

Teaching Ear Playing in Formal Education Settings:
Strategies from Three Master Fiddlers
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Research suggests that the skill of playing by ear is foundational to overall musicianship, including the skills of sight-reading, improvisation, and playing by memory (McPherson & Gabrielsson, 2002; Woody, 2012), yet in mainstream Western culture, instruction in playing music by ear has not often been included in formal education settings (Green, 2008; Woody, 2012). While Green (2006) lists learning by ear as a characteristic of informal learning, there are also many examples in aural traditions in which students are taught to play by ear in formal settings (McLucas, 2010) which may more directly apply to the development of formal pedagogies for ear playing. The purpose of this instrumental multiple case study was to gather strategies used by expert teacher/instrumentalists deeply rooted in aural traditions as they teach students to learn to play music by ear.

Data collected from interviews with and observations of three American-born experts in Irish, Arabic, and old-time American aural traditions, along with relevant documents, were analyzed within case, across case, and synthesized using multi-level coding procedures. Findings illuminated similar approaches and priorities, thoughtfully adapted for 21st century American students from the basic rote imitation model participants had learned through to include contextual, purposeful analysis of form, meter, and harmony. All participants encouraged students to develop individual musical voices grounded within the tradition, and emphasized the inadequacy of notation and the importance of learning through watching, listening, and experiencing.

When learning music by ear, to know a piece of music is to have it memorized, and participants' strategies necessarily focused on remembering the music aurally, through the motions by which the body draws the proper sounds from the instrument (kinesthetically), and through recognizing the structure and patterns inherent in the music. Teachers were making music continually throughout the lesson, modeling for students and playing along with them while occasionally drawing students' attentions to issues of intonation (pitch) or bowing (rhythm), or posing analytical questions (i.e. which beat is that B on?). Scaffolding strategies included the careful selection of repertoire and the length of phrase initially presented to students for imitation; as phrase lengths increased, students necessarily relied less on watching and imitating and more on an integrated aural-kinesthetic comprehension. Participants demonstrated the characteristics of expert teachers as described in music education literature, expecting high standards from students, customizing instruction, and suggesting practice strategies, while successfully encouraging a holistic learning process independent of notation.

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Applications

Benefits of playing by ear include improved intonation, critical listening skills, and deep comprehension of the repertoire. While the development of music notation has facilitated the composition of longer, more complicated forms with parts played by unified sections in large ensembles, it may be in part the repertoire which has made the development of ear playing skills more challenging in some ensemble settings. Music educators in general music and instrumental ensemble settings may consider

- selecting repertoire featuring melodies, harmonies, and structural components at a level which students can learn by ear
- teaching students through modeling while focusing on way the **motions** made playing the instrument evoke the **sound** of the music, and connecting that sound and motion to purposeful **observation** of the repertoire's rhythmic, harmonic, and structural features
- prioritizing students' aural-kinesthetic comprehension while teaching with notation as well
- encouraging students to teach each other parts through modeling and imitation, supported by analysis
- building students' aural skills through the teaching and learning of music by ear
- reinforcing the concept that knowing a piece of music includes knowing how it goes (being able to audiate it) independent of aural and visual cues