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*This article is also available on my website as a blog post:*

<https://fluteplayer.ca/2020/02/20/music-is-a-language-listening-is-important/>

## Music is a Language

If I was talking to you, and I suddenly paused in mid sentence, you would probably be able to anticipate the next \_\_\_\_\_ I was going to say.

This is because you know the language well, and you recognize common phrases and patterns instantly.

If I sang, "Happy birthday, to you, Happy birthday to you ....." you would probably be able to finish the song for me.

You learned this song the same way you learned your language. By hearing it often in the same context, you began to expect to hear it again in similar situations, and could predict when people would probably sing it. When it was sung, you always heard the entire melody, so you knew when it would begin, when it would end, and the special place in the middle that was always different depending on whose birthday it was. And it felt good to sing it, because it was in an environment of happy celebration (which often included cake!)

But why stop with just "Happy Birthday to You"?

You can learn any music the same way that you learned "Happy Birthday."

You can understand where it begins, where it ends, and the special places in the middle where something different happens. You can start without being prompted, and pick it up at any point to finish it. You can do this with a simple folk song or with a piece of complex classical music.

All you need to do is listen to it.

In the same way that as a baby you listened to your parents talking and absorbed your native language easily and accurately, you can listen to music and absorb the vocabulary and grammar of the language of music.

Every person can.

All you need to do is listen.

But you have to listen more than just once. Just like babies hear words many, many times before they begin to imitate the sounds, you need to listen to music repeatedly, until you can anticipate the next sound as easily as you can anticipate my next \_\_\_\_\_.

Then you will recognize the same patterns in other pieces of music, and anticipate when they will happen. And you will be pleasantly surprised if a composer does something slightly different from what you are expecting, and show you something new! In this way you will learn more patterns, the same way that we learn the meaning of a new word from its context in a sentence.

Congratulations! You can now speak the language of music.

Effortlessly, the same way that you understand what you are now reading.

## **OK, I get it. Now how do I do it?**

Your teacher will have many resources for helping you organize your listening. Approaches will vary depending on the needs of individual students. Here are some strategies to make learning easy by setting yourself up with a comprehensive listening program.

### Get your playback devices organized

Download your assigned playlist on to the device you will actually use to listen to it. Yes, download. Do not rely on streaming services. If your computer is in an office where you never listen to music, put it on your phone or tablet. Parents, make sure you both have all the music on both your phones. so it is instantly available at all times. If your child has their own device, make sure they have access to the music on it, but do not expect them to be responsible for doing all their listening unsupervised. Use decent external speakers or headphones - do not rely on the tinny internal speaker on most mobile devices. If you use CDs, burn several copies - one for the car, one for the stereo, one for backup when one gets lost or damaged.

### Listen repeatedly

Set your device to play the same track or playlist on repeat. You need to hear the same tune many times before you can confidently anticipate what comes next. Set a goal - listening to a piece 100 times before trying to play it yourself is not unreasonable.

### Listen ahead

Don't just listen to the piece you are working on right now. Alternate between listening to your current working piece and listening to the entire playlist. This allows you to look forward to the pieces you will be learning soon, reviews your memory of past pieces, and avoids listening fatigue from too much constant repetition of just one thing. Listen to other pieces for your instrument as well, not just the assigned repertoire.

### Consider your listening environment

Listening in the car is super convenient. It is a wonderful way to seize an opportunity, so do take advantage of it. But remember that inside a vehicle is a noisy environment - engine noise, traffic noise, etc. will mask many of the expressive elements of the music. This is fine if all you want to do is get to know the pitches and rhythm. But if you also want to anticipate dynamic variations, articulations, vibrato, and other nuances of phrasing that are not always written in the score, you need to listen in an environment where it is quiet enough to hear them. I recommend having a quiet time at home when you make a habit of listening to music.

### Use both passive and active listening

Let the music play in the background during quiet activities and meals, and when you are sitting in the car. This is passive listening. Active listening is when you engage with the music as it is playing. For a beginner, this can be as simple as beating time with feet or hands while listening, or moving freely to the music. More advanced students can alternate playing a section of the piece with listening to a section of the piece, or play along with the whole thing to feel how the melody fits with the accompaniment.

### Listen to a variety of versions of the same piece

Listening to different recordings of the same piece will draw your attention to the variety of nuances used by individual performers. Imitating these different ways of playing the same passage help you make your own artistic decisions about how to play it yourself.