

By Jessica Johnson and Midori Koga

The Art of Listening

with Depth, Understanding,
Flow and Imagery

“The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes—ah, that is where the art resides!”

—Artur Schnabel¹

Why is it that some performances we hear are perfectly competent, technically impressive and even stylistically correct, but leave no lasting impression? Why is it that others are memorable, moving and somehow alive? We hear these contrasts on the concert stage, in college- and high-school-level recitals, in competitions and juries, and even when we listen to young children as early as age 6.

When we teach piano it is our goal to help our students, at every level of study, to achieve that elusive state of “artistic musicianship.” Teaching others how to play the piano is a complex and challenging endeavor. There are many different aspects of playing the piano upon which we must focus our attention: tone, rhythm, reading, technique, character, phrasing, dynamics, color, voicing, understanding of harmony and theory, and the list goes on. But it is only when we manage to pass the message on to our students that all of these “basic” aspects of piano

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playing must revolve around and grow out of our ability to *listen*, that we are on the way to helping them become independent musicians. When students are truly listening, they have the ultimate tool with which they may begin to make artistic choices for themselves.

Defining the concept of artistic listening is very difficult. Artistic listening is not necessarily the same thing as *hearing*. Anyone playing music or attending a concert may be hearing sounds but may not be fully participating in the act of *listening* with depth, focus, intent and *understanding*. Hearing can be passive; listening, especially *artistic* listening must be *active*.

As performers, we can only capture our audiences' ears and hearts if we, too, are engaged in the act of listening with this kind of depth and intensity. As teachers, we can only help our students become musicians in their own right, when they learn to listen artistically and with full intent. Aaron Copland in his *Music and Imagination* writes:

*"Listening is a talent, and like any other talent or gift, we possess it in varying degrees.... I should say that there are two principal requisites for talented listening: first, the ability to open oneself up to musical experience; and secondly, the ability to evaluate critically that experience.... The ideal listening it seems to me, would combine the preparation of the trained professional with the innocence of the intuitive amateur.... The ideal listening, above all else, possesses the ability to lend himself to the power of music."*²

While listening is a talent, as Copland writes, we have the ability to encourage our students to reach their full potential in terms of their sensitivity to listening. The following ideas are different approaches to exploring and developing artistic listening.

Exploration of Sound Potential

One of the supreme joys of teaching pre-college students is observing their first encounter with the grand piano. With wonder and amazement, they "doodle" and experiment freely, their ears and minds open to possibilities. Often this magical exploration of the instrument is ignored or even discouraged in an effort to make the brief lesson or practice session as "productive" as possible. And yet, it is this very exploration of sound that helps the student develop an understanding of the nature of the instrument, to discover a wide range of creative sounds with which to experiment and, most importantly, to learn how to listen.

Understanding the Piano

Compared to harpsichordists and percussionists who routinely build and repair their own instruments, pianists are often the least knowledgeable about how their instrument actually generates sound. Without this understanding of how sound is produced, the student has a limited awareness of how to control the sound *quality*. In addition to acquiring a basic knowledge of the mechanics of the piano, one must also learn to listen to the overall acoustics of the instrument. Those who can hear the natural overtones and sympathetic vibrations that every note produces, more successfully match tones and learn to create the desired sound

Guided Experimentation

The exploration of less traditional sounds on the piano, such as plucking strings and playing harmonics and clusters helps the student become more familiar with the sound potential of the instrument while exposing them to diverse musical idioms. Fortunately, there are many excellent materials available for the pre-college piano student that encourage this type of sound exploration. Mary Elizabeth Clark's *Contempo Series* introduces elementary students to 20th-century idioms. In "Mountain Voices," Eloise Ristad allows the student to pluck strings, apply a pencil to the strings and explore a whole new range of sound possibilities.

Example 1

x or d indicates notes to be played on strings with the pencil eraser or mallet.
 Play very slowly and thoughtfully, enjoying the sounds.

Hold the damper pedal down throughout the piece.

Tremolo produced by bouncing or tapping pencil eraser on string

ELOISE RISTAD

"Mountain Voices" by Eloise Ristad from *Contempo 2: An Introduction to 20th Century Idioms for the Pianist*, edited by Mary Elizabeth Clark. Copyright © 1974 by Myklas Press. Used by Permission.

Improvisation can be another powerful tool for developing artistic listening. Unique sounds are valuable even if they are considered "harsh" or "ugly" in a more traditional context. Encouraging students to improvise strengthens the connection to sound because the inner ear is the composer. Often students can be encouraged to improvise by giving them a programmatic title or subject, motive, rhythm or other specified parameters. For example, students might

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improvise a piece comprised of various animal sounds, exploring different dynamics, registers and articulations to depict a given animal. In “Kangaroo Parade,” Stephen Chatman provides clear compositional guidelines and an actual score to serve as a point of departure for guided experimentation. If it is a regular part of the lesson from the onset, students will perceive improvisation as a natural way to explore the sound of the piano.

Example 2

• = Black and white note cluster within given pitch range

“Kangaroo Parade” by Stephen Chatman from *Amusements*, Bk. 1. Copyright © 1989 by Frederick Harris Music Co., Ltd. Used by Permission.

Listening Through Continuous Motion

In her book *A Soprano On her Head*, Ristad describes her meeting with Israeli painter Chaim Naher. She is deeply moved by his work and describes her experience: “I have the sensation in my body that I have when I am dancing.” Naher is thrilled with her response to his work and says, “You see it—you feel it! That is the way it must be. In any art there must be movement or it becomes static—dead.”³

As pianists we are at a slight disadvantage in that technically, the only physical control we have over our sound is on the initial attack. Playing almost any instrument other than piano, such as cello, violin, oboe or voice, motion or movement is not only an integral part of creating sound but also of *sustaining* sound. The cello bow creates the initial sound and then shapes and carries it to the next. The performer is then more likely to follow each sound through to the next with artistic listening because of the continual physical motion. The air blown through the oboe reed, or the breath of a singer creates the initial tone and then also sustains the sound to melt seamlessly into the next pitch. Again, the performer is more likely to be listening with artistic focus because the continuous physical motion forces him to remain engaged *between* the notes. As Schnabel writes, it is the “pauses between the notes—ah, that is where the art resides!” Since we, as pianists, do not have an actual physical motion that will sustain the sound, we must create the illusion of continual sound by listening with our inner hearing and by feeling the internal continual motion to sustain the melodic phrase.

Continual Motion as a Tool to Sustain Line

How does one actually bring the concept of continuous motion into our sound? When we speak of continuous motion, we actually refer to an imperceptible motion that is only felt internally. However, for us to learn this internal continual motion, we must first practice moving “out loud.” Various explorations both at and away from the piano may be helpful.

A lovely Hungarian beginning piano method entitled, *Child Playing the Piano* by Aszalos Tunde, encourages sound exploration and listening from the very first lesson. In a piece called “The Eagle and the Sparrow” the child is asked to hold a middle range F-sharp with the left hand finger 3, and play a ringing forte staccato tone in the right hand (also finger 3), followed by a quieter “echo” staccato tone on the same note. The student is encouraged to listen to the way the sound through the sympathetic vibrations of the silently held F-sharp, can “ring out” and “swirl around” in a continuous flowing motion.

Example 3

Viszra
Zurück
Back

“The Eagle and the Sparrow” by Aszalos Tunde from *A zongorazo gyermek (Child Playing the Piano)* Copyright © 1991 by Harmadik kiadas.

As an introduction to the piece, a few of the following exercises may encourage a child to begin listening to the “space” between the sounds:

1. Before the child plays the piece, ask her to sit under the piano to listen to the first sound as the teacher plays. A directive such as, “close your eyes and listen to the way that the sound swirls around your ears,” may guide the child to be sensitive to the continual motion in the sound. By being directly underneath the soundboard, the child will be able to sense the vibrations as well as hear the sound. (see figure 1)
2. A second step might be to have the child stand on a chair with her head inside the open lid of the grand piano or her ear pressed close to the open lid of an upright piano. This time with closed eyes, she might move her arms and upper body in the way that she hears the sound floating around her head. (see figure 2)
3. The next step is to sit together on the piano bench as the teacher plays and have the child listen for the “bell-like”

Figure 1



Figure 2



quality of the first tone and be aware of the ringing until it completely disappears. Again, slow continuous movement of one arm in a rainbow arc will help the child remain focused on the sound as it dies away. Often the child will listen and move quietly entranced for a very long time.

After these initial games, the child may be ready to listen in a deeper way beyond the notes themselves as she plays the piece.

Continual Motion to Create an Undulating Rhythmic Pulse

Abby Whiteside, in her book *Indispensables of Piano Playing*, writes at length of the importance of rhythm in all music making. She defines rhythm in the following way: “I feel strongly that (the term) rhythm should never be used for

meter and note values, but be reserved for that continuous undulating action which once started, is impelled to carry the entire musical performance to a close.” She also writes: “Rhythm is the most potent of all forces which influences listening. Rhythm channels the emotional surge which the music creates if the piano is beautifully played.”⁴

In Mozart’s *Fantasy in D Minor, K. 397*, the difficulty is not in sustaining melody, but in hearing and feeling the rhythmic and harmonic pulse, which carries the music forward so it doesn’t “bog down” in the individual notes. The challenge is that the individual notes in the opening of the *Fantasy* are not heard and felt in forward moving gestures. Often, a performance by a student may sound stagnant. For this slightly different goal, the following exercises may be helpful:

1. This movement exercise is taken from *A Soprano on Her Head* in the chapter entitled “Shall We Dance?” Ristad encourages a student having difficulty feeling “free” in a similar passage to place her hands against Ristad’s, and to move her hands with slight pressure in the way that she thinks the music should feel. By placing her hands against her teacher’s, there is just the right amount of resistance for her to feel the motion to the core of her physical being.⁵
2. Next, ask the student to play the outlining harmonies in blocked chords, perhaps two chords for each measure. In this way, without all of the intermediary notes, the student may focus on how the harmony becomes the underlying rhythm, which propels the music forward.
3. The next step is to ask the student to play the passage again with blocked chords and sing the written moving line.
4. The student will now be ready to play the passage as written, while *internally* listening to and feeling the motion.

Developing An Aural Image

Take a moment and silently hear the opening of *Für Elise* in your head. Despite different musical visions of tempo, melodic inflection, pacing, dynamics and sound quality, we each have the ability to hear it in our inner ear. This is exactly what we want for our students: the ability to make independent decisions regarding the music’s sound.

Because of the nature of the instrument, pianists can do absolutely nothing to alter the sound once the hammer has made contact with the string. As a result, it is imperative that we have an aural image of the sound *before* we actually play it. Evidence abounds that great pianists and teachers have emphasized the importance of hearing with the inner ear. Mozart’s ability to hear things internally was phenomenal as this letter attests:

“Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them. Those ideas that please me I retain in memory.... Provided I am not disturbed, my subject enlarges itself,

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*becomes methodized and defined, and the whole, though it be long, stands almost complete and finished in my mind, so that I can survey it, like a fine picture.... Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them, as it were, all at once.*⁶

Aaron Copland proclaimed in *Music And Imagination* :
*“The way music sounds, or the sonorous image as I call it, is nothing more than an auditory concept that floats in the mind of the executant or composer; a prethinking of the exact nature of the tones to be produced.... the sonorous image is a preoccupying concern to all musicians. In that phrase we include beauty and roundness of tone; its warmth, its depth, its ‘edge’, its balanced mixture with other tones, and its acoustical properties in any given environment.... You cannot produce a beautiful sonority or combination of sonorities without first hearing the imagined sound in the inner ear.”*⁷

The greatest musical performances always possess conviction and authenticity. When a performer has no clear aural image of the music, even the most technically competent performances may not communicate to the listener or sound convincing.

Renowned music educator Edwin Gordon distinguishes between imitation and what he refers to as *audiation* in the following way:

*“Audiation takes place when one hears and comprehends music silently, when the sound of music is no longer or never has been physically present.... Imitation is accomplished through someone else’s ears. Audiation is accomplished through one’s own ears. Imitation while singing a song is analogous to using tracing paper to copy a picture. Audiating while singing a song is analogous to visualizing and then drawing a picture.”*⁸

Silently Hearing

The following activities and exercises demonstrate effective ways to develop inner hearing:

- Have the student play four measures of a piece, silently hear the next four measures, resume playing the subsequent four measures and so on. This exercise serves as an excellent diagnostic tool for measuring the student’s ability to maintain inner pulse, track the score and hear with the inner ear.
- Isolate a given phrase, silently hear it and sing, move or play with the imagined sound.
- Perform and record a given passage two or three times, altering certain parameters each time (for example, dynamics, voicing, pacing and so forth). Prior to playing, the student must take the time to silently hear the pas-

sage. A student should be able to clearly articulate her musical intent, as well as evaluate the results. This is the basis of effective practice, artistic listening and developing one’s own ideas about how the music might unfold.

In “Perfect Day” by Lynn Freeman Olson, elementary students can experiment with phrasing, shaping and pacing that corresponds with different textual inflections. Discovering several ways to recite the text will naturally lead to a variety of interpretive possibilities.

Example 4

“Perfect Day” by Lynn Freeman Olson from *Music Pathways*, Solo A. Copyright © 1983 by Carl Fischer, Inc. Used by Permission.

Musical Understanding and Stylistic Awareness

Understanding the historical context, stylistic components and compositional process of a piece will help the student develop a concept of sound and form an intelligent and stylistic aural image. As teachers, we need to make sure students are exposed to a diverse palette of musical styles, learning how to examine music from a holistic perspective and listening to a variety of genres. The following activities help develop an aural awareness of stylistic characteristics in music:

- Compare several recordings of the same work by different artists, listening closely to subtle differences in sound, tone quality, pedaling, articulation, dynamics, voicing, and pacing. Encourage the student to consciously imitate excerpts. To do this, she must listen intently and “aurally transcribe” the sound; allow the student to describe the process. This procedure can also be used when imitating the teacher’s model and sound.
- Try performing an excerpt with varying stylistic characteristics, such as making a romantic piece sound baroque and vice versa. This exercise helps students become more

