
Playing by Ear for Dummies

How one musician does it.

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Introduction

This is not your typical “how to” for dummies book. I’m not sure if many dummies *can* play by ear, if they aren’t already. The ensuing pages will simply attempt to explain how I, John Edelmann, play the piano by ear. No stones left unturned, no dark secrets unrevealed. If, in the end, I have produced nothing more than a few pages of enlightened gibber gabber to clarify a sometimes mysterious ability, I’ll assume I have been successful. As such, this is not intended to be a real “how to” treatise. It is highly unlikely you’ll be playing the first song you hear on the radio after reading this. [You may, in fact, never ever play any song no matter how many times you hear it.] But, perhaps in the end, you’ll understand one person’s strange gift (and sometimes burden) a bit better than you do now.

I honestly do wonder why I’ve not started this effort before now. It may simply be that I’ve thought about it long enough, that, like so many melodies that cohabitate in my mind, I’m ready to write some of it down. Or perhaps enough musician friends have prodded me that the effort may ensue. No matter – ensue it has.

Playing by Ear?

By my definition, playing by ear is the ability to render, on a musical instrument, a close approximation of music heard from live performances or recorded medium, without the benefit of even a “fake book”, let alone a full musical score. Such playing encompasses the musical intent of the composer usually, rather than simply a rote regurgitation of what was heard. This is especially important when piano works which accompany a solo voice or instrument are played by ear, as well as full orchestral works are reduced at the piano, and typically on the fly. A perhaps trivial example of this is the ability many share to hum, sing, or play a single melody line once the tune is “in one’s head”. For the purpose of the present discussion, however, I’m really referring to a more complex rendering of an entire keyboard part, played, as just mentioned, without the benefit of the usual musical notation, on such instruments as the piano, pipe organ, accordion, or other keyboard apparatus.

In many cases, it is my experience that my audience (such as it may be) is convinced that I’m playing a memorized score of the original piece, rather than creating what many would consider to be an *improvisation* -- which, of course, brings up another variant on this topic.

Improvisation

Is there a difference between playing by ear and improvising? Most certainly. Improvisation usually entails a blend of an original work and the performer's original composition of the same, resulting in an altogether new piece. As such, the intent on the part of the performer is specifically not to *imitate* the original, but rather, to employ studied artistic license and devise something somewhat different. On the contrary, it is the goal of playing by ear that one imitates as closely as possible, the original work. At the very least, only fingerings are altered from those used or intended by the original recording artist, performer, or composer. Therefore, since improvisation is clearly another area of expertise altogether, its goal is usually an entirely distinct work, loosely based on the original. In fact, many composers of improvisation spend as much time on their creation, as did the original composer of the source work. Playing by ear, on the other hand, is more spontaneous and less studied (remembering, of course, that this is all based on my particular view of the playing-by-ear-world). For instance, for typical ballads or other works with a strong lyrical melody, I can usually render a close approximation after hearing the source only a time or two. Lest we hurl ourselves too quickly into the muddy details, suffice it to say, that this treatment of the topic will concentrate on playing by ear, rather than improvisation.¹

With these ground rules in mind, therefore, let us end the introduction and proceed to Chapter 1.

¹ This is not to say that playing by ear cannot or does not regularly involve a degree of improvisation. Quite the contrary, however, it is the matter of intent that separates pure playing by ear from this variant.

Chapter 1

the raw mechanics

A Brief Tour

Let us begin with a thin sketch of the basics. A tour of the mechanics when I sit down to play something I've heard would go something like this: (to keep this simple, we shall suppose it is something that I'm familiar with, and have a recording on hand to reference)

1) Locate or prepare a suitable audio recording of the intended work

Assuming the work is complex enough to require it, an audio recording is indispensable. This can be either a standard cassette or CD recording, or the sound track from a DVD or VHS tape.

2) Find the correct key

When playing along with a recording, finding the correct key is important. Transposition to other keys is fairly straight forward, but this comes into play much later. In the old days of cassette tape recordings, it was difficult but not impossible to accompany a recording using a piano tuned to A440. In the present digital age, however, this is usually not a problem at all, unless the source instrument isn't tuned properly in the first place (whether intended or not). I should mention, at this point, that I am not gifted with *perfect pitch*. However, my *relative pitch* abilities are such that I'm usually within 2-3 notes of the correct pitch.

3) Listen to the main theme (musical introductions are left until the end) then play the melody

Perhaps best viewed as the *discovery* phase, this can be tricky if the melody is intertwined too closely to the accompaniment. However, assuming the melody is fairly obvious and lyrical, I play the melody first to ensure that I have the basic theme registered in my mind. A few times usually does the trick.

4) Listen to the theme again; focusing this time on the bass accompaniment (if any)

Music without a pronounced bass element can be challenging, especially if relying solely on an aggregate accompaniment for "chordal" direction. (I suppose "chordal" isn't really a word. We hope that the reader will indulge the author here, while necessary words are construed to accomplish the stated purpose of this work. It means "that which pertains to the chord structure of a piece".) I spent six years in Junior High School and Senior High School, playing tuba in school bands. In college I continued tuba performance, in the marching and wind ensembles at the University of Dayton, in Dayton, Ohio. As a junior, I took a year of Tuba Performance as an elective. Familiarity with typical "bass" parts is an invaluable component of playing by ear, since it usually provides the foundation on which the melody line rests. I am certain that my experiences playing the tuba aided me in my ear playing abilities. We'll discuss other similar things that contributed to my abilities in due course.

5) Combine melody and bass with some harmony tossed in for good measure

This is the tricky part; sort of sink or swim, actually. Once I'm playing the melody, a fair rendition of the bass, and a few harmonic devices as deemed necessary, I'm home free. Certainly, any determined student of music who has studied chord progressions can very nearly *learn* to play by ear if the circumstances of their ability are attuned to the discipline. Unfortunately, if the knowledge of chord progressions and the ability to assimilate this onto a *map* in one's mind (as discussed in the following section) is less than adequate, the end result may not be pleasing to the ear.

Finally, proper dynamics, emphasis, tempo, and rhythm are all that remain to achieve a satisfactory performance.

And there you have it. That wasn't so bad now, was it? No intrigue there, no really dark secrets, cunning, or stealth. Simply step 1, 2, 3, and so forth. This is a bit over-simplified, but then, after all, we're only in Chapter 1.

Can't Get It Out of My Head

When I was little (4-6th grade), I was oftentimes kept awake at night by music that would literally run over and over in my mind. And I do mean *music*, not simply melodies. If it were a pipe organ work, I'd hear the entire instrument (including the natural reverb of the church where the performance I had heard was recorded). If the subject was an orchestra performance, the entire ensemble was right there. While not so much a problem while mowing the lawn or painting a wall, rewinding these things endlessly in my mind when trying to go to sleep was a real problem on occasion. Nevertheless, I am convinced that it was this propensity to replay music in its entirety in my mind that contributed to my abilities as they evolved over time.

I would probably liken this to the ability some have in never losing their way during a hike or while wandering about a foreign city. Rather than melodies and harmonies bouncing about in their mind, they see the map of the place clearly laid out before them, even after only one trek through the place.

The ability to play by ear, then, hinges to some degree on the ability to map a musical composition in one's mind: when the attempt is made to actually reproduce it at the piano, the result of the actual performance matches the pre-recorded version that is [we hope] already there.

On occasion, I find that the thing whirling around in my mind is not a recognizable tune at all. In these cases, I'm oftentimes left wondering if I've contrived a new melodic invention, or am simply on the verge of an unintended plagiarism. A case in point will illustrate this particular, um, curiosity.

One summer I found myself humming along to a rather grandiose organ and trumpet thing that seemed to go along in my mind very nicely. As I was mowing the front lawn at the time (about 4 acres), I didn't mind the repetition. However, some time later, I tried playing it on my keyboard, only to find that it was quite a nice little thing that sounded sort of like Handel, but nothing that I could quite place. Many months later, after I had arranged the "new" work mentally to some extent, I was in my office planning a wedding with a couple. As I was cueing up a potential processional for them from a record I had, I inadvertently played the tail end of the 4th movement of Handel's Suite for Trumpet and Organ in D. Lo and behold, this was the source for the seemingly obscure music that I had proceeded to arrange for, well, trumpet and organ. The quirk here, however, was that I had completely replaced the original "B" section with an ostensibly original "B" section of my own. When I then completed my own arrangement, I added my original variant as a "C" section in the middle of the piece. I have used the resulting recessional at numerous weddings since then.

So as this experience shows, playing by ear does have interesting side effects, with oftentimes unintended results.

Another similar circumstance happened in this fashion. In 2001, I took my laptop with Finale (a music composition program) to a car dealer in Cincinnati one Saturday morning, to have our Subaru Impreza Outback worked on. Planning for a long grueling wait in the lobby, I proceeded to compose what came to be *Recessional No. 1*, for 2 trumpets and organ. In the middle of the piece, I hit upon what I thought at the time was a fully contrived bit of stoic musical fare, hymn-like in design, such as might give the trumpets and the keyboardist a break from the otherwise busy nature of preceding measures. I finished the piece over the next few days and it was used for a few weddings in subsequent years.

In January, 2006, I had the opportunity to perform the piece as part of an organ dedication concert at the Church of the Holy Angels, in Dayton, Ohio. At the time, another participant commented that the hymn in the middle of the piece was quite nice. He thought he'd heard it before, but couldn't quite place it.

We now fast forward to December, 2006. I was listening to a classical music station in Cincinnati, when what to my wondering ears should be heard, but precisely the same hymn. It was being sung as part of a Christmas presentation of Lessons and Carols from Kings College, in England. Alas, I could not make out the words enough to discern the title. A few days later, on Boxing Day, to be exact, (December 26), I was talking with some friends who came to the United States from Canada. They recognized the tune I was playing and thought it might be *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks at Night*.

I searched the internet for that title, with MIDI samples and lo, I found it! It was the Old Winchester 1592, by Thomas Este! Unbelievably, I had determined that my nice (seemingly) original hymn structure wasn't mine at all, but had been around for more than 400 years. Such are the many ways that the mind and ears plays tricks on us.

From this tendency, then, to map a particular musical work in my mind, I have subsequently been able to play innumerable melodies. And while the result of such impromptu effort is less than perfect in most cases, it is certainly less time consuming than the more involved approach detailed in the steps at the beginning of this section.

And the Rest

There are, of course, other contributing factors to the nurture of the ability to play by ear. A brief listing of such factors would include:

- ❑ Basic familiarity with the instrument of choice, be it the piano, the pipe organ, or other keyboard-type instrument

By this I primarily mean the mechanics of creating sound pleasing to most ears. Use of the sustain pedal, is, for instance, of critical importance on a piano in the rendering of a finished musical product. Oddly enough, I have to say I never really was *taught* to use the sustain pedal. It was rather like learning to use the clutch of a manual transmission automobile: it is much easier to learn if you have a basic natural feel for the coordination between foot, clutch, gear, and speed.

Perhaps the most complicated instrument from a point of view of the mechanics involved would be the pipe organ. Between the sheer complexity of having multiple keyboards (manuals) as well as pedals, to the dizzying array of stops, pistons, buttons, generals, etc., there are few instruments more involved than a pipe organ.

I have no idea why playing a pipe organ (or other electronic organs of the era – mid to late 70's) was such an attraction for me. In spite of my near total concentration on piano playing, I jumped at the chance to play a pipe organ at every opportunity. During these early high school years, the pipe organ in the Church of St. Francis de Sales, in Newark, Ohio, was the only really big (and therefore, intimidating) pipe organ I ever had the opportunity to play. The organist there was very friendly, however, and a few live samples from Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor inspired me to purchase a copy of this score. I was eventually able to concoct my own version of the work (for piano) as a result of this "reference manual" (the score) and recordings of the same. One particularly useful recording was by the Warsaw Accordion Quintet of Poland. They played the thing slow enough, that I was able to hear the passages much better, than say, the typical E. Power Biggs rendition, wherein most of the "cool" parts were blurred by the rapidity of the performance. The challenge here, of course, was the problem of reducing a very active pedal part, a moving left hand, and a solo right hand to only two hands, on a piano. This was clearly not something that Bach would have ever intended to be done. I succeeded, however, in devising a fairly satisfactory version that, while always better sounding on an organ, could at least be performed on a piano.

As it turned out, this being enamored with pipe organs came in handy later in life, when I accepted a position as a director of music at a rather "organ-centric" church in the Dayton area.

- Being prone to listen to music that is "playable" by ear

There is a great deal of music that would be very difficult to play by ear, mainly owing to a melody that is either devoid of lyricism, or too diffuse to be easily recognized. Such music almost always ends up sounding either like "elevator music" (which we shudder to imitate) or being totally impractical or impossible to emulate by ear. I submit to the reader that the more one listens to music that is "playable" by ear, the more likely the ability will manifest.

- Ready access to a piano or other instrument (guitar, organ) being used to play by ear is critical.

It goes without saying that it would be difficult to nurture such ability without convenient access to the instrument of choice. Much of developing this ability has to do with the spontaneity of "trying" out a passage without having to first write something down or otherwise prepare oneself.

- Proper playing technique, including knowledge of scales, basic fingerings, etc., as well as a basic knowledge of chords and chord progressions are all key "enablers" of playing by ear.

Playing by ear, is, after all, a *subset* of more usual piano or other musical instrument playing, since "learning to read music" is nearly always the goal of traditional music instruction. From this vantage point, some would consider playing by ear to be a vulgar aberration of "true" musical ability. The author does not share this position, however.

Chapter 2

learning vs. ability: science or art?

If I were to begin this discussion with the nutshell first, I'd argue that I was undoubtedly predisposed to a life of playing by ear (i.e., I was born that way). Everything else I'm about to mention simply conspired to both accelerate the process and polish the finished product. Therefore, this chapter may prove to be the most controversial of this entire work.

My definition of playing by ear as *ability* is a bit vague, I suppose. After all, "abilities" can be learned or they can be talents present at birth. While it is generally agreed that a child can grow up to be whatever they wish to be, I suggest that abilities come easier if there is a definite kernel of innate talent in there somewhere to begin with. I believe that kernel was there in my life, even though I've doubtless benefited from years of practice and exploration, all the same.

I sincerely hope that this reality is not overly depressing to the reader whose wish it is to "learn" to play by ear. However, I must be fair here. Remember, I stated carefully in the introduction that this was more an exploration of my ability than a generic "how to" discussion.

In the Beginning

I believe I have delayed this enough now. So here we go.

My 5 siblings and I were all given the opportunity to study the piano with our mother, who had graduated from college with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music from St. Mary of the Springs College, in Columbus, Ohio. In 1959 she and our father moved to Gallipolis, Ohio, to start a family and several new careers. Besides being a music teacher at area elementary schools, our mother taught piano to students in the local community. She also became the organist and choir director at St. Louis Church, in Gallipolis, that year, a position which she holds to this day. From the earliest times, therefore, we siblings were immersed in the sounds of students taking lessons, as well as attending various church events with the requisite musical accompaniment.

It is with this backdrop that I found myself "fiddling" with the keyboard of the piano and devising sounds seldom pleasing to others, but always interesting to myself, along about 1971-1973 as a pre-teen. I may have had actual lessons prior to that age, but I do not remember them, and I do not believe I ever actually was involved in a piano recital, per se, as were my sisters and other students my mother taught.

For you see, while I was given a few lessons, I was never overly encouraged to pursue the piano (or music in general, for that matter) as a serious student of the art. It is not that we "boys" were driven to any particular discipline, actually; we were simply and consciously discouraged from pursuing music as an avocation or career.

Therefore, since I didn't possess the self-discipline or drive to become proficient in sight reading, technique, and other piano playing skills *on my own* [SURPRISE!], I grew up without the parental guidance and direction that may well be integral to the nurturing of an accomplished student of the art.

The Magic of Chords

Fortunately, my maternal grandmother came to the rescue with a new project that was sure to change my musical outlook for all time. She was an accomplished pianist of the old school (the *way old school*) that did not rely on learned means, but rather, was simply the product of both owning a piano and owning some piano music. She set about, therefore, learning to play such country favorites as Nellie Gray, The Turkey and the Straw, O Where O Where has my Little Dog Gone, and others. These as well as The Spanish Cavalier and Red Wing were two very characteristic tunes of the era, that she could play quite well indeed.

Grandmother had already accumulated a degree of success teaching chord-based accompaniment to another grandson (my cousin) who played the guitar. When I came on the scene, she proceeded to teach me the basics of chording. The routine generally went this way:

Grandmother would play the song first, in the appropriate key.

The key was generally either G major or C major. Simplicity was the key, to the whole process, actually. On rare occasion, we found ourselves in Eb major, or even D major. My major key loving tutor frowned on anything in a minor key. "That just isn't pretty", she would say. I found them very intriguing. Later, I would experiment all over the keyboard, as I became familiar with the basic constituents of the key. Somewhere, my mother let slip such technical terms as tonic, dominant, and sub-dominant (I, V, IV), which are the fundamental building blocks of any attempt to play by ear. Once I learned these fascinating elements of nearly all musical pieces, the entire piano keyboard became an 88 key playground, solely, it seemed, for my entertainment.

My job was to accompany by playing the appropriate *octave* with my left hand, and a suitable chord in the right hand (in the best *inversion*, whatever that was).

An inversion, in the simplest of terms (for the concept was learned in only the simplest way possible) is the manner in which a triad (a chord of three tones) is played, i.e., which note of the chord is on top, and which note of the chord is on the bottom. I gradually began to accompany my grandmother taking into consideration the spatial distance of the melody from the root of an associated chord, and therein, found that certain inversions sounded better than others, while playing along.

The end result of all this chording was that my familiarity with the chord progressions of a few strategic keys continued to grow. I was not, actually, playing by ear all that much during this period; I was merely becoming adept at finding my way among the keys (the white and the black). This is an invaluable ability, if one is to play by ear, which is learned as much as it is discovered.

Yes, I know, there's that "L" word. I didn't promise to never use the word. The road to a great many things in life is littered with things learned and unlearned. However, the fact of the matter in my case was this: of the 10 grandchildren in my grandmother's extended family, I was the only one who "chorded" with her on a regular basis. She made certain that every visit included some time to chord, almost as if it were scheduled, which, of course, it wasn't. Others were busy actually taking lessons in earnest (my oldest sibling studied all throughout grade school and high school, and went on to study music at Marshall University, in Huntington, WV), or were busy with sports and other distractions.

In any event, the chording continued and in time, I found myself becoming bored with piano lessons, very bored indeed.

A Sinister Hand

Neither my mother nor my father was left-handed. Even my grandmother who taught me to chord was right-handed, but then, that was to be expected. In the early 1900s it was not *proper* to write with the “sinister” hand, and every effort was made to instill more noble right-handedness in all subjects of early learning, for good or ill. However, my youngest brother and I were and continue to be left-handed. And we were definitely the only two in the family that could play by ear at all. Certainly we were the only two who desired to make up anything original, as well. Given that very unscientific and incomplete body of evidence (lacking, as it were, in many ways), I can, nevertheless, say with great certainty that being left-handed made all the difference in the world². I am confident that being left-handed (which, I believe, is a tendency at birth)³ has great impact on one’s musical and other artistic related endeavors. One individual in the noted research left a comment that being left-handed definitely impacted (and improved) his playing ability, though he’s making the point that it was an issue of style of playing, rather than any structural alignment in his brain inducing his playing ability⁴. I’m suggesting the latter is the case.

As the years progressed, the desire to play songs that I had only heard became something of an obsession. I would spend hours working on arrangements of such pieces, recording them at first only in my mind. Soon I was able to record them onto paper using manuscript and musical notation. These renderings were rarely used to actually play the piece, however. I usually recorded them one way or another so as not to forget how they went (or more accurately, how they started). The discovery phase of playing a song by ear was not something that had to occur each and every time a piece was played. However, the chance of recalling such works at a later time is greatly improved if the first few notes of the melody are remembered, either by writing it down, or by audio recording. In later years, I would compile cheat sheets of familiar titles, categorized as instrumentals, vocals, orchestral, seasonal, and the like. Next to the title, I would include the best key in which to play the song, and any additional information that was deemed useful at the time.

Meanwhile, I was enjoying playing tuba in the junior high, and high school bands. This eventually led me to agree to play bass (tuba) for the annual Rio Grande College Messiah Christmas Performance. There are, of course, no written tuba parts for this work. However, the folks involved in this event were not distracted by such details, and were very happy to have me help out. In fact, I wrote out bass arrangements during this time, based on the piano score in the full vocal score edition, for a majority of the Christmas choruses. Having thus familiarized myself with the Hallelujah Chorus, in particular, would come in quite handy in later years.

In my high school years, the ability culminated in a talent show I became involved in, when I accompanied a friend as he sang a solo, “Dream On”, by the Oak Ridge Boys. My friend gave me a cassette tape of the recorded song, and I proceeded to “learn” it from the tape. Everyone thought it came out rather well indeed. This occurred in the spring of 1979, I believe, and was the first time I had ever played in such a public forum.

Art vs. Science

Part and parcel of the left hand syndrome is the impact my eventual affinity for computers may or may not have had on my musical abilities. It has been found that mathematics, computers, and musical ability, seem to go hand in hand. Let us imagine, for a moment, that one is left handed (therefore, right

² See <http://www.drspock.com/article/0,1510,5816,00.html> for a reference regarding tendencies of child development based on handedness.

³ See <http://www.indiana.edu/~primate/index.html> for a website related to left-handedness research. My premise isn’t implied, but there is ongoing research located here.

⁴ See http://www.indiana.edu/~primate/lpeak4.html#music_tips.

brained), and has no affinity for anything technical. Such an individual would be squarely in the “creative” corner. The arts could potentially reign supreme.

In my case, however, I’m fairly certain that, while certainly born left handed, I had the instinct to be a bit too technical. This bi-polar design, has resulted in what I would characterize as my present condition: the ability to play by ear(art), to compose music (art), as well as to enjoy writing (art), making wine (art), and a host of other related artsy things, but, also to be very intrigued by the following scientific endeavors: meteorology, astronomy, chemistry, and the electricity, and technically, systems analysis (computers) – my degreed profession.

Thus, I sometimes think that I was in fact, born left brained, but since through some quirk of fate, I ended up left handed, my right brain received just enough exercise, that I have a decidedly strong artistic streak.

On one hand, I’m concerned that this is all rubbish, and nothing but a fine bit of rationalism. But on the other (the left one), I’m left wondering if this might not be the way of things. Who’s to say?

Chapter 3

from dabbler to director

My high school years in Gallipolis, Ohio, ended with my being able to play many diverse things, but other than the odd occasion of accompanying a friend in a talent show, I didn't really have any vehicle by which to apply my talents.

In 1980, I was accepted at the University of Dayton, Dayton Ohio, in the Computer Science department. I played tuba in the marching band and wind ensemble, but otherwise, didn't pursue actual piano performance. I did, however, appreciate the easy access to the many pianos on campus. There was one in the dormitory, many in the band room, and many in the music and theatre building on campus. The idea of having a practice room, where one could go to play in a sound proof room was way cool. The majority of my "professional" development certainly occurred here.

In 1982, I had befriended a priest of the Society of Mary, by the name of Gerald Chinchar. I was delighted to learn I could arrange to play the pipe organ in the chapel on Campus, and through the vehicle of music, I learned that Fr. Chinchar and I composed music, and enjoyed playing.

Since it was not practical to have a piano in my off campus housing, with Fr. Chinchar's help, I did purchase a small Casio keyboard (with miniature keys), so that I did have a keyboard instrument readily accessible. I used this keyboard for several years, mainly to compose a few original works, for rather unique ensembles (tuba quartet, or two tubas and two bassoons).

At the beginning of the summer trimester at UD, 1983, I happened to attend an 11:30 service in the chapel. At the conclusion of the Mass, the song leader invited musicians to join the ensemble. I and several other individuals with the same idea joined that day. The leader was Mark Haller, and I owe a considerable debt to his patience and guidance as I evolved from musical dabbler to accomplished accompanist over the next several years.

In the beginning, I brought only my Casio keyboard to the group. There was another individual who "played the piano" after all. I would accompany with strings, or brass, or other tinny timbres from the meager selections available on the instrument. Then, one day, we were preparing for a wedding. As the others were taking a break, I played around on the piano with one of the songs, namely, "You Light Up My Life". When Mark heard me playing this song, he immediately approached me regarding being the regular accompanist (at least for those songs I seemed to be able to play easily enough. Thus was the group introduced to my playing by ear abilities.

The ensemble was primarily a guitar group, with between 3 and 4 guitarists, a flute, and of course, the piano. Being a member of such an ensemble provided another interesting component to my musical development: I learned to play music that was less familiar to me using chords, and I essentially imitated where possible, the guitars, in terms of rhythmic touch, etc.

Eventually, then, as the later years of my college career unfolded, I found myself applying for a formal position with the university, as a co-director for music with Campus Ministry. This position consisted of directing the music for the 10:00 AM Sunday liturgy, as well as directing music for all "special events"

(Baccalaureate Masses, the annual Christmas on Campus liturgy, and other such campus-wide religious events as were planned). This was quite like jumping from the frying pan into the fire, since I had had no prior experience as a director in my own right, and did most of the “directing”, by *ear*. Perhaps most intimidating was the request made by the choir and the Christmas on Campus committee, to include Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus as the postlude for the event. I had never even contemplated such a development, and was fairly concerned that this would be a problem. As it turned out, however, I was familiar enough with the score, with the over all “mapping” of the piece, that I conducted it without any trouble at all.

As I was only in the infancy of my directing career, I approached a professor in the UD School of Music as to whether conducting classes might not be in order. His response was as unexpected as it was simplistic: if I didn’t seem to have any difficulties directing by *feel*, then it was his recommendation that I not become too distracted by formal instruction on the matter. A very interesting view, I thought, considering I had begun to experience the more “dignified” (arrogant is too severe a word) side of the formal musical establishment at UD, and the same establishment was not too impressed by my tendency to “play by ear”.

In summary, I would admit that had I not been afforded the opportunity to become involved in a formal music ensemble at UD, or had I not pursued the directing position in Campus Ministry, I may well have never achieved the confidence and expertise that I have in later years. And as I moved from church to church, or from event to event, one of the frequently asked questions is, “Where did you study music?”, a question, of course, which had no real answer.

Chapter 4

playing by ear: the ugly, the bad, the good

What could possibly be *ugly* about playing by ear, you ask? Plenty, I say.

Playing by ear, without a corresponding disciplined routine of practice, or a firm grasp of theory and piano study, can result in an ability that may be somewhat lopsided. Consider the fact that when a person plays by ear, it is perceived that they are as rehearsed and as schooled, as anyone would need to be, to perform similarly. This can lead to an interesting assumption, on the part of the listener, that such a person can play just about anything. However, this is rarely the case.

When I amaze my listeners with my playing ability, or even my directing abilities, most never question the depth of that ability. Rarely am I asked where the boundaries lie that surround my talent – for surely, boundaries do indeed limit my abilities. While it is fair to say that I can play most of what I'm expected to play most of the time, it is also true that beyond certain well defined limits, I find myself pitifully lacking. After all, I don't attempt to play things that are outside of my comfort zone, unless the need is great, or I'm being paid to do so. In such cases, I end up spending an inordinate amount of time practicing a piece, until I am fairly confident that I'll not screw up too badly.

Perhaps the worst possible consequence of playing mostly by ear (in the absence of good reading skills), is the havoc wrought by such playing if one is an accompanist. If the accompanist is unable to accurately follow the written music (because they choose or can only play by ear), it is highly likely that there will be conflicts between the accompaniment and the choral parts. This causes confusion and results in a less than satisfactory performance.

Believe me. I know.

Equally disastrous can be attempts at playing a somewhat difficult piece, with a melody that "seems" easy enough.

For you see, nearly every attempt at playing a challenging piece is subject to being derailed, regardless of the practice invested, by distraction, another fairly awful consequence of being able to play by ear.

Confusion and Distraction

When one plays from a music score bereft of the ability to play by ear, the notes on the page provide all that is necessary to render the piece on the intended instrument. Unfortunately, just as it can be difficult to turn *on* the ability in the first place, it can be just as difficult to turn it *off*. The problem surfaces when an unfamiliar song is attempted. The thought process goes something like this:

First, the piece is carefully examined for the usual important facets of performance, key signature, tempo, time signature, etc. The absence of chords can be especially challenging.

Second, the melody is played, with as close an approximation to the actual accompaniment as is possible in the left hand.

Now comes the tricky part. While playing the [presumed] unfamiliar melody, should it happen that another melody comes to mind, that melody can very easily provide just enough confusion, as to render the current piece unrecognizable. This can get ugly, especially, if a choir or other musician is attempting to accompany you or vice versa.

This can be a problem, obviously, for you see, in order to truly play by ear, one needs to be able to *implicitly trust ones ear to be true and correct*, not just suggestive or merely affording assistance. The latter would make it practically impossible to play well, by ear, with just a few practice tries, since there would be too much starting, stopping, correcting, starting, etc. The ability requires total dependence on ones ear to provide the unwritten score, which the talented individual instantaneously uses to render the desired musical performance.

In the absence of the ability, one is refreshingly unencumbered by the confusing array of melodies, chord progressions, etc., that would otherwise cloud the way. Contrarily, such distraction severely limits ones ability to properly read a piano score, since the performance is more than just a little affected by the guiding force of the ability to play by ear.

Of course, in actual practice, the outlook is not really quite this bleak. Through diligent effort and attention to detail, one can keep the ability to play by ear in check, but it can take quite a bit of effort, to be sure.

Additionally, as we will explore in a later chapter, the ability to play by ear often comes with the added ability to compose original works on the fly. Many is the time that I have been confused by a piano score, only to find that I made up either my own accompaniment, or even parts of the melody (to the chagrin of anyone trying to follow along).

Fingerings (Lack Thereof)

Even beginning students of piano learn the importance of proper finger position, and ultimately, the need to carefully work out exact fingerings (whether based on suggestions by the composer, or based on the interpretation of the performer/instructor). Carefully devised fingerings aid not only the ability to play technically challenging runs, but also, directly affect the way certain passages will sound.

Unfortunately (at least in my case), when one plays by ear, it can oftentimes take every ounce of effort to simply play the piece at all, never mind fingerings. And since we who play by ear, rarely spend time perfecting a given piece (we played it already, after all), that initial rendering usually ends up being the only one that is mentally recorded.

The most obvious example I can offer here, is my rendering of the fugue in Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Since my right hand is responsible for most melodic activity, it is common for me to span unimaginably bizarre melodic ranges with only my right hand, even while my left hand rests idly in my lap, wondering, as it does, when it should have a turn. The trained listener will, most likely, perceive this flaw, but, in the spirit of we who play by ear, "all the notes got played", didn't they?

I would be the first to say that piano performance is way more than merely "playing all the notes", but the reality is, that when the foot hits the pedal, you do what you can in the melodic time frame you are allotted, and then, move on to the next verse or refrain.

Practice

Though it is true that practice makes perfect, it is equally true that practice takes time, time that many who play by ear have little of. Who knows whether or not the majority of people who can play by ear, hold part time music positions, but that has always been my situation. As such, it is simply not possible to spend the same amount of time that our more accomplished brethren can spend practicing the art. Perhaps the most important result of adequate practice is the aforementioned precision required in executing proper fingerings. Lack of adequate practice results in substandard technical execution; this can render certain challenging passages unplayable at worst, or interpretatively shallow, at best.

This is reason that I mention this in the category of the “bad”, for, were it not for the fact that I could play by ear, I would either not own a piano at all, or have studied piano “properly” and not have discovered this litany of challenges in the first place.

The merits, however, of playing by ear, should be obvious (this is the “good”). I can play for hours without any music whatsoever; I can amaze my peers by playing (rather well, I might add) things that appear fairly complex, in spite of the negatives mentioned above. And, by extension, I have been able to direct choirs and other ensembles by ear, which I would never have imagined doing, without the benefit of being able to play by ear.

Another significant side benefit is the fact that I developed (or had by accident of birth) the ability to compose new melodies and their associated accompaniments on the fly. So much so, that listeners are never certain whether I’m making something up, or playing by ear something published, that they never had occasion to hear.

Given these “pluses”, I would hesitate to exchange my talent for the more precise skill of sight-reading and a more disciplined approach at piano performance.

Economies of Performance

As with most shortcuts in life, there are economical considerations involved in playing by ear.

Given the fact that we who so play, do so without the benefit of a score, we must needs eschew certain elements of a piece, in order to adequately play the thing, in the first place. This means that rather than including all of the subtle voices in the tenor or alto of an arrangement that would be, say, otherwise published, we rather sacrifice such things, for ensuring that the melody, and at a minimum, a basic accompaniment is present. The glue (magical though it be) that holds the whole thing together is the sustain pedal, of course.

O what a transparent and uneventful world we’d have, had we no sustain pedal.

A good example is the standard Bach tune, *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*. Any conventional arrangement will have inner voices that accompany the moving eighth note melody that begins the piece. I find it most difficult to add these voices when playing the piece by ear, because they are essentially a “third” piece to the puzzle (melody (1), bass line (2), inner voices (3)). When I play something by ear, I rarely consider inner voices as a separate entity; rather, they are melded into the right hand experience, and become one with it. Occasionally, when it is most essential to a particular piece, the effort is made to extricate these inner voices, but by and large, in terms of execution, they are played in the right hand. As you might imagine, this makes for even more exciting fingerings and

technical profundity. In practice, however, the end result is not precisely *wrong*, but rather, simply *different*.⁵

In reality, I would characterize the way I play these inner voices, the same way stereo imaging works with speakers. By the innate design of the playing by ear “driver”, the two hands work together to cause the desired result, *without precisely identifying all facets of the intended result*. This is synergy at its most basic level, to be sure.

Other liberties taken include such things as the re-arrangement of verses and refrains to fill the required time allotted for the performance. This is especially difficult for the performer unable to play by ear, or otherwise improvise on the spot. One of my most satisfying abilities, especially for church services and weddings, is the ability to extend a song when more music is required, or alternatively, to cut short a selection, when brevity is required. Success is achieved by being able to do so, while convincing the listener that the score was played exactly as written.

Out of Tune

Occasionally, I find myself playing a piano, pipe organ, or other natural instrument, and the fool thing is out of tune. While I do own a tuning hammer for surgical tweaking as required, an out of tune piano is usually too fouled up to easily rectify. In such cases, my ability to play by ear, or to render anything pleasing at all from the instrument in question is virtually impossible. This is especially true in the case of a pipe organ. The more out of tune and unbalanced a pipe organ’s sound is, the worse will be my playing by ear and improvising abilities.

Conversely, the better an instrument sounds, the better will be my performance; not simply because of the better sound quality of the actual musical rendering, but because there is an intangible link between the resulting sound potential, and my ability to execute. Not only will my performance be crisper, but the very melodies, accompaniment, etc., will be more inspired, as a direct result of the aural feedback experienced during the performance. This is all rather like having a good day. The better one’s day is going, the fewer mistakes in execution there likely will be; but more important, the potential exists to be significantly more creative and successful in all things attempted.

Playing by ear predisposes one to such nuances, whereas the performer bereft of this talent, but able to play most music from the printed page, will be less affected. Certainly they will be less inspired on a sullied instrument, but the execution should not necessarily suffer.

Happily, then, there is “good” aplenty with respect to this talent of playing by ear. Like most things, however, such good is a subjective matter, best left to the “ear” of the beholder. In sum, though, perhaps the best thing about playing by ear, is the ability to not be limited by how much sheet music one happens to have. This is a very good thing, indeed.

⁵ This from the perspective of one not too hung up on classical correctness and such. If you count yourself among those who consider any deviation from the original intention of the composer as being inherently flawed, then you will find this statement inherently flawed as well.

Chapter 5

learning to play by ear

[insert sustained *sigh* here]

Hang on there! Slow down! Learn to play by ear? What, are you mad or simply hopelessly confused? Haven't you been paying attention?

Well, for those of you who *haven't* been paying attention, shall we have a go at it then?

In this chapter, I'll present the mechanics for how I would play various tunes by ear, from the simple to the not so simple. If, by the end of this chapter, you're still trying to find your way, and are lost wandering about in the wasteland of notes gone astray, then, well, give it up, already.

For those who have been paying attention, you realize that if you are unable to play by ear, and are generally musical by nature, you may be a bit dismayed regarding the reality of the situation here. However, I suggest we plow ahead in the hope that I'm wrong on that account, and playing by ear is an attainable, learnable goal.

Baby Steps

What say we begin with a familiar melody, such as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. The very first step should be plunking out the melody on the keyboard of your choice. (Any polyphonic instrument would suffice for this exercise, but we'll limit our discussion to the piano.) Find a key somewhere that is comfortable (being able to hum along helps so keep the range of the piece within your vocal range).

There now. If you were able to find the notes without error, in the proper rhythm, etc., then, congratulations. You just played by ear (unless of course you have the keyboard melody memorized from having learned it in music lessons, in which case, you're cheating – try a different melody).

If, however, your rhythm was off, or you made serious blunders mis-plunking, as it were, notes here and there, then it should be clear that you either didn't have the melody in your head properly (the "mapping") or you are "spatially pitch challenged" as it relates to the relative placement of tones up and down the keyboard. I imagine that the latter malady is most prevalent among would be ear-playing hopefuls, and alas, is probably the hardest to resolve.

Most will become frustrated that they can sing the melody just fine, but when asked to play even the simplest melody on a keyboard instrument, fail miserably.

The best solution to the spatial pitch issue is to study relative pitch.⁶ Owing to the complexity of this subject, the study of relative pitch is beyond the scope of this effort. But, once this is learned, playing by ear can begin in earnest.

In simplest terms, relative pitch is the ability to accurately judge intervals between pitches, and to find such tones on a keyboard or other instrument. Perfect pitch, on the other hand, refers to the ability to play a given tone directly without the aide of adjoining or “relative” pitches.

With the “perfect” ability, one can find a note given the name, or name the note based on the pitch. When one plays by ear, however, the “true” key of the song is usually not important. Rather, the name of the game is being able to pluck out the tones of the piece, in proper tempo (speed), proper meter (3/4, 4/4, etc.), and with all of the other subtle nuances that define the song as a whole. As such, the “relative” ability is all that is required to successfully play by ear.

Regardless of how gifted one may be in either of these abilities, the importance of practice cannot be underestimated. The more practice you have at attempting to find pitches relative to one another on the keyboard, the less challenging it will be to proceed to the next step: finding the expected bass pattern to accompany the melody.

I say “expected” because most known melodies have an expected bass progression, just as surely as they have an expected chord progression. Purposely varying from the expected progressions constitutes fraudulent playing-by-ear behavior, unless that is the desired goal, in which case, this is known as *improvisation*. That is not what we’re trying to accomplish here, however.

If you haven’t heard the song enough to understand or to visualize the bass line in its entirety, then you need to listen to the song more. Playing the bass line alone isn’t particularly valuable, since the goal here is to make music, not practice individual parts. Were the actual music available, rehearsing individual lines would, of course, be productive. An added concern with attempting the bass line alone is that it is too easy to misrepresent the melody using the “mental voice”, and thus, run amok of the song altogether.

With the melody ever present, the likelihood of running astray in the bass is lessened.

I should comment, however, that subtle diversions or embellishments of the bass line do not necessarily constitute improvisation. The goal is to make the finished product interesting, and close as possible to a common version with which most are familiar. Remember the ancient Greek proverb:

Μια τρυπώντας βαθιά γραμμή ένα ενδιαφέρον τραγούδι δεν κάνει (*A boring bass line does not an interesting song make*⁷).

And so, if all went well, we now have a passable tune, with a moving, secure bass, and a clear, illuminating melody.

At this point, the only remaining component is the use of harmonies to either embellish or provide balance to the melody and bass figures. Harmonies can make different melodies sound similar, by employing similar accompaniment intervals and counter melodic lines, or, they can be entirely unique, producing correspondingly unique and [sometimes] interesting results.

The simplest harmonies are typically a third below the melody, though continued use of this device is not a pleasant thing at all.

⁶ Perhaps the best online source for learning relative pitch and other aural skills can be found at <http://www.perfectpitch.com/playbyear.htm>.

⁷ No representation as to the authenticity or origin of this statement is made or implied.

However, we are forgetting a primary goal of our study: playing by ear. What exactly we are trying to duplicate, with so simple a melody as Twinkle, Twinkle is anyone's guess. With the myriad variations at our disposal, avoiding committing the "improvisation" blunder is a nearly impossible task.

For that reason, it is far more useful to attempt a more structured piece, with a standard accompaniment, rather than one so diluted by centuries of variations. But, the exercise is still valuable, in that we're able to explore the minute basics of melody – bass – harmony in the development of our "skill".

One song I'm frequently asked to play at social gatherings and the like is the "Music Box Dancer". The music of this particular piece I have not seen, even to this day. However, I play it all the same.

In this piece, there is only the arpeggio-like right hand figure accompanied by a simple bass line.

Try playing only the melody, say, in the key of C major. It moves all over the place, and probably has specific fingerings to make life easier, but, "...don't bother us with details", I'm heard to say. We don't have the music, of course, and so, we need not worry with such things, concentrating instead on the relative pitch placement and a proper tempo and over all "feel".

Once the melody is down pat, try adding a bass, even if it is only the tonic of each chord (listed here in progression order, not by measure: C, F, C, G, C etc.).

On closer inspection of an actual recording (recordings or live performances being the only safe resources for the ear playing aficionado, after all), you will note that the bass line has a peculiar rhythm to it. Actually, I believe it is based on the accents in the melody line of the right hand. Try it and see.

This song can probably be improvised to a high degree and result in something far different from the simplistic music box dancer that the composer originally intended. As such, we'll rest on our laurels now, and set this one aside as we contemplate pieces yet more challenging and audacious.

A small detail we might mention here may be of use. There is a recognizable difference in performing purely instrumental music, versus vocal music, when playing by ear.

Instrumental music tends to be awash with complex harmonies, entrances, exits, and general confusion masked to varying degrees, by the overall [usually] pleasing experience of the whole. In other words, the melody line itself is handed off between instruments of diverse color, and even shared, at times, by the same, resulting in an intermingling of musical colors that paint an aural picture of one sort or another.

Vocal music (at least the majority of solo works) is decidedly different, in that the melody line is nearly always right there in your face, and hard to miss.

Thus, rather than try to play an orchestral piece, I highly recommend trying simpler (or not so simple) songs recorded or performed with a solo voice. Not only is the melody obvious, but the flow of the lyrics also is of considerable aid in "mapping" out the song in its entirety.

At this point, I suspect we'll need to bring this chapter to a close, since more involved study would likely require guidance at a work shop or similar venue to proceed further.

Chapter 6

composition: “Did you just make that up?”

At some point in my career, I began taking this ear playing ability to another level. I believe it started mostly when I was in college, though I had always tinkered a bit with original melodies and their accompanying harmonies and the like, from high school on.

I began by simply playing something from scratch, and then recording it (the best I could) for subsequent analysis, or to simply impress my friends.

Though I first started writing music down on manuscript as a teenager, the skill progressed further in college when I wrote music for a tuba or bass quartet, composed of players from my immediate family (2 tubas, 2 bassoons). These were basic four part arrangements of Pachelbel's Canon in D, the Canadian national anthem, and other fairly simple tunes.

Then, I met other instrumentalists, primarily in the Wind Ensemble of the University of Dayton. Depending on who I knew at the time, and what instrument they played, I wrote music accordingly. One example was a brass sextet piece that was originally written for a very accomplished horn player.

Eventually, I befriended a violinist for whom I wrote a number of solo pieces for violin and piano. Some of these were eventually recorded and the resulting cassette tapes were distributed to my friends and family.

It was during this time that I began studying piano with a “doctor in residence” at the University of Dayton, one Tibor Szasz. He was from Romania, and was a very accomplished classical pianist. Unfortunately, my *laissez-faire* approach to my studies and lack of unrelenting dedication to the art resulted in a re-direction of our focus. It was determined that I was not cut out to be a classical pianist, and that I should concentrate instead on developing my composition skills. He therefore agreed to assist for a time, with “proper” arrangements of my melodies which he found inspired and very pleasing.

Now you may be wondering what all this has to do with playing by ear.

Let me assure you that I'm not at all certain myself, other than to say, that once you get in the habit of playing things without the “crutch” of musical manuscript, the idea of wandering off, say, into uncharted lyrical territory, playing songs centered on melodies of your own creation, doesn't seem at all very scary or troublesome any more.

By carefully (or even haphazardly) tossing together various pre-existing melodic artifacts (from the “mental library” of things heretofore played by ear) into a greater work, embellished by or perhaps even

centered on a unique theme, it is possible to render an original composition that can be very pleasing to the ear indeed.

Thus it came to pass that during my years at U.D., (while playing at a Catholic Mass), I often asked the members of our musical ensemble, "So, what key should I play something in today?" and once given the key, would proceed to ad lib a little ditty that was heard by the congregation *that day*, but, like as not, *was never to be heard again*.

At some point, though, I did bring a tape recorder so that I could record some of these "ad libitums" as they came to be called, in order that I not lose a particularly moving theme for all time.

the wrap up

Well, so here we are at the conclusion of this little work. At least I suppose we should conclude, since I'm not sure what else to say that I haven't already said or implied by the foregoing.

I have related as many personal experiences as I could recollect that are germane to the topic at hand. I have attempted (difficult though it was) to articulate to the best of my ability, the discrete steps I think I follow as I do something that cannot really be explained effectively in the first place.

I have explored some of the good and bad that is associated with the art, and have described the consequences of being a self-acclaimed musical charlatan in the oftentimes stuffy academic world of studious classical perfectionists.

And most important, I have attempted to explore whether playing by ear is a gift or an ability that can be learned through devoted study.

But study though you may, I do fully believe that playing by ear is an art made infinitely easier by the simple benefit of a *gift*. Life, let alone the world we live in, is not a characteristically *fair* undertaking. Some have the gift of speech, some the gift of social prowess, others, the ability to dance well. Anyone whose gift is in high demand will be sought after, and likely compensated for it, to the chagrin and dismay, sometimes, of those on the sidelines who would rather *they had been chosen instead*. But alas, such is not the way of things. As stated earlier, life is not fair.

Thus, I believe it is far more important to nurture the gifts one does have, and let envy and other ugly trappings of our human existence wither and fade where they may.

Playing by ear is one of my little niches in this unfair world, and I try to take it seriously. May the reader be ever conscious of his or her own gifts, and take them seriously as well, as we pursue a life of peace and harmony on the wandering path to happiness.