

Research Briefing N° 19

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

Green, L. (2014). *Hear, Listen, Play! How to free your students' aural, improvisation and performance skills*. Oxford University Press

Baker, D. (2013). 'Music, informal learning and the instrumental lesson: teacher and student evaluations of the Ear Playing Project (EPP)' In Mary Stakelum (ed.) *Developing the Musician* pp 291-310. London: Ashgate Press

Baker, D. and Green, L. (2013). "Ear playing and aural development: Results from a 'case-control' experiment". *Research Studies in Music Education*, 35, no. 2

Green, L. (2012). 'Musical "learning styles" and "learning strategies" in the instrumental lesson: some emergent findings from a pilot study'. *Psychology of Music*, Vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 42-65

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

under the auspices of the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB); one at the Royal Northern College of Music; one at Croydon Music Service; and one at Forest Hill School, London; 100% of participants said they would recommend the induction to others. 54 of them elected to be part of the research and provide us with data over a period of 10 lessons.

- 325 students participated in one-to-one lessons, plus over 100 in 4 extra-curricular ensembles, 6 guitar groups and 1 choir. In addition, we ran a day for 9 blind and partially-sighted children. The students were mostly aged 8-16, but the full range was from 5-63 years, with an average age of 14.
- We collected data through 114 lesson observations involving 95 pupils and 17 teachers, mainly in one-to-one lessons; observations of 4 band rehearsals and 6 guitar groups; 13 teacher interviews and 42 student interviews; 193 student questionnaires and 54 teacher questionnaires; e-mails and blog comments. We collected audio recordings of 75 students' first attempts at the task, and conducted a matched-pairs experiment with 36 students. Data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

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