

Music and Jazz 101: How to Listen and Learn

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Music is a language and can be written down, spoken, or spoken about. It depends on sound and silence to function. There are main categories of musical language e.g., Western, Chinese, or African; and thousands of dialects e.g., New Orleans style jazz, Cajun, a Choral counterpoint as composed by Palestrina, Techno-pop, etc.

MUSIC THEORY is the grammar of music, or a way to describe how music is put together. It describes what is musically possible based on what composers and improvisers have created. It describes how basic musical elements behave. It is not a set of rules, not a prescription for how music "has to be."

Basic Musical Elements

RHYTHM is the frequency and duration of events i.e., when sounds happen and their duration.

Pulse is the steady repetition of a sound or sounds to create a "beat."

Tempo is the speed of the music.

Placement is when things come in or "happen." Rhythm isn't just about tempo or the beat; it's about exactly when in the music anything happens from a snare drum crack to a vocal slide to third note of a cello melody i.e., where (when) the cello melody comes in.

Rubato describes music that is not "pulsed" and does not happen to a "beat" or tempo but is freer, more "gestured" or ad lib such as John Coltrane at the beginning of *A Love Supreme* or the solo cadenza in the Brahms *Violin Concerto*.

Rests are the silence in one part or overall. Two examples of the use of silence in jazz are Count Basie's piano style and Miles Davis' trumpet playing.

Pitches are the individual notes named using the musical alphabet: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G". We may use "do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do", or even "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8".

Notes (pitches) are raised by adding sharps (#'s) and lowered by adding flats (b's).

Intervals are the distance between two notes, a lower note and a higher note. You count intervals by calling the bottom note of the interval "one" and counting up to the higher note. Every interval has its own "character".

An example of a **perfect fourth** is the first two notes of *Here Comes the Bride*, an example of a **descending minor third** is found at the beginning of the Beatles' *Hey, Jude*.

You may be unfamiliar with the term **perfect**, in this context, but if you associate the beginnings of those tunes with those interval names, perfect fourth, minor third, you'll begin to recognize those intervals when you hear them in other music.

Seconds are notes right next to each other are a step away; we call them "seconds" because they are counted from "one" going to "two": A to B, D to E, Eb to F, etc. are seconds.

Thirds are notes that skip a step between them are called "thirds": 1, skip 2, 3, that makes a third: C to E (skip D), D to F# (skip E), Eb to G (skip F) are thirds.

Music uses seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, sevenths, octaves (eights), ninths, tenths, elevenths, twelfths, and thirteenthths in major, minor, diminished, and augmented forms.

SCALES are sequences of ascending and descending notes organized into specific sounds (major, minor, etc.) existing in different keys (C major, Eb minor, etc.) Scales are usually seven notes, "do (1), re (2), mi (3), fa (4), sol (5), la (6), ti (7)", with a repetition of "do" at the end, one octave higher. Though septatonic (seven note) scales are the norm in western music we also find pentatonic, sextatonic and octatonic scales.

CHORDS are stacks of three or more notes that are usually a third apart. Chords can be extracted from scales. Chords live in scales, lurking among the seven notes, waiting to step forth and proclaim themselves! This is where "harmony" comes into music: chord progressions, key relationships, shifting tonalities. Chord changes are a major event in music. Often that's where we hear the deeper significance of what we're listening to. Think of the second time Ray Charles sings the word "Georgia" in the song *Georgia On My Mind*. That's a chord change!

Improvisation

Composition and Levels of Control

IMPROVISATION is the spontaneous creation of music, or some part of music, in the moment. Indigenous music from all over the world contains elements of improvisation. Many of the greatest classical composers were known in their day as prodigious improvisers e.g., Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart.

COMPOSITION is the preparation of music, by a composer(s), to be read and performed as written. Composition is usually associated with classical music, improvisation with jazz, rock, Latin and pop music.

Composed music can contain elements of improvisation. Music that is predominantly improvised can contain passages that are composed.

Music is improvised in the way that conversations are improvised. New (and old) things are said, new perspectives and ideas (or old ones) are explored, but the phrases and words are familiar.

At its heart the opposition of improvisation and composition is cultural, even class-related or economically based. Composition, the art of prescribing exactly how the music should proceed, is a matter of control over the musical material and the ensemble. How much control to exercise is a matter of choice.

Jazz

JAZZ is a distinctly American art form with an emphasis on fluent, spontaneously-improvised group interactions marked by extremes of subtlety and intensity. It has more in common with the unfolding of an athletic contest than the pre-composed, well-rehearsed ritual that classical music can sometimes seem.

The main element of jazz is swing. **SWING** is rhythmic, and is felt by musician and listener alike. Jazz is also about melodic invention. Jazz is about expression and progress, about finding new pathways of expression, about the passion for progress and the limits of progress

With the advent of jazz and the new awareness of different methods of music-making from all over the world composers more and more relinquish control by allowing improvisation and random chance to be built into their compositions. It is possible to see different "levels of control" operating in composers' work.

How much control to exercise is a decision constantly being made and revised by composers or anyone generating creative work.

On Music Education

If "music is the universal language" then every person shares the potential to express himself or herself musically. Most music education is limited to learning one's parts in a band, orchestra, or choral group with a strong emphasis on accuracy with music chosen by others.

How could music be taught so that musical involvement and growth are sustainable over a lifetime? There is a model in place for this in most schools: **ART CLASS**. Art class is the place where students make things. And they usually give them to someone else. No one directs them to make an exact duplicate of art created by someone else. During art class materials are used and misused, they are messy, they ruin, and get ruined. Things are made. Often, the results are beautiful, or unique, or both.