

## LEARNING TO PLAY MUSIC 'BY EAR'

### What does 'playing by ear' mean and why is it useful in the classroom?

- 'Playing by ear' means relying on aural perception more than usual, thereby being less reliant on written notation to understand, play and compose music.
- It useful because the better children understand how to *really* listen the better they will become as musicians as time passes.

### What is the best way of introducing playing by ear?

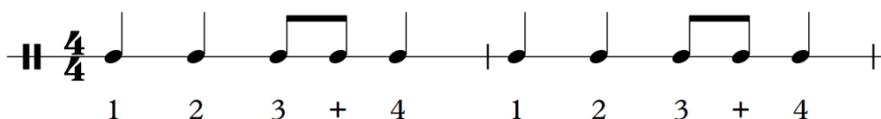
- As with much classroom music, begin with rhythm.
- For example, with all your class sitting in a horseshoe or circle, practice a 'pass the pulse' activity.

Using the pulse pattern below ask each child to clap/tap/play one pulse / beat, which they then 'pass' to the next child. The aim is to get them all to *really* listen and keep the pulse 'in time' i.e. steady.



*Note: the notation here is for teacher benefit. Don't write it down for the children - in the first instance at least.*

- Don't hesitate to stop or correct them if the pulse becomes unsteady.
- From that move onto copy patterns i.e. teacher claps / taps a rhythm pattern which all copy. For example:



- There are endless variations on this you can experiment with: different rhythm patterns; the whole class copying back; one person copying back; children making up their own rhythms.

- At this stage I recommend introducing dynamics (loud and soft) and tempo (speed of pulse) variations
- This creates added interest and also encourages the children to concentrate and listen even harder. Make sure they do put the dynamics into practice. Stop and do it again if they don't!
- All of these activities should be focussed primarily on *concentrated listening*. Try to keep the physical activity relatively uncomplicated because you want their focus of attention to be on sound, not movement.

### **What is the next step in 'playing by ear'?**

- As a break from practical activity try some exercises based on listening to recorded music. Virtually any style, genre or format is fine for this.
- Here are some key questions for focussed listening which will help to develop the children's 'musical ear'.
  - What do you hear in the music?
  - What is making those sounds?
  - Focus on a particular sound: what is it doing?
  - Are the sounds you are focussing on loud or soft?
  - Are the sounds you are focussing on made up of long notes, short notes or both?
  - Can you name one or more instruments you are focussing on?
  - What kind of timbre (quality of sound) does an instrument you are focussed on make e.g. mellow, harsh, breathy etc.?
  - Is there a pulse to the music?
  - If there is a pulse to the music is it fast, slow or moderate?
- The purpose of this style of questioning is not about identifying a 'correct' answer but rather to get the pupils to really focus on the music and dig 'deeper' into it, the more they listen to it.
- By the time you have tried an exercise like this your class is probably beginning to become better at *really concentrating* on the sounds they are hearing.
- This will then help them when playing and creating their own music.

### **So, what's next?**

- Introduce untuned percussion and experiment with the sounds they can make.
- After demonstrating and/or exploring the sounds talk about how they might be described.
- For example: shaking and 'rain' sounds (shakers, maracas, tambourines); clicks (wood sticks); clangs (cowbells, triangles); bangs (drums), scrapes (guiro / scrapers), crashes (cymbals, gongs)

- Lay down some musical rules / parameters such as:

Create a pulse

Make up a repeating pattern

Get gradually louder

Get gradually softer

Play short fast notes

Have big gaps (silences) between each note

- Then (ideally...if your class is ready for it!), break the class into say, 3 groups and ask each group to make a short piece of music based on the parameters you have just explained.
- As with all the other exercises, explain the purpose is not to make noise for the sake of it, but to *really listen* to the quality of the sounds the instruments can make and experiment with them.
- Once you have some musical ideas created, ask each group to play them back to the other groups. Encourage really focussed listening to each group and then apply the same kind of questions used with the recorded music exercise above.

### **All those untuned percussion instruments are driving me mad! What next?**

- Except for the very youngest children, using only untuned percussion will soon feel limited, so move onto pitched/tuned percussion.
- You can add these in to the untuned instruments exercises above to create much more musical interest and variation.
- But before you do so take some time explore these tuned percussion instruments more fully (see below).

### **Using tuned / pitched percussion to develop the 'musical ear'**

- Pitch is probably the most complex aspect of musical understanding, so build it steadily and carefully.

#### **Stage 1:**

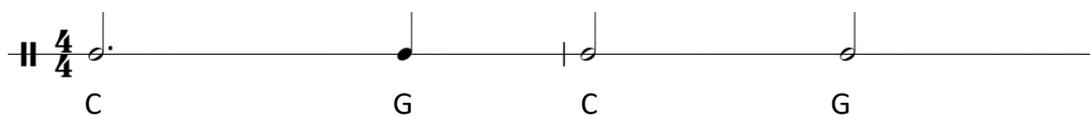
\* Using your glockenspiels, xylophones etc. (at least 2 pupils per instrument to get as many as possible playing at once) explain that the notes are set out in 'steps'.

\* Get the pupils to experiment with these so they understand that the physically longer notes on the left are lower in pitch than the physically shorter notes are on the right.

\* Be prepared to sing notes to demonstrate high /low and different pitches. Encourage the children to do the same.

### Stage 2:

\* Next try some very simple aural exercises e.g. using notes C and G make a very simple pattern (see below):



\*Ask them to 'copy back' what you have just played.

\*Try to avoid telling them which ones are note C and which ones are note G. This way they are really having to use their ear to work it out for themselves.

### Stage 3:

\*You can increase the complexity depending on the age/ability of the children.

\*For example, instead of using C and G use two adjacent note e.g. D and E

\*You can also increase complexity by making the copy back rhythms longer e.g. 4 bars instead of 2 bars.

### Stage 4:

\*Take a simple repetitive melody e.g. the 'Jingle Bells' chorus or 'Frere Jacques' and ask the pupils to try and find the correct pitched notes themselves.

### Useful vocabulary

<b>Notation:</b> written down music	<b>Bar:</b> a group of beats
<b>Beat:</b> the underlying pulse of the music	<b>Duration:</b> length of notes
<b>Rhythm:</b> note values (duration) & patterns	<b>Dynamics:</b> volume (loud / soft)
<b>Tuned percussion:</b> pitched (with note names)	<b>Untuned percussion:</b> drums, shakers etc.
<b>Tempo:</b> the speed of the pulse / beat	<b>Melody:</b> the tune
<b>Pitch:</b> how high or low a note is	<b>Genre:</b> style / type of music