice, is a sort of "phonographic" memory.