

“Playing by Ear”: An Investigation of Definitions

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*Presented at the annual conference of the Pennsylvania Music Educators
Association
Hershey, PA
March 27-19, 2014*

ABSTRACT

The term “playing by ear” is used in varying ways among researchers, yet is often used without being defined explicitly in the field of music education, and presumably among the population at large. Reported definitions vary between the rote-style imitation used in the Suzuki method and the less specific interpretation one might find played by a popular guitarist or keyboard player. During a recent survey examining the likelihood of participants’ continued musical participation through adult life based on their method of music making (reading, by ear, and improvisation), the presumed variation in definitions of “playing by ear” posed a challenge while interpreting the data. This current, in-progress study seeks to determine how specific of a re-creation is assumed or expected when adults use the term “playing by ear,” and if age, gender, background, musical instrument or genres played are factors in a person's definition of the term “playing by ear.”

A questionnaire has been devised to determine the definitions of “playing by ear” among the general adult population. No specific group of the population is being targeted. Of the questionnaire’s two sections, the first section is designed to collect data concerning the five independent variables being examined; age, gender, background, and when relevant, musical instrument and genres played. The second section will gather participants’ definitions of the term “playing by ear.” Analysis will reveal the range of definitions among the participants, as well as seek to determine correlations between reported definitions and variables.

Applications to Teaching

- An awareness of the variety of possible definitions for the term “playing by ear” will aid in understanding students’ backgrounds and perceptions in the classroom.
- An understanding of students’ definitions of “playing by ear” will help teachers to provide effective direction in ear playing exercises.
- As harmonic and melodic instrumentalists may have different concepts of what is expected when playing by ear, the sharing of perspectives may be encouraged in the classroom.
- As a teacher, consideration of one’s own definitions and attitudes towards playing by ear may also aid in communication with students, and in the development of curriculum. For example,
 - Is playing by ear a purely imitative activity?
 - Is it appropriate while playing by ear to exercise personal choice/creativity?
 - Is there a place for playing by ear in the classroom or the rehearsal studio?
 - What kind of musician plays by ear? Or... what kind does not?
 - Do students perform any genres in which playing by ear might be appropriate?
 - Can playing by ear be taught? Should it be taught? Encouraged?
 - How might the skill of playing by ear prepare students for a musical life outside the classroom?