

The art of audiation

Nigel Scaife, ABRSM's Syllabus Director, discusses why aural training is a vital component of all good music teaching.

The purpose of aural training

Let me pose a question: What is the purpose of aural training? Take a few minutes to think about it. Given its importance to musical development, it is worth taking some time to gather your thoughts about this important subject.

Did you find that the more you thought about it, the harder it became to summarise? You may have started by thinking about the importance of listening, and perhaps that led to thinking about what the activity of listening involves. You might have thought about the 'musical ear' and how the process of internalising music is fundamental to aural training. You might have mentioned aural discrimination, the association of sounds and symbols, and the analysis of what is heard. You may have even thought about ABRSM aural tests, but I hope not, as that would have led you down a different path. Testing skills is not the same as training them – sometimes an area for confusion when it comes to aural tests!

One answer might be 'to transform hearing into listening'. Listening is certainly the key word here, because while hearing happens automatically whenever the ear receives sound, listening is something done consciously which requires active concentration. 'Listening' can be thought of as the general and 'aural training' the specific development of intelligent hearing. Listening involves the vital mental activity through which musical sounds become meaningful. While we hear with our ears, we listen with our minds. Another answer might be 'to inform and enhance the student's all-round musical development', while another might be 'to develop the musical ear'.

The musical ear

There is a scene in the film *Amadeus* in which the elderly Salieri recalls Mozart's Serenade K. 361. As he listens to the music in his head he describes his impressions: 'On the page it looked nothing. The beginning is simple, almost comic. Just a pulse, bassoons, basset horns – like a rusty squeeze-box. And then, suddenly, high above it, an oboe. A single note hanging there, unwavering, until a clarinet took it over, sweetened it into a phrase of such delight...' Later a flashback shows him staring at the notation in an elegant ballroom, at which point a musician swiftly snatches the score away – as though Salieri had been reading a private diary!

This scene illustrates two slightly different aspects of listening. Firstly, there is the mental recall of music from the memory: Salieri describes his impressions of something heard many years earlier that was so profound that he thought it was 'the voice of God'. Secondly, there is the actual activity that took place when he was young man: Salieri translates the written notation into imagined music. This music may never have been physically 'sounded' at that point, yet Salieri can nevertheless hear it in his head. In a sense, he was 'hearing with his eyes'. Both of these activities are types of audiation – a word that describes the activity of the musical ear.

Audiation

Audiation, a term coined by Edwin Gordon, can be thought of as the aural counterpart of visualisation. When you read the words 'Eiffel Tower' you visualise a particular construction that exists in Paris. Similarly, if you now think of the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the opening motive will spring to mind and you could sing that idea out loud, probably continuing for at least the first few phrases. So audiation describes the process of thinking in music that happens when we listen to it, imagine it, perform from notation, play by ear, improvise, compose or write music down.

Developing the musical ear

There are many ways in which the musical ear can be developed, especially through activities that rely heavily on musical listening, such as improvising, playing by ear and answering questions about music that has just been heard. Singing is particularly effective, as it makes the connection between the internal imagining of sound and the external creation of it in a very direct way. Singing or humming back musical material that has been internalised is also an important way in which listening skills can be assessed. After all, whenever you have to imagine what music sounds like, you are effectively singing it in your head, whether or not you physically vocalise that sound. But singing out loud actually strengthens the aural imagination and makes the live connection between the aural image and the reality in sound.

Strategies for aural training

The three recently published volumes of *Aural Training in Practice* specifically address training the musical ear. As well as many practice exercises, each book contains 'Teaching hints and strategies' sections throughout that introduce ways of integrating the development of aural skills into your everyday teaching.

A key message is that by threading practical aural activities in imaginative ways through every lesson, preparation for the exam can be a natural extension of what is already a central part of the student's musical learning. The main way to achieve this is to make the actual music that your student is working on the basis for aural skill development. Its melody and phrase, its harmony and tonality, its rhythm and metre, its musical and expressive detail; these can all become springboards for aural activities which make the connection between learning a piece and developing aural skills.

Aural for instrumentalists or non-pianists

The musical examples and exercises in *Aural Training in Practice* are generally manageable by teachers who are able to play the piano at around Grade 4/5 level. To help teachers who are non-pianists and to provide opportunities for students to practise the tests away from the lesson, there are also CD recordings of all the exercises, as well as a complete set of answers. Up to Grade 5 all the aural tests can be usefully practised using any single-line instrument.

Aural and musicianship

Listening lies at the heart of all music-making and having a good musical ear enhances every aspect of musicianship. I hope that the new volumes of *Aural Training in Practice* will support you in the important task of developing your students' musicianship and in particular, training their musical ears! ■