

# Training Active Audience Members Through Deeper Listening

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We all know that it is an ongoing and important work to strive to educate future audience members, who are both our students and ourselves, to actively listen and engage. However, as any good musician can attest, there is a difference between hearing and listening. Whereas hearing is more generalized and passive, listening is a more active activity that is more intentional and involves going beyond hearing towards engagement with more understanding and meaning making.

Learning how to listen is important for musicians. How often as music teachers have we realized that we are sharing some music and listening to it, only to realize that many of our students may be only passive hearers, not focused listeners. Learning to listen is of course a focus of many general music classes, but also important for ensemble students, both for their own playing and the good of the overall sound of the group. But, too often, music teachers do not seem to have a systematic approach or plan for how to teach their students to listen.

## Something to Hang Your Hat On

How do we teach people to listen? One approach I have found success with is to find something students can aurally ‘hang their hat on.’ There is a range of options for what that ‘something’ can be. For those who are beginners it can be as simple as a lyric or a melodic phrase, and for those who are more advanced it might be the type of harmony or instrumentation they are hearing while they try to listen. Regardless of whether students are not listening because they have no musical knowledge on which to ‘hang their hat’ or whether they are advanced players who may check out because they ‘got the answer’ already, helping students listen can involve the same approach because what we want is constant and ongoing engagement with what they are hearing, in order to teach them to listen for a lifetime.

## Deep Listening

Pauline Oliveros talked extensively about “Deep Listening” and the difference between hearing and listening. As she puts it, “listening is a lifetime practice that depends on accumulated experiences with sound...” (Oliveros, 2015). Early in my music education career, Oliveros’ work, and her words, inspired me to find a way to help children learn to listen more deeply, and so for many years now, I have worked to develop an approach to teaching listening with music students that I refer to as ‘Deeper Listening for Learning.’

This project began when I was teaching in a K-12 position and would teach the same students over the course of their elementary and secondary school years, so I had a built-in longitudinal study. I began with the desire for my students to listen to music more intently, and for longer periods of time, with a growing sense of interest and discovery. I wanted them to interact with the music and move beyond hearing towards listening. Over the course of a decade of teaching, I created many permutations of the worksheet I share with you at the end of this article, as well as the approach I outline below for helping students find ways to listen deeper.

## Deeper Listening for Learning

First, I begin by explaining to students the notion that there are some fundamental concepts that all music shares, regardless of genre, and secondly, that it is fundamentally important to not talk while hearing music if one wants to truly listen. Then, I encouraged them to listen for different concepts each time they listened, and, as I put it, to “be fair” we should always listen to each piece a minimum of three times before deciding if we liked it or not. I explained to them that it would not be fair to decide if we liked a person or not until we had at least talked to them (or played with them at recess) at least three times, so we should treat music similarly; like a potential new friend.

Without telling the students, I simultaneously designed the listening the students would experience with a few guidelines in mind. I chose pieces, or segments of pieces, that were only about half a minute long, or less, for students who are beginners at this process to listen to. I also began with pieces that were likely to be familiar to them, including a mixture of movie tunes, folk music they likely would recognize, popular music selections of good quality, and musical excerpts they likely would recognize from the classical genres only sparingly. Over time, I increased the length of recordings, and the complexity of the musical choices, gradually. Therefore, students who started with me in the 3rd grade (about age 7-8) on this project (since it assumed students' ability to write) would by the 6th grade (age 11-12) be listening to pieces or excerpts as long as 2-3 minutes. To my delight and surprise, by the time they reached 9th grade (age 14-15) many of these students would voluntarily sign up for trips to the opera and symphony, or come to my classroom during their lunch breaks for 'listen-ins' where we could listen to whole works three times in a row! But, beyond their seeming increase in attention span and interest, what was most remarkable to me was the students' markedly more complex and interesting ways of describing what they were listening for while they were listening. I found students explaining concepts to me in ways that were very sophisticated, and involved a depth of musical understanding going far beyond yes-or-no and black-or-white answers. For example, on one field trip to the opera house, one 15 year-old young man who had participated in Deeper Listening exercises since he was a fifth grader, was heard at intermission arguing with an older high school student about how a compound meter from the overture had changed to a simple meter in the later aria using the same motif! Each student, of course, is different, but I share the information below in the hopes that you and your students might derive some benefit from this systematic approach to music listening.

## The Process

First, I either pass out a copy of the chart attached to the end of this article, or I post it and pass out notebooks to the students. Next, I inform the students that they will hear the excerpt three times. Then, we talk about the items they should fill in on the chart during each listening. I ask them to start with just the first two boxes, and then jump to the note at the bottom to free write or draw the colors that this work elicits in their mind and include either a scene, story plot, or concept. I explain that they must start writing when the music starts, and must write or draw until the music stops. When the music stops students must cease writing or drawing and put their pencils down.

We then discuss how to listen for a melody, and that they can circle or write down while they are listening whether the tune is mostly stepwise or mostly leaps, and whether it is conjunct, disjunct, or tonal or tuneful. With younger students I use only the terms flowy, jumpy, and tuneful. Then, I ask the group for more suggestions to add to the chart. I add the ones that are appropriate, and make sure they can and should select more than one item in the melody box. Next we talk about harmony, and while I let students see the words monophonic, homophonic, and polyphonic at all ages, I explain that these mean they should be listening to determine if they think, harmonically, that there is only one main musical line (no matter how many people are singing or playing at once together), or an accompanied line such as one hears on most songs on the radio, or if there are many musical lines happening at the same time that seem equally important. I then play a very short example of each, usually via a video clip so they can see how many people are on stage and who is singing or playing which lines. Then I show them an example of dissonance and consonance. More advanced students should circle or write whether it is dissonant or consonant, but beginners often just circle one of the three main choices: monophony, homophony, or polyphony. I then again ask the students if they have ideas to add to this category, and we add them into that box.

Now, I remind them again that it's time to listen without speaking and to pick up their pencils. I then play the music excerpt and model listening in silence and writing in my own notebook or on my own handout. As I stated earlier, I start with a very short excerpt of half a minute or so, but gradually increase this as the students get more practice with the process. After the music stops, I model putting my pencil down. I then say very little, except to point out perhaps what the melody might be, and then play the excerpt a second time, again modeling what the students are doing. After the second playing, I might ask them what they think the harmony is, and give a little nudge towards the correct answer. Then we listen a third time, and I again model what the students are doing while they listen. After this third listening, I ask the students to share what they drew or wrote about if they wish. I also take a poll for what colors they chose, which I tally on the board. (It is interesting to the students, often, that many of them choose similar colors!) Only then do I ask the students to indicate, by a show of hands, whether

or not they liked the music we just listened to. It is important to wait and ask this after the students have actively listened three times, not before they're familiar with the music. Sometimes I ask one student to share what they liked about it, or to share what they didn't like about it. I always remind students that it is very important to have your own opinion about a piece of music, especially after you have given it three chances to make an impression on you. That means, in essence, that they should not like it just because I like it or their friends like it. This is important to say, aloud, so that students are very aware that the goal of these exercises is deeper listening, not learning to like a certain type of music. They should be reminded often that this exercise will help them listen more deeply to ALL types of music.

As the weeks go on, we practice more, and one at a time we add meter, rhythmic ideas, instrumentation, and timbre into the listening exercises. When I introduce each concept, I explain each term, show an example, and ask students to add their own options to each box. As they get older, we will continue to add to all of the boxes as we learn new concepts in our classwork and rehearsals. Also, as time goes on, the length of time the students can listen increases, and as they begin to learn new ensemble pieces, I often introduce them this way first. Once they have really spent time with the music aurally, I have found that often rehearsals and performances come together more quickly and with a greater sense of musicality and joy. I hope you and your students can use all or part of this systematic approach and I look forward to hearing from some of you how you change it to make deeper listening practices a part of your own ways of teaching and learning music.

## References

Oliveros, P. (2015, November). The difference between hearing and listening [Video]. TED Conferences.  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_QHfOuRrJB9](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QHfOuRrJB9)

## Listening Template

Name of Work \_\_\_\_\_

Composer(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Genre \_\_\_\_\_

<p><b>Melody:</b></p> <p>Stepwise</p> <p>Mostly leaps</p> <p>Conjunct (flowy)</p> <p>Disjunct (jumpy)</p> <p>Tuneful (tonal)</p>	<p><b>Harmony:</b></p> <p>Monophonic (one line)</p> <p>Homophonic (accompanied line)</p> <p>Polyphonic (multiple important lines)</p> <p>Mostly Dissonant or Consonant?</p>
<p><b>Meter:</b></p> <p>Duple or Triple</p> <p>Simple or Compound</p> <p>Does it change?</p> <p>Are there shifts?</p>	<p><b>Rhythmic ideas:</b></p> <p>Syncopation</p> <p>Triplets</p> <p>Hemiola</p> <p>Stop time</p>
<p><b>Instrumentation:</b></p> <p>Voice: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass</p> <p>Woodwinds: flute, clarinet, sax, oboe, bassoon</p> <p>Brass: trumpet, French horn, trombone, tube</p> <p>Percussion: drums, marimba, chimes, cymbals</p> <p>Strings: violin, viola, cello, bass</p> <p>Piano</p> <p>Harp</p> <p>Other instruments:</p>	<p><b>Timbre:</b></p> <p>Bright</p> <p>Dull</p> <p>Dark</p> <p>Reedy</p> <p>Mellow</p> <p>Warm</p> <p>Harsh</p>

Free write or draw the colors this work elicits in your mind and either a scene, story plot, or concept. You must write or draw until the music stops, when the music stops you must cease writing or drawing.