Listening - aural skills

excerpts from the Late Starters Handbook:

'**Music Engagement at mid-life on the Guitar'** by Bruce Stewart

Aptitude

Where does musical ability come from – are we born with it or do we gain it through practice? This debate is still continuing, although new research has shed light on the controversy (Gavin, 2001)[p52]. My experience teaching late starters [those in their 50's] has proven that nearly all students in this age group have been successful learners. Their success depended on their motivation. I believe, late starters need time and encouragement where aural skills are concerned, as new learning requires interaction with what they already know (Bruning, 1999)[p6]. For the late starter, listening as a musician is a foreign concept. Listening skills usually improve dramatically after several months, when the late starter can make tangible reference to the sounds they are playing. Once again the nature/nurture debate flares; perhaps it boils down to the individual gaining practical exposure to music, and the motivation to practice (Gavin, 2001)[p53].

Musician and non-musician

Recent research examining the differences between musicians and non-musicians found that students of high musical ability did not necessarily show early promise, but that parents and teachers actively encouraged them (Gavin, 2001)[p55]. Other studies focusing on earliest musical memory, found that musicians recalled actively participating as children. More than likely their participation followed stages of passive listening – perhaps making the connection between a musician's actions and the sound they heard (Gavin, 2001)[p59]. Other factors in the study were family support and teacher interplay (Gavin, 2001)[p59]. The study concludes that the difference between musicians and non-musicians lies in the early appearance of interest, expressed through participation, coupled with support and encouragement from adults possessing expertise (Gavin, 2001)[p59].

Expertise

"To the uninitiated, expert knowledge is mysterious and inaccessible and based upon skills or intellect beyond the non-expert. To the cognitivist, however expertise is based on large banks of specific and organised knowledge" (Gavin, 2001)[p52].

Expert music performance reveals that retained information is not subject to interference upon recall and performance appears to be automated, i.e. not dependant on memory limitations, running to completion and without being subject to introspection (Gavin, 2001)[p53]. Quick pattern recognition is another facet to expert performance. One study found that young musicians with the highest levels of skill were practicing 5 to 8 times more than those with lower levels – evidence of 'practice

that makes perfect', rather than inherited genius (Gavin, 2001)[p53]. Also the measure of a child's refusal to except defeat in spite of early failed attempts, is evidence that motivation and perseverance play a role in expert performance. Therefore to become an expert musician, one needs motivation and encouragement to change skill levels and the incentive to practice (Gavin, 2001)[p54].

The classical approach to music learning

Traditional classical methods of learning music favour sight reading abilities – the interpretation of written notes takes precedence over aural approaches (Coff, 1998)[p3]. Students are not given the opportunity to listen to recordings of the beginning pieces that they are to study (Coff, 1998)[p3]. The fear is that students will become dependent on learning by rote rather than developing sight reading skills. Therefore, students read pieces note by note when learning and playing (Coff, 1998)[p3].

The Suzuki Method

In the 1920's, while studying violin in Germany, Dr Shinichi Suzuki marvelled at the way in which children learn to speak their own language. The method parents used to teach their children to speak, is the method Dr Suzuki believed to be ideal for teaching music to the very young (Komlos, 2005)[p1]. Refuting the commonly accepted idea that talent must be inherited, Suzuki placed great emphasis on the environment of the child and developing the child's self-worth (Komlos, 2005)[p1].

The Suzuki method emphasizes passive modes of learning – watching and listening (Coff, 1998)[p2]. Students are encouraged to listen to recordings of the music being studied, on a daily basis (Komlos, 2005)[p2]. Recordings of subsequent pieces and general repertoire are played as 'background music' at low volume levels each day. As with language acquisition this 'immersion' enhances learning through repeated exposure with Suzuki students developing an internal model of their studies (Coff, 1998)]p2]. Consequently, the music is memorized and the students internalise nuances of pitch, tone and timing as demonstrated by the recordings (Coff, 1998)[p3]. Suzuki teachers defer notation reading until the student has mastery of the basic skills for playing and sufficiently developed musical memory (Coff, 1998)[p3].

Listening

Late starters should never underestimate their listening skills (Vella, 2000)[p30]. Listeners have the luxury of absorbing music free of the performance making associations as they wish, whereas the performer appears to be concerned about performance criteria (Vella, 2000)[p24]. Make sure before playing that you know the sound of the piece in question. If the piece is new, listen to it regularly, striving to recall the tune in your imagination unassisted by your instrument. Performance skills take a long time to develop but listening skills can be developed in relatively short time (Vella, 2000)[p25].

There are many ways of listening to music. Fundamentally they may be referred to as *holistic* listening – listening to overall sound with little attention to detail, and *analytical* listening which entails listening to the organization or construction of music (Vella, 2000)[p30]. The perception of musical events comes under the domain of music cognition, encompassing music and psychology. It has to do with the way listeners perceive, differentiate, organize, remember and predict musical events (Vella, 2000)[p10]. One of the most important functions of analytical listening is determining the function of one sound in relationship to others in the music you listen to (Vella, 2000)[p32]. To do so, you will have to separate the sounds you hear on a CD recording into categories – perhaps bass guitar and snare drum. Listen for the bass and try to imagine what the bassist is playing. Similarly, listen to the snare drum – does it sound regular? If so, what beats does it fall on? Many of my students face this sort of analysis while learning guitar. Ideally the late starter could gain important insights, by setting aside a couple of months prior to tuition, to practice analytical listening, comparing criteria on several CD's. To do this you will have to make decisions about what you are going to listen for (Vella, 2000)[p38]. Listening, in this sense will be a means of categorization, requiring that you separate the instrument you are focusing on (Vella, 2000)[p38].

Bibliography

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