

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Rehearsal Session 3 - Part one

Listening Skills

Learn how to develop your listening skills

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Now Ear This

More than anything else, it's your ears that work hardest in an Ensemble group. And this lesson will give you some simple hints and tips on how to improve. Nothing world-shattering - just a lot of experience and observation distilled down into one article, which you might like to save to disc and read later....

So why is this lesson in the practical pages of my Website? Because I want you to go through the material here with Guitar in hand. Just because this lesson seems simple doesn't mean it's not important to try to understand it *for real*. Acquiring a good listening ear is perhaps the most important area to work on when playing Ensemble, and it needs to be done while the Ensemble plays - it's a *practical* topic.

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Six Solo Skills

Consider the activities you carry out when you play a Solo Guitar...

- 1 READ Your eyes track the music
- 2 THINK Your brain decodes the notes and works out which fingers to move
- 3 PLAY Your fingers make the new notes
- 4 COUNT Your brain counts the rhythm
- 5 FEEL Your fingers feed back the sensation of touch
- 6 HEAR Your ears feed back the sensation of sound

And consider the difference between what you as a player do and what an audience does. They just listen.

- 6 HEAR

Just number six.

One sixth of the work you are doing!

So they do it quite well. And it's important that you do it well too, on top of all the other jobs, because if there's an audience, then you are playing for *them*, and you need to be aware of how they are perceiving what you play.

But which activity is the one which you can dispense with the most easily without the piece of music *falling apart*?

You have to keep reading...
 You have to keep thinking...
 You have to keep playing...
 You have to keep counting...
 You have to keep feeling...

That's right - when your brain is more than a bit occupied, it's 'listening' which is the first thing to go.

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Extra Ensemble Expertise

But consider what is different when you play Ensemble Guitar...

6 HEAR

And for two quite separate and very important reasons.

Because there are other players....

- You hear **more** than you *read, thought about, played* and *felt*.
- You may hear it **before or after** the elapsed time you *counted*.

Two compelling reasons to sit up and take note.

And there are other, subsidiary things to listen for too.

- When you play Solo Guitar, if you forget to change tone and volume on a repeat, you simply miss a trick.
- In Ensemble Guitar, if you forget, you can spoil the whole sound balance.

Who'd have thought that doing one third, one quarter or even less of the total work might actually result in you having a greater responsibility for the overall sound balance than playing a Solo?

The one skill which is often the Solo Guitarist's *weakest* skill is the one we need to be **our strongest**.

But as it's the one skill which an audience uses, that's no bad thing, is it?

Let's get you thinking!

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Why Listen?

Try this simple quiz. I think you'll see what I'm getting at....

1. *Your right hand controls the tone.*
 Q How do you know the tone is good?
 A By listening
2. *Your right hand controls the rhythm.*
 Q How do you know you are in step with the other players?
 A By listening
3. *Your right hand controls volume and tone changes.*
 Q How do you know your volume and tone changes match the other players?
 A By listening
4. *Your left hand controls note pitch.*
 Q How do you know whether you have played the sharps and flats correctly?
 A By juggling. No - I was just seeing whether you had glazed over or not! By listening
5. *Your left hand controls note integrity.*
 Q How you do know if you are free from buzzes and mis-frets?
 A By listening
6. *Your eyes control what you read.*
 Q How do you know if you've misread?
 A By listening
7. *Your ears are responsible for tuning the guitar.*
 Q How do you know if your guitar has gone out of tune?
 A By listening

8. *Your whole self is responsible for making you the guitarist you are.*

Q How do you know if you are improving?

A By listening

You can laugh - OK - it was a silly quiz. But there are two more questions to ask yourself before you collapse in a belly laugh...

1. Q How does an audience judge your playing?

A By listening!

2. Q How can you open your mind and improve your playing and enjoyment?

A By listening!

Now you can see where, as they say, I'm coming from!

And if you *will* listen, what shall I tell you? Well, here goes....

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Listen to what?

Hearing skills. Listening skills. Yes, but listening to what?

"The music" - OK - a good first answer. But there's more.

At a noisy party, how do you hear conversation better? By lip-reading to back up what you hear with visual clues.

And the same principle applies playing music. To hear more clearly your music in an Ensemble, you need visual clues. And these clues are simply the notes on the page.

If, by lip reading, you can help your ears "make out" what you are hearing, then, try the same with Guitar...

If, from seeing the notes, you know what you expect to hear, then you can hear much more clearly the notes you want to hear, and be alerted to any problems with them.

Take a peep again at the [music](#) we went through in our [rehearsal](#). Concentrate on the middle line right now. It's a standing joke amongst altos in choirs that the middle line is always, always, indescribably naff. That's fighting talk to an arranger like me! A guitar is capable of things that no singer can sing - repeated jumps of major sevenths and diminished fifths for a start! - but any good arranger will write not for the guitar but for the guitarist; indeed for the person inside the guitarist. It is much more rewarding if every part of the Ensemble has a line to play which is musically interesting.

I like to think that the middle part of the [Bach Cantata](#) is singable. And sightsinging is a most powerful ally in reading music. Whatever your vocal range, it should be possible to sight sing the middle line. Sightsinging isn't about vocal quality. It isn't about becoming a good singer. It is simpler than that, and yet bigger than that. Sightsinging is your chance to connect your eyes to your ears without the hassle of playing an instrument! If *you* can't tell your ears what to hear, how can your *guitar* tell your ears what to hear?

Sightsinging is your brain's attempt to get your eyes to make your mouth instruct your ears what to hear.

If you can sightsing out loud, then it is easy to sightsing in your head, in the same way that reading out loud means you can read in your head, (except if you were my Grandmother, God Bless Her, whose lips used to work overtime when she tried to read silently). I can sense that you're starting to skip sentences and get a bit fraught with this. HANG ON! We're nearly there!

If your brain can tell your ears, via sightsinging, what the music sounds like, then your brain can tell your ears what to expect from your guitar. And if it can, then your brain is going to hear every detail, every nuance, every note and every squeak from your guitar. And you will enjoy music all the more.

What follows backs this up with a 10 point plan to improve your listening skills.

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