



Articles

Musicians: How To Develop Your Music Away From Your Instrument

By MICHAEL SMOLENS

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The Different Faces of Being in Action

When we feel that it's time to make music a more regular part of our life, it usually shows up in one or more ways: joining a band or choir, picking out an appropriate instrument, finding an inspiring teacher, or talking with a partner or roommate about your practicing. If we go deeper in, more interesting challenges arise, like composing a new piece for some occasion (maybe in an unfamiliar style), or deciding on a better recording microphone. All of this activity makes sense; after all, we're putting our treasured time and financial resources into our music. "Consistent Action=Big Results" is how the saying goes. This is often what consoles us when we reach plateaus in our learning curve.



So if someone were to say that music is actually as much a receptive activity as it is an active one, you might stop and ask how that is possible. My experience is that listening plays a huge part in our development as musicians, whether you are a beginner or a working professional. Almost everyone is exposed to music throughout each day and night, often more frequently than someone who is practicing even hours a day. This is exactly where you can grow as a musician: if you learn how to listen deeply.

Practicing Wherever You Are

We all use music for different purposes at different times: to accompany another art like painting, for relaxation, cleaning the house, partying, emotional release, etc. All of these are totally valid uses, however, the kind of listening I will be focusing on is what will allow you to develop most quickly as a musician—it can be called Directed Listening. What I mean by this is that the listener uses the primary purpose of the musical experience as an opportunity for deep listening, whether it be at an expensive concert, a wedding, or while being put on hold during a business call, or during a 15-second TV commercial soundtrack.

(Conversely, urban dwellers have needed to learn how to block out unwanted sound in public places, such as a gym).

And, like going to the gym, Directed Listening is a skill that builds slowly over time. I would liken it to someone putting on a white lab coat and clipboard—listening to music very objectively, even while the listener's responses are usually subjective. Sounds contradictory, right? In a sense, it is. My goal has always been to stay open to as many styles and sources of music as possible and at the same time honor my reactions to each piece. Eventually I developed a criteria of success for any music that seemed to escape various dogmas of what was "great music."

Listening Beyond Personal Preference

Try this on: each piece of music is trying to create a world unto itself. Does it successfully communicate that world? Metallica is definitely constructing a very different world than Mozart, as does Balinese gamelan music inhabit a completely different world from Andean pan pipe music. Is one better than the other? If you want to develop quickly as a musician, the answer would be "No." This question seems to bypass the whole mess of "serious music" vs. "popular music" and allows us to simply explore the question, "Did it work?"

The question is not did you like it? Did it make you feel good? Did it accurately portray a sense of class struggle that was resolved by the end? Or from some more experienced listeners: Did the drummer really swing? Did the lead vocalist really cut loose? Were the ornaments really authentic?

Listening or Voting?

Maybe most of our listening to music is not true listening, but more like voting. When I first ask a student what they're hearing while doing Directed Listening, I usually get responses that reflect their likes and dislikes. And if I were to put a little microphone next to that student's head, I would likely hear a less conscious layer of reactions: "I could never do that", "Why would anyone try that", "I could do that if my Dad had given me lessons when I was young," etc. I have spoken with a fair number of people who no longer listen to very much music because the intensity of their 'internal dialoguing' is so pervasive.

We live in a society of unparalleled access to music from any culture, style, and era thanks to modern technology. (Let's not forget all of the many fusions and hybrids that have come about in a place like the Bay Area). Because of this, we have an unparalleled opportunity to enrich our musical palette with minimal financial and time investment. And all of this can be done throughout the day without even touching our instrument, if we learn how to uncover our listening prejudices and build a new listening muscle that asks, "Did the piece fulfill the world that it tried to create?"

Uncovering Our Reactions

Here are some important considerations that are often overlooked when we observe our reactions to music:

1) Familiarity—Because music is a language, and the earliest intelligence to develop, there tends to be a relationship between the amount and range of styles that someone has been exposed to early on and their ability to listen to new music openly. Similarly, the societies (and eras) that have had the most amount of mixing of traditions often produce the most intriguing composers and musical cultures.

2) Rate of Change—Let's assume for a moment that music is fundamentally a balance of contrast (change) vs. continuity (non-change) and that each area of music (melody, harmony, rhythm, phrasing, etc.) has its own rate of change. Now try imagining each musical area as a moving line on a graph and seeing different areas change more at

particular times while others stay constant. These different areas also work together to create an overall rate of change, or musical metabolism, and affect people's energetic metabolism differently. And that is why some people generally love the consistent changes in texture and meter of Progressive Rock in a band like Rush or Nine Inch Nails, while others are generally more at home with traditional folk music or New Age music that, overall, changes much more slowly.

3) Amount of Dissonance—When we speak about 'dissonance' we're really speaking about the amount of general tension present. This used to reside primarily in the world of harmony, but now there are many aspects of studio production that afford much subtler techniques of creating tension. It's very interesting to talk with people who grew up in the same household who yet have very different tolerances for dissonance in their music. And consider that dissonance in music is relative: what was used to create a moment of tension in jazz from the Dixieland Era of the early 20th century was far less than what was needed in the Free Jazz movement of the 1960's and 70's.

4) Tone Color—Have you ever noticed how immediate someone's reaction to a piece of music can be? A high-pitched nasal sound might make someone instantly cringe while the same sound could make someone else feel wistful and nostalgic. Like the visual arts, music has qualities that can be talked about in terms of color and tone, and these qualities can affect people very quickly, like a sudden change in temperature. (People who write music for commercials or films are counting on this because they need to get their emotional point across instantly). Similarly, any tuning system outside of our normal 'piano tuning' (equal temperament) is part of this Tone Color world.

5) The Unexplainable—The very first time I played traditional West African drums and sang North Indian classical music I had the same reaction—"I not only really like this, but I think I've done this before." I have spoken with many people over the years who have experienced the same phenomenon: they come across some style, often that has nothing to do with their musical upbringing, and they feel an instant and deep affinity for it, not knowing why or where it came from. Some call this The Unexplainable. Some people who get glimpses of themselves doing an unfamiliar form of music from the past call it "past lives."

The Payoffs

After a while (minutes for some, weeks for others) my students begin to experience a deep insight into what they're listening to. Not so much by doing detailed analysis of everything they hear, but rather by improving their ability to take in music that was previously unacceptable, and therefore, inaccessible. Then their ability to listen to what they are playing or singing in real time greatly impacts their connection to their music, and their ability to connect with an audience.

Finally, on a more personal note, I can say that my experience with Directed Listening has allowed me to go beyond listening and enjoying a huge range of music. It has also allowed me to successfully coach musicians in a range of styles that far exceed my own performing, recording, and composing specialties (jazz and various world music styles). And for that, I am very grateful.

Part II in this series will cover how to develop your music when on a vacation, business, or family trip.

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