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Active Listening Guide: Helping Your Students Engage With Music

The Listener's Job Description ¹

Music can seem intimidating. It seems like you have to know a lot. What if you don't understand the music? What if you don't know how to listen correctly? What if you don't "get it"? According to Eric Booth, founding artistic director of the mentoring program at Juilliard, live music newbies are "not so likely to come back—the sheer power of the music may work for them, but the occasion is challenging, the formality distancing and the personal challenge difficult for most...the vast majority of (people) don't believe they are able to "get" classical music and many don't find a concert setting a safe or welcoming place." ²

The good news is that children have an innate curiosity and, unless told otherwise, are usually excited by live music performance, and indeed music in general, of any type. They are not yet self-consciousness enough to become intimidated or to have pre-formed opinions about the inaccessibility or content of the experience. Because every individual is unique, and because our collection of experiences is unique, the music will affect one person differently than it will anybody else. It may affect your student's emotions, thoughts, spirit, body—any part. The same music may affect them differently at different times.

Music is meant to trigger reactions, invite reflection, awaken feelings, activate memories, and touch the heart. Allow students to be affected. Of course knowledge of music, and experience with it, influences how we are affected. Learning about the music often makes its effect more powerful. Repeated and active listening gives students time to process, absorb and become more and more affected by a piece. A wonderful and mysterious thing about live concerts is that everybody comes to be affected together; everybody onstage and everybody in the audience shares in the same experience, each of us in our own unique way.

¹ The majority of this guide is adapted from: <http://www.naxos.com/education>

² Booth, Eric. *The Music Teaching Artist's Bible. Becoming A Virtuoso Educator*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2009, p41

Source: Photo of children by Michael Maher Photography: www.maherphoto.blogspot.com

Ways to Listen

Encouraging Active Listening Through Inquiry

Passive listening is when you listen to music while doing other things. The music is in the background. You may enjoy it but are probably not fully engaged and may be missing something. **Active listening** is when you listen to music carefully and give it your full attention. You allow it to affect you and respond to it.

Through the process of inquiry, individuals construct much of their understanding of the natural and human-designed worlds. **Inquiry** implies a "need or want to know" premise. *Inquiry is not so much seeking the right answer -- because often there is none -- but rather seeking appropriate resolutions to questions and issues.* For educators, inquiry implies emphasis on the development of inquiry skills and the nurturing of inquiring attitudes or habits of mind that will enable individuals to continue the quest for knowledge throughout life.

Inquiry Questions to Ask while Listening

How does listening to this song make you feel?
How would you describe the rhythm or beat?
What were you thinking about when...?
Were all the parts balanced? Could we hear all of them?
I wonder how it would sound if...
What did you hear/notice about the...sound/instruments/etc...?
Who made the choices in how it sounded?
Did it compliment the mood or the emotion of the piece?
What if we put our hands on the floor or our chests or the wall or speakers etc... to feel vibrations?
(listen with our bodies)
What if we lay underneath or sit next to the instrument versus far away?
If it sounds serious or silly?
What would change if...?
How would it be different if...?



Activities to Do to Engage Learners in Active Listening

1. Have students draw or paint the shapes of the melody as they listen to it.
2. Have students speak a chosen or created text, perhaps a poem from Language Arts. Speak it in rhythm. Experiment with changes in rhythm, meter or speed and discuss the effects it has on the text. Listen to various examples of music and listen for similar rhythmic constructs in them.
3. Draw contour lines and try singing the "ups and downs" of the contour using solfège. Sing the contours again using lyrics or words from a poem or student created text.
4. For meter, try clapping the beat of your piece as you speak the words and listen for where you naturally place emphasis. Draw lines above the written words to show duration of words .

Thinking Routines

Listening To and Reflecting On Music³

The goal of the Artful Thinking program from Project Zero at Harvard University is to help students develop thinking dispositions that support thoughtful learning – in the arts, and across school subjects.

I HEAR / I THINK / I WONDER

A routine for exploring works of art and other interesting things

- What do you hear?
- What do you think about that?
- What does it make you wonder?

WHY

To help student make careful observations and thoughtful interpretations; to stimulate curiosity and set the stage for inquiry

WHEN

Use this routine when you want students to think carefully about why something sounds the way it does or is the way it is.

HOW

Ask students to make an observation about the music and follow up with what they think might be going on or what they think this observation might be. Encourage students to back up their interpretation with reasons. Ask the students to think about what this makes them wonder about the artwork or topic.

The routine works best when a student responds by using the three stems together at the same time, i.e., *I hear?*, *I think?*, *I wonder?* However, you may find that students begin by using one stem at a time, and that you need to scaffold each response with a follow up question for the next stem.

The routine works well in a group discussion but in some cases you may want to have students carry out the routine individually on paper or in their heads before sharing them out as a class. Student responses to the routine can be written down and recorded so that a class chart of observations, interpretations and wonderings are listed for all to see and return to during the course of study.

³ These are adapted to support musical thinking from the Thinking Routines found at <http://pzweb.harvard.edu/tc>

LISTENING: TEN TIMES TWO

A routine for observing and describing music

1. Listen to a piece of music quietly. Let your ears wander and take in as much as possible.
2. List 10 words or phrases about any aspect of what you hear.
3. Repeat Steps 1 & 2: Listen again and try to list 10 more words or phrases to your list.

What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

The routine helps students slow down and make careful observations about music. It asks students to think about words or phrases to describe the work and encourages students to push beyond first listen or basic description.

When and where can I use it?

The routine will work with any kind of music. Use Ten times Two when you introduce a new piece of music to get students thinking carefully about it before having a discussion or using another routine. You can also use the Ten times Two routine after an in depth discussion about a piece of music to both push forward and summarize some of the ideas and observations that were made during the conversation.

The routine is useful before a writing activity. It gets students thinking about descriptive language and helps students make observations about the music.

What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Give students time to listen to the music multiple times, with an effort on hearing something new each time. If possible, keep the music playing at a softer volume while students develop their lists.

Students can work as a whole class, in small groups or individually. Students should try to write their ideas down, or in a whole class discussion the teacher could write students' comments on the board. Make sure that the descriptive words and phrases generated are made visible for the whole group at some point in the discussion. Add to the list as necessary during any follow up conversations.

A natural follow up to Ten times Two would be another routine that get students talking about their interpretations, for example the *What Makes You Say That* routine or *Claim, Support Question*.

CLAIM / SUPPORT / QUESTION

A Reasoning Routine

1. Make a claim about the artwork or topic	→	Claim: An explanation or interpretation of some aspect of the art-work or topic.
2. Identify support for your claim	→	Support: Things you see, feel, and know that support your claim.
3. Ask a question related to your claim	→	Question: What's left hanging? What isn't explained? What new reasons does your claim raise?

WHY

To help students develop thoughtful interpretations of an music or topic by encouraging them to reason with evidence.

WHEN

Use *Claim / Support / Question* with works of art and with topics in the curriculum that invite explanation or are open to interpretation.

HOW

Model the routine for the whole class, and then work in small groups or individually. Take turns using the routine so that each member of the group makes a claim, identifies support and asks a question. Following each persons report, take a moment as a group to discuss the music or topic in relation to the claim before moving on to the next person. After everyone has had a turn, reflect on the activity. Ask students to discuss what new thoughts they have about the music or topic.

Resources

“We should show enriching fun activities first, to (help children) fall in love with music, and then ask for the skills and knowledge that you need to do that better.”

-- Tod Machover, Professor of Music at MIT University and innovator of the Toy Symphony, music technology for children

Machover, Tod. “Shaping Minds Musically”. *BT Technology Journal*. Volume 22, No. 4. October 2004

Video of Toy Symphony: <http://web.media.mit.edu/~tod/video.html?vid=ToySymphony-hi>

Artful Thinking Program, Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education:
<http://pzweb.harvard.edu/tc>

Concept to Classroom- Workshop on Inquiry Based Learning:
<http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/inquiry/>

Eyes and Ears: An Anthology of Melodies for Sight Singing is a book of melodies for use in practicing sight-singing (including Solfège). You can download it for free. It currently contains about 400 melodies, arranged systematically for education. Best for a music specialist teacher: <http://www.lightandmatter.com/sight/sight.html>

Classics for Kids: Lesson plans for engaging students in Classical Music and Orff
<http://www.classicsforkids.com/teachers/lessonplans/>

Wiggins, J. *Teaching for Musical Understanding*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001

