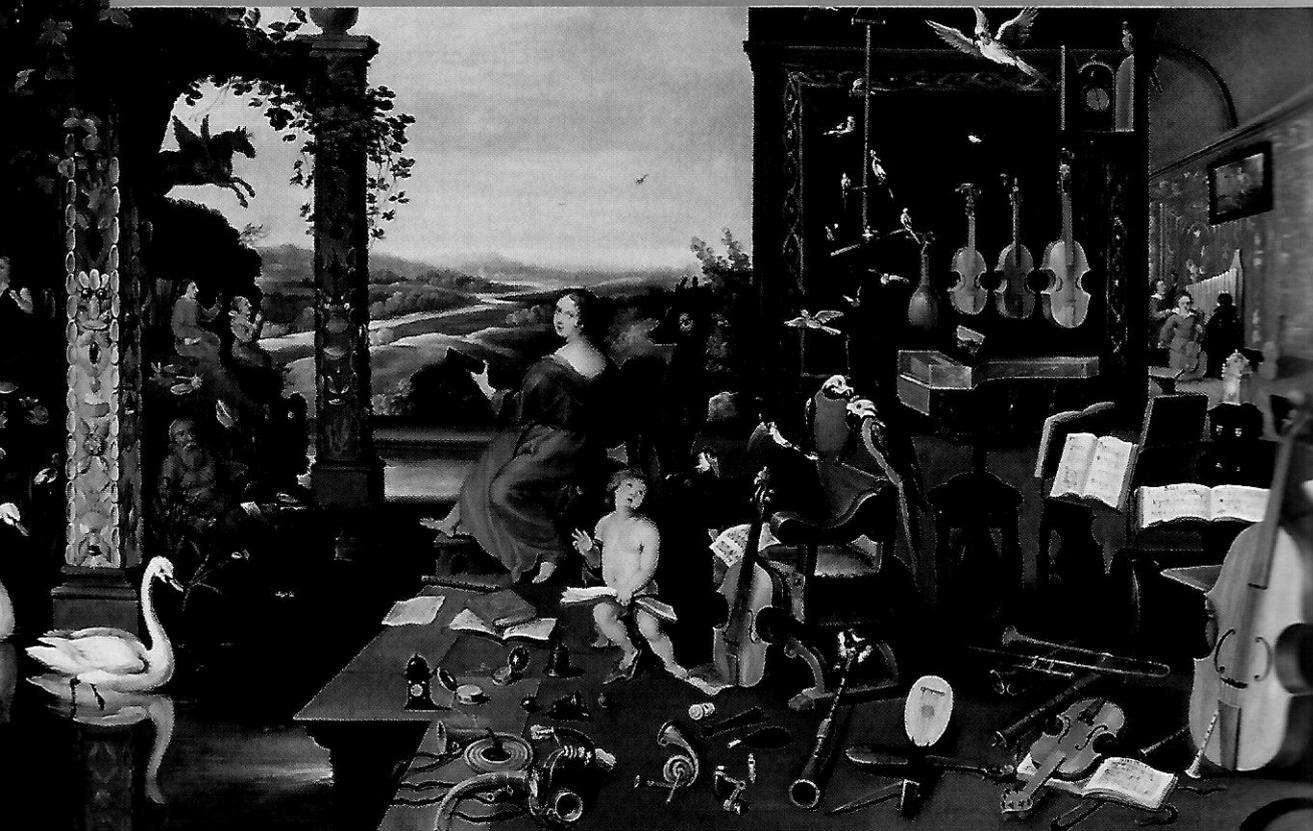


How to listen to music



Jan Brueghel the Younger: Allegory of Hearing

Listening not hearing

You will, of course, feel that you know how to listen to music. Put your headphones on, kick off your shoes, lie back and let the music flow while you check up on your social media.

It can be that simple; however, there is a lot more to it.

Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that we have two verbs for what our ears do: listen and hear? Why is this?

It's the same with eyes: we can see, we can also look. We see the moment our eyelids open in the morning; seeing is an involuntary thing that we do all the time, it is what happens when light hits the retina at the back of the eye. This is not looking. Looking is what happens when we consciously engage with the information received through sight. We look at our phones, we look at a score, we look at a view; we look through a telescope, down a microscope, up a periscope; we look into a problem, we look up an old friend, and look out for danger. Looking is a conscious and focused activity.

When our sight is reporting something familiar, our brain may see but not really look. When you get to your bedroom to crash out, a momentary glance will tell you that everything is familiar and your consciousness will not be focused on visual information but on the feeling of relaxation as you flop onto your bed. Bliss. Lying there, however, you may

need to look to see whether your phone charger is in the socket next to you; you probably would have seen whether this was the case as you entered your bedroom, but you weren't looking out for it, so lying there you can't be sure.

Similarly, when you get to your music lesson at school, your sight will tell you that everything is as you would expect, and you are unlikely to focus on what colour shoes your teacher is wearing today, even though your eyes will – in all likelihood – see your teacher's shoes at some point. If, later in the day, you were asked 'what colour shoes was your music teacher wearing this morning?' you might well reply 'I don't know: I didn't look at his/her shoes'.

So it is with our ears: we hear all the time. We do not have earlids, so we have our ears 'open' all the time; whenever soundwaves are travelling through the space we are in, they will reach our ears. This does not mean, however, that we are listening to everything. As with eyesight, we choose what we focus our hearing on: at a party, for instance, among the buzz of many conversations we focus on the one that we are having with a friend.

Music makes all sorts of challenges on our ears. We can just hear it, or we can choose to listen to it.

Of course there are many scenarios where we use music as a background part of our experience:

- In a film we concentrate on the images on screen and not the music in the soundtrack (which is usually subsidiary to the sound of the dialogue), though, as anyone who has seen *Jaws* will testify, the music can very strongly influence our mood
- In an Indian restaurant we focus on the flavours of the food, and the conversation with our friends, but the atmosphere will be enhanced by the sitar music in the background
- Out running, we are mindful of the physical feeling – the tiring muscles, rapidly beating heart, the heavy breathing – though the strong beat of the music coming through the headphones will motivate us to push on harder

Even when we are listening to music, we can easily listen to only part of it, and only hear the rest. For instance, we can focus on the words that are being sung and miss the shapes in the melodic line to which the lyrics are being sung; similarly, we can listen to the driving beat from the drummer and miss the moment the chord pattern or tonality changes. In orchestral music, we may listen intently to the main tune in (say) the woodwinds, but miss the intricacies of the accompaniment in the strings and horns.

By choosing to *study* music to AS or A Level, you are volunteering to become far more expert in the use of your listening faculties. Remember, this is not just an activity for your ears; it requires the full concentration of your brain too.

Developing expertise

Behind listening is curiosity; curiosity as to what is actually happening in a piece of music – not just enjoyment of how it sounds.

Curiosity is the beginning of becoming an expert in any field:

- The chef at some point ate food and thought 'I wonder how you make this', or possibly 'I wonder how you could make this better'
- The professional snooker player at some point thought 'I wonder how you play that shot', or maybe 'I wonder why that shot went wrong'

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- The astronomer at some point looked at the night sky and thought 'I wonder what's out there', or possibly 'I wonder why it's there'

In each case the wondering led to a focused pursuit of knowledge and skills: hours spent in the kitchen, or at the snooker table, or looking through the telescope.

Gradually, as knowledge and skill was gained, the initial pleasure turned into expertise and a much deeper identity with the subject:

- The chef began to find much greater understanding of fine food, and a more heartfelt delight in creating and savouring excellent cuisine
- The snooker player began to have a far better sense of the tactics required to play at a high standard, and a deeper appreciation of the skill of the best opponents
- The astronomer began to look at the night sky with much deeper engagement, thrilled to be able to follow and understand the movements and cycles of the cosmos

At the start of your AS or A Level course, when you have chosen Music as one of your specialisms, there is great cause for excitement in the way the study of the subject will deepen your understanding and delight in experiencing music.

Of course, there is a range of skills that come with music. You will be keen to develop your instrumental and/or vocal skills, and there is a great opportunity to take your musical creativity further in the composition; however, at the heart of music is listening to it. The purpose of music is for it to be listened to, and good listening is at the heart of performing and composing well: in both disciplines, you need to listen carefully to the sounds you are producing.

Once you become a skilled listener, you get inside music and music gets inside you.

What is good listening?

Just as the chef benefits from a good kitchen, the snooker player from a good table, and the astronomer from a good observatory, so listening is best under the right circumstances.

These are:

- In an environment where the only sound to be heard is the music you wish to listen to
- Somewhere where there is no visual distraction – for example, a phone, movement of other people, etc
- At a time when your brain is ready to concentrate

There are other important aspects:

- You should listen regularly to unfamiliar music: try different artists, different composers, different instruments, different genres, different musical traditions
- You should listen to a piece more than once: the best music repays listening to several times because you notice more each time
- You should try to follow a score: the combination of your eyes and ears giving your brain the same information in two different formats means you take in more of the musical detail
- Alternatively, you can watch the piece being played, perhaps on YouTube
- Best of all, try to attend live performances: large parts of the repertoire are intended to be experienced 'live' and not through headphones

A very good idea is to keep a listening diary: somewhere you can record the music you encounter and your impressions of it. This will enable you to look back and see how your own personal repertoire of music that you know is developing in quantity and scope. It might look something like this:

Listening diary

1st Oct

'Chan Chan' from Buena Vista Social Club - Spotify

Really liked this: a mellow Cuban song with some cool guitar playing. The main chord pattern has a syncopated feel. Great use of two male voices, and a trumpet instrumental section. Latin percussion effects.

3rd Oct

'Our Love Is Easy' by Melody Gardot - YouTube

A moody song with female vocalist in a minor key. Quite lush strings accompaniment that has a falling bass line. There are some other elements in the accompaniment inc. brushes on the drumkit and some sax. There's a strange solo instrumental break - not sure what it is. Not quite my thing, but suspect Dad would love it!

4th Oct

'You Know I'm No Good' Amy Winehouse - iTunes

I've always liked this song, but really listened to it this evening. There are some great sax moments. The instrumental sections have the band in an octaves texture over the drums which is really effective. I'd not noticed the chromatic bit in the bass riff before, and I think there is a chromatic chord at the end of the verse... it might be V of V which we learned about in class yesterday!

6th Oct

Symphony No.3 'Eroica' Beethoven - Live concert

This was part of our school concert trip to hear the Hallé Orchestra. They were awesome! My favourite section was the third movement that started quite delicately but had some big dynamic changes and lots of energy. I really enjoyed watching the conductor. Must listen to this again!

7th Oct

The Archers theme tune - Radio 4

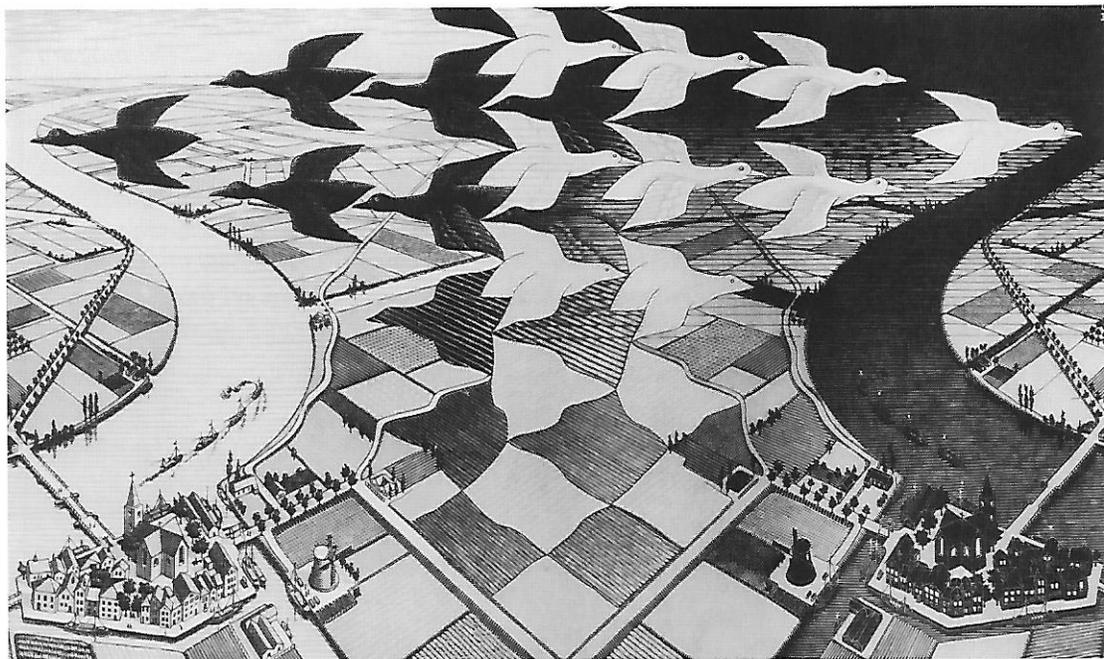
This tune has always irritated me whenever Mum listens to it, so I decided to actually listen to it and work out why. I think it's the combination of skippy $\frac{6}{8}$ rhythms and loads of major chords. Also, I realise the tune never goes outside an octave: the top note is the tonic and so is the bottom note. This is kind of boring!

What am I listening out for?

In a word: everything. It is so easy for our brain to respond to first impressions, positive or negative. Yet the first impression is inevitably going to be just that: an impression.

It can easily be the audio equivalent of a glance: a sense of the mood of the music, how energetic and loud it is, perhaps which instruments are playing. Yet there are many more details which our ears will hear, but our brains might fail to listen to.

Our eyes do the same thing. Take a long, careful look at this picture by the distinctive Dutch artist Maurits Escher.



Maurits Escher, Day and Night, 1938; woodcut in black and grey, printed from two blocks

Now cover the picture, and – being honest with yourself and without looking back at the picture – have you noticed the following things in this drawing?

- A white, twisting river on the left
- White birds flying to the right
- A patchwork of fields
- That the dark fields and light fields have stripes in opposite directions
- Four boats on the river
- A bridge across the river that leads to a tree-lined road
- Part of the bridge across the river that is narrower (presumably it is a lift bridge)
- A town on the edge of the river (front left)
- A church in the town that has a spire
- The town is surrounded by a canal
- Two ships that are moored up in front of the town on the canal

- Two bridges across the canal into the town
- A windmill on the opposite side of the canal to the town
- A dark, twisting river on the right
- Black birds flying to the left
- A bridge across the dark river leading to a tree-lined road
- Part of the bridge across the dark river that is narrower
- A town on the edge of the dark river (front right)
- The dark town also has a church with a spire and light coming out of its windows
- The dark town is also surrounded by a canal that has moored boats and two bridges
- The dark town also has a windmill on the opposite side of its canal
- In fact, the right hand side of the image is the negative (i.e. black and white reversed) of the left hand side
- That it is not an exactly symmetrical image

In this one two-dimensional image there is an enormous amount of detail. It is small enough on the page that our eyes will 'see' it all in one go; in order for our brain to take it all in we need to spend a significant amount of time 'looking' at it, concentrating our focus on different areas of the image. If we are going to appreciate fully the artist's intentions and skill we also have to make comparisons between one segment of the image and the others: both with the direct symmetrical opposite (left to right) and with shapes that evolve across the picture – consider, for instance, the second line down of flying birds allowing your gaze to travel from right to left to understand how the lead bird on the right morphs into a vaguely bird-shaped view of fields way below a flock of black birds.

All this invites us to engage with our sight and our mental processing; yet the image never changes. The changing aspect is the focus of our eyes.

Now that you have spent time finding all the detail in this Escher picture and understand the clever relationships within it of symmetry and evolution from 'white' to 'black' (or, possibly, daytime to night-time), take another, fresh look at it.

Ask yourself:

- Is my reaction to this picture the same now as when I first saw it?
- If it has changed, do I like it better or less than was initially the case?

Music is different from visual art. Music only exists in the dimension of time; its sounds pass by our ears controlled by the composer and performers. Although we 'hear' all the notes of a piece in an initial experience, in order to be able to understand all the detail and comprehend all the connections between the notes we may have to 'listen' to the music several times. What do we need to be ready to listen to? Potentially, there are many aspects, as shown in this table. (If some of these terms are unfamiliar, you will find them in the glossary, and many are explained further on in the book.)

Tempo: Is there a regular pulse to the music?

How fast or slow is it?

Does the speed of the pulse change?

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Metre:	Is there a regular stress to the pulse (creating a predictable first beat of the bar)?
	Is the beat divided into halves (simple time) or thirds (compound time)?
Rhythm:	What is the rhythmic detail of the music?
	Is it consistent throughout, or are there passages of contrast?
	Does the rhythmic detail create energy or tranquillity?
Melody:	Is there a prominent melodic content?
	In what register is it heard?
	Does it cover a wide range of notes, or a narrow range?
	Is its predominant character rising or falling?
	Does it usually move by gentle steps or bold leaps?
	Is it legato (smooth) or staccato (detached)?
Tonality:	Is there a clear sense of key?
	Is it major, minor or modal, or so chromatic as to be uncertain?
	Does it change between major and minor?
	Does the tonic change at any point (i.e. modulation occurs)?
Harmony:	Is the main effect one of consonant or dissonant harmony?
	How varied is the palette of chords used?
	How frequently does the harmony change, and does it do so regularly?
	Are both major and minor chords used?
	Does the harmony use accidentals to create chromatic (colourful) moments?
	Are there important cadences along the way?

Texture: How many notes are heard at any one time?

Are the multiple notes created by **doubling** the melody, providing an obvious accompaniment to the melody, or by providing two or more melodic lines simultaneously?

Are there any **drones** or **pedal notes**?

What registers are being used? How far apart are the notes being heard?

Instruments: Which instruments / voices are heard?

What is the role of each one? Do these roles change?

Are any particular instrumental techniques used (e.g. **pizzicato**, **mutes**, **flutter-tonguing**, **pedalling**, **overdrive**, humming, etc.)?

Are there any especially interesting blends of instruments being used?

Structure: How uniform is the musical substance and character of the piece?

How is contrast achieved?

Does the opening music return later on, and – if so – in identical or altered guise?

Style: Does the music represent a clear historical, geographical or cultural style?

Is a combination of stylistic influences discernible?

Character: What is the emotional or aesthetic character(s) of the music?

Armed with this long list of questions when you approach an unknown piece of music, you should feel like the musical equivalent of an explorer setting foot on a newly discovered island. How large is it? What are the landmarks? What is the terrain like? What creatures will you meet? Is it inhabited? Does it have hidden treasure? Imagine you need to draw a map of it to guide the next visitor to the island (or listener of the piece).

Here are three listening exercises to try out your explorer's instincts.