Playing by ear in the instrumental lesson: an approach based on popular musicians’ informal learning practices

This research looks at how musical practices and techniques that involve playing by ear can enhance the teaching and learning of music in one-to-one instrumental tuition.

Key words: music; playing by ear; instrumental tuition; informal learning

Key findings

- 79.3% of students found the project enjoyable or very enjoyable.
- 71.5% reported that they had never done any playing by ear of this kind before.
- At the end of the project, 80.3% thought playing by ear was ‘important’ or ‘very important’ and 79.8% said they would like to learn to play by ear as well as by notation.
- Teachers felt they were introduced to new, rewarding and useful musical skills that they would not otherwise have come across: 85% felt they had learnt useful teaching skills, including new perspectives concerning how their students learn; 87% agreed or strongly agreed that the project would influence the way they teach in the future; and 90.7% stated they would continue to use the strategies in a general way after the project had finished.
- 93% of teachers felt their students had benefitted from playing by ear, with 74% stating their students’ general musicianship had improved, and many witnessing increases in students’ confidence.
- Four key spontaneous musical ‘learning styles’ appeared to emerge amongst students.
What we did

The project was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. It involved a 12-month pilot study in the academic year 2008-09 and a 12-month main study in 2011-12.

The informal learning practices of popular musicians are simple, effective, flexible and enjoyable. Shared in different ways by folk, jazz and many other musicians, they can lead to high levels of skill-development, particularly in the realms of playing by ear. Furthermore, many of the skills involved can be just as relevant to classical music as to any other musical style. The Ear Playing Project (EPP) was based on a distillation and adaption of popular musicians' learning practices, designed for instrumental settings at any level. In particular, it focused on one of the central ways in which popular musicians first acquire their skills – that is, listening to a recording, picking out a part, and attempting to play it by ear, usually with little or no formal guidance. The approach builds on the highly successful classroom project created by Professor Lucy Green within Musical Futures

How we did it

- 144 teachers attended an induction day: six sessions were held at the IOE; one

Further information


Varvarigou, M. and Green, L. In press. ‘The Ear-playing Project: musical learning styles and strategies in the instrumental music lesson: main study findings’

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