

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Rehearsal Session 3 - Part two

Listening Skills

Learn how to develop your listening skills

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Hear Hear! - a ten point plan

How can we "hear" better?

It's easy to think that sensitive ears are all that matters.
But hearing is not the same as listening.

This lesson isn't called Hearing Skills, it's called Listening Skills. For good reason.

Just as an eye for detail doesn't mean you have perfect vision, so an ear for music doesn't mean that you can hear a pin drop. A keen eye and a keen ear are both the product of not only picking up the information around you, but of processing it - making sense of it - knowing what it's telling you.

Indeed, it's your brain which does the "processing" I mentioned, and so it's your brain we have to sort out.

Let's map out a plan, and then see how we can put it in place.

You want to improve.
Which means learning.
Which means adding new skills.
Which means frustration as you learn them.
Which means you'll need to believe that the payoff justifies the work.

Which means you'll have to trust me when I tell you it does!

There's an old proverb along the lines of "God gives you one mouth but two ears, because listening is more important than speaking". And it's not so far removed from the world of Guitar, either. Listening to what you are doing is more important than just "doing"!

Here is a plan to help you sharpen *your* listening skills...

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Step 1 - Prepare

Now you are studying Ensemble Music, prepare your ears.

An untrained ear will only hear the tune. Consider this fact - in a symphony orchestra, 75% of the players aren't playing the tune. So what are they doing? Once you can hear, you might be surprised. Train your ears to listen to the whole of the music. You can begin the training by listening out for the bass-line in music. Pop music, Classical music - it matters not. Turn up the bass on the Hi-Fi if it helps you, but gradually you will hear much more of what goes on.

Try your local Record Library. String Quartet music is often available on loan both on tape and in score. So are motets and madrigals. Read the score as you listen. But please, don't just point to the score and say "we're here". Pick a part other than the tune and follow it. Strive to hear the instrument that plays it, the voice that sings it. Strive to hear the counter melody that the instrument weaves, or use the singer's words to home in on what they're singing.

Prepare your own music in the same way - know what you expect your line of music to sound like so that you can pick it out from the music in the room as you play.

A person can spot movement in a forest, so don't be surprised if you can learn to hear a moving phrase in a forest of other notes.

Prepare, prepare, prepare!

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Step 2 - Relax

More than anything, anxiety, tension and stress divert the brain from the messages coming in through the ears. There are many ways to achieve relaxation in the face of performance anxiety - I mention just a few in the [Class lessons](#). Eating bananas, abstaining from coffee, visualising the performance, sleeping with herb pillows, hypnotherapy, frontal lobotomy - all these ideas may help.

Herb Pillows. Sounds like a Country and Western Singer. Sorry, I digress.

But for the moment, try this - take two deep breaths (no, *not* at the same time - you'll burst!) - and let the air sigh out. As it goes, so will the tension. When the tension goes, you are at ease. When you are at ease, you will hear well.

I said, "YOU WILL HEAR WELL!"

Relax!

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Step 3 - Optimise

Optimise how you hear. Read on and this might make a little more sense.

For the moment, just follow this suggestion :- if the size of the room permits it, sit in a circle, all facing each other. Not only will it be easier to hear each other, but everyone in the Ensemble will enjoy the same listening conditions.

Other seating positions end up with some players on the end of a long row (hearing everything through one ear) while others are in the middle (hearing in stereo). Or some players sitting in the back row (hearing little of the front row, because the front guitars are facing away and have a large sound absorbent body in the way) and some in the front (hearing the back row breathing down their necks).

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Step 4 - Concentrate

As you play, you have to read, or there is nothing to play.

As you play, you have to finger the notes, or there is nothing to play.

As you play, you have to pluck the strings, or there is nothing to play.

As you play, you have to count, or there is nothing to play.

Don't forget to listen. It's the one part of the job that can get forgotten. Totally forgotten.

You *can* play without listening. And kid yourself that you're playing well. The audience might not agree!

Concentrate!

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Step 5 - Focus and Filter

As you play there is a whole blend of wanted and unwanted sounds.

Unwanted sounds include mistakes and squeaks - don't let them surprise or interrupt you. If you practise at home, unwanted sounds also include other people in the house, the sound of your cat clawing the furniture, the sound of the washing machine emptying all over the

floor, the smoke alarm....

Wanted sounds is pretty much all the rest.

Learn to discriminate in what you hear. Filter out the background noise - it is irrelevant.

Focus and Filter!

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Step 6 - Process and Pigeonhole

Hearing what is going on is more than listening to everything; it's processing the information you hear so that you can act on it. To process what you hear effectively, you have to divide and conquer the cacophony.

Separate in your mind your neighbours' notes from yours.

Separate low notes from high.

Separate notes to your left from those to your right.

In a large ensemble, separate the notes in front of you from the notes behind, as well.

Once you've done all this, you can process each part of the soundfield in turn. You will have learned how to hear *along* each line of music, instead of *across* each chord. This is a big step to take. Trust me - it's difficult but so worthwhile.

Process and Pigeonhole!

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Step 7 - Start Straightaway

The start of the note - the *transient* is very quick, but it contains two pieces of information that you should listen out for and use.

- Timing
If the start of *your* note is earlier or later than those around you, the music is "coming apart" and someone is out of time. Meet halfway with those around you - if you are late, speed up, if you are early slow down. If they do the same, the fault will "heal up" quickly. And if the fault is not yours, but theirs, do the same, and they will benefit likewise.
Make the correction now, not when you are a complete note adrift and no longer sure whether you are a note early or a note late!
Use the structure of the music (usually the first beat of the bar has a strong bass note) to reinforce where you are in the music and what you are hearing.
- Tone
The transient part of the note is the place most likely to buzz if the left hand is not placed correctly. As the string amplitude settles, the buzz subsides, so don't wait too long before deciding what you hear. A buzz which is detected early on in the note means a finger is a little out of place. Use the rest of the note to watch, to feel and to think what needs doing so that the next note is pure. Don't wait till the whole note buzzes. If you do, the hand is so far misplaced that it's difficult to rescue the music instantly.

Listening? Start Straightaway!

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Step 8 - Listen at Length

After the transient, the rest of the note rings out. Listen carefully. Just like the transient, it contains several pieces of important information.

- Pitch
What you hear will tell you whether someone has played a wrong note. Listen more carefully and you will know who it is. If it is you, listen to determine whether the note is
 - The correct string, but the left hand has missed
 - The wrong string, the right hand has missed
 - The wrong pitch, the brain has forgotten the key signature
- Tuning
What you hear will tell you whether all the guitars are in tune. Listen more carefully and you will know which guitar is wrong. Listen yet more carefully and you will know which string needs tuning.
I'm not joking - this is for real!
- Interpretation
What you hear will tell you whether you have, for example, forgotten the volume and tone change on the repeat. If you have made an interpretational slip like this, correct it one note later. If your tone or volume are wrong, then they are wrong every time you play a note. If you are truly listening it should not take you 4 bars of playing before you realise you are wrong. One note should be enough!

Listen. At length.

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Step 9 - Improve

If you are hard working in steps one to eight, step nine is automatic!

Make sure Step 9 happens - it's your proof that Steps one to eight have!

Improve!

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Step 10 - Start again

Learning to listen is not a five minute job, it is a continual process. Step 9 depends on Step 1, Step 2 and all the others. But Step 1 is, itself, easier to do if you have already started to improve.

Step 1 leads to Step 9. Step 10 says start over, with Step 1 again. But this is not circular advice, this constant improvement of your skills means that every step spirals you upward in ability and confidence.

Isn't that what you want?



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