Learning through sound

Richard Steggall

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Introduction

Music is a creative subject. Music sparks the imagination. It takes us into a sonic world where no other subject can go. We all know this.

Sound is made when we use our bodies to create vibrations in the air that travel to the ears of a listener. The listener's brain translates these vibrations into sound, and if they're sufficiently ordered, we identify them as music.

We therefore teach children how to move their bodies to create these vibrations, whether that's by hitting a key, blowing a reed or activating their voice. When we identify these sounds as music we say, 'Congratulations, you just played the first notes on your instrument!'

However, great musicians already know the exact sound they are going to create before they move their bodies. It's the sound that they're about to make that controls their physical movement, not vice versa. When does that change take place? Is it just experience? Is it something that only a few people can do?

This resource looks at placing sound at the forefront of everything you teach.

Do you recognise any of the following traits in your students?

- They quickly learn complex pieces but can't sightread.
- They panic at the thought of aural tests and don't understand concepts such as intervals or intonation.
- They make the same technical mistakes again and again, even when reminded.
- They're good players in lessons, but they struggle with performance anxiety or don't seem to enjoy playing that much.

If any of those sound familiar, it may be that your students don't have enough focus on their sound. There are many ways to teach music, of course, but I propose that the way to minimise such common problems in musicians is to put sound firmly at the front and centre of your teaching.

I believe that musical potential can be unlocked by loving the sound you make, and hopefully this resource will begin to explain why. When we learn to love our sound, we learn to listen, and when we can hear the sound in our heads, we become truly creative. When we listen and are creative, we become musicians.

I'm a brass player and teacher. Brass players have to have a clear concept of sound because so much of the work we do to create the desired vibrations is unseen. Not being able to hear sound in your head is disastrous for a brass player, since it's this sound concept that synchronises the many muscles needed to play your instrument. Although physical actions may be more obvious on some instruments – for example pianos, drums or guitars – having a focus on sound is vital for all instruments.

Focus on sound

Make it *your* sound

As soon as a student makes a sound, let them take ownership of that sound. Be excited for them. Every sound is unique, like a fingerprint or an iris in the eye. They've created it – it's theirs. Allow them to be proud of whatever sound they make.

Most students will need a gateway to help them focus on the concept of sound, and we can start by using words and imagery. You could help students describe their sound, maybe even give it a name. Relate any imagery to what the students already know. 'Do you like chocolate? Well what kind of chocolate would your sound be? Does it sound light and fluffy with a bit of air in it? Does it sometimes wobble about when you don't want it to? This sound could be called Jack's Chocolate Mousse.' You can be fun and honest, without being derogatory. Try letting the students come up with their own ideas, giving them control and ownership of their sound.

Sound is subjective and changeable

Sound is subjective, therefore you can constantly praise your students. If you say something like 'That's the perfect sound that you can make at this moment in this piece', it will make a student feel good. And feeling good about what they do will inspire a student to move forward. Concentrating on getting the notes right means telling, or at least suggesting, to the student that they've got something wrong. This does not inspire most students.

Sound is also changeable, particularly for those students, such as pianists, who will be playing across different instruments. The acoustics of a room will also affect the perceived tone of an instrument. Playing on a different instrument, or in a different acoustic, provides the perfect opportunity to harness a student's awareness of the sound they're producing. The common pre-performance instruction to 'Play a few notes before you start, just to get used to the piano/room', is often seen as an instruction to check if an instrument is working. Instead, it should be seen as an opportunity to recalibrate the student's perception of what they're going to sound like.

It's also important to get your student to listen to sounds they can aspire to. Hopefully some of these will come from you as their teacher, but how about playing them some music as they come into their lessons? We now have a world of different sounds at our fingertips. For a trumpet student I might play them Maurice André one week, and Miles Davis or Louis Armstrong the next. Who can say which of those sounds is right or wrong?

As we play harder pieces, we label them according to a Grade standard. We could think in the same way about sound. We could call 'Jack's Chocolate Mousse' a Grade 1 sound, which he's very proud of. However, knowing there's a 'Grade 8 LSO Maurice Murphy, glorious, chocolate fondant with a solid outer coating oozing a rich, molten centre' sound should serve as a powerful aspiration.

Become part of a team

Owning your sound lets you become part of a larger group. Being a member of 'Team Clarinet', for example, gives students a sense of belonging: everyone in the team makes their own individual sound, but they're all grouped together by the sonic possibilities of that particular instrument.

If you learn in a group, or play in a band, suddenly the sound of multiple different instruments playing together can be even more exciting. Allow your students to think about how their sound works in a group situation, and how the sound of multiple instruments brings new possibilities. On a polyphonic instrument, like the piano, one player can do this themselves, suddenly opening up a world of harmony.

Don't just like it – love it

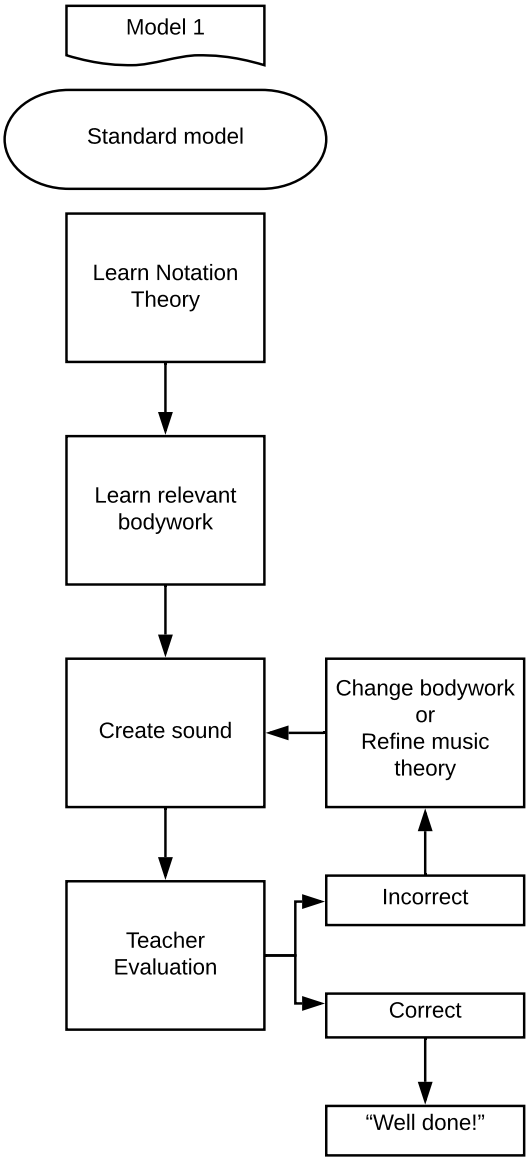
Use as much enthusiasm as possible to help your students love their sound. The more they love it, the more they will focus on it. As long as their sound holds their attention, listening skills will improve, as will concentration and focus.

Creative learning: driven by sound

Once we focus on a sound, it becomes alive in our imagination. The next stage, however, is to imagine the sound *before* we play it. I call this aural image a 'sound picture'. This picture in your inner ear must be as complete as possible, containing tone, pitch, dynamic, articulation and rhythm.

A student must build up tools to develop a strong sound picture. They can do this by listening or using music theory to translate music notation into imagined sound. It is up to the teacher to direct the student, so they end up with the correct set of skills for the music they want to play.

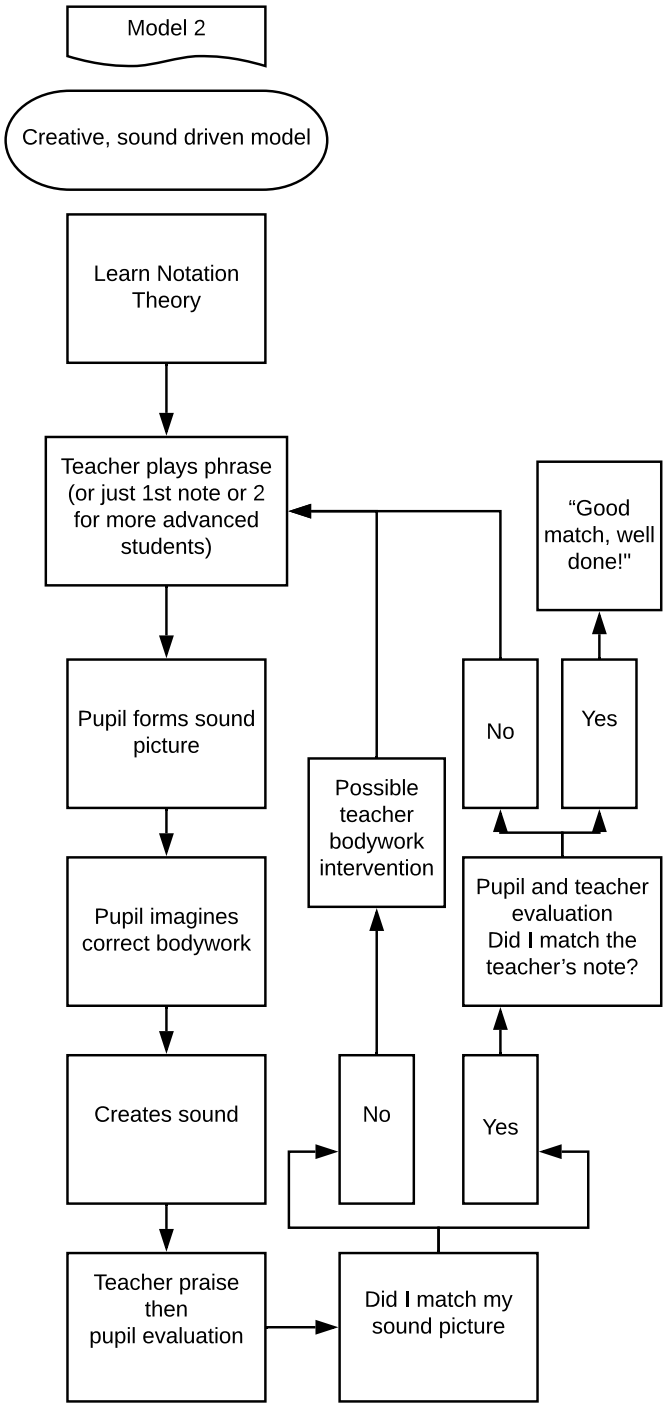
The diagrams below contain two methods of learning. The first is a standard model (Model 1) that many teachers use, but the second is a more creative, sound-driven model (Model 2). The term 'bodywork' refers to the mechanics of how we make the sound using our bodies – for example, where to place our fingers or how to blow.



Using the standard model (Model 1)

Scenario: I've got a horn student that I'm teaching a new note to, an A, which is a tone higher than any note they've learnt before.

- Show them a written A, and tell them that this is the new note, A, that they'll be learning today.
- Explain that you need to blow the air faster than you do a G, and hold your lips firmer together and also press down valves 1 and 2.
- Let them have a go at playing the note.
- Listen and evaluate. If it's not an A, give more advice either about bodywork ('No, you need to blow faster than that – pretend you're blowing out a candle') or theory ('No, that was a C, which is in the third space. You want a second space A, a bit lower'). Then let them have another go. If they play an A, congratulate them.



Using the sound-driven model (Model 2)

Use the same scenario as above and the initial explanation as to what the notation means.

- Ask your student to listen carefully as you play an A.
- Ask your student to close their eyes and imagine that sound in their head.
- Now ask your student to imagine themselves playing that note.
- You let your student try to play the note.
- After a brief 'Well done!', ask your student if their note matched their sound picture.
- If they say 'No', play the note again and repeat the process.
- If they say 'Yes', that could mean one of two things. They may have matched your A, in which case you can congratulate them with a 'good match', or they may need help in strengthening their sound picture, in which case you can repeat the exercise.

Differences between the two models

The central difference between these two approaches is that in the standard model, the sound is a product of the bodywork. The teacher (and student) listens and then reacts to the sound. In the second model, the bodywork is a product of the sound picture. The student reacts to the relationship between their imagined and created sound.

Model 2 looks more complicated. It's certainly more time-consuming. If you want the result of a student playing the correct notes in as short a time as possible, you should probably go with the standard version. If, however, you want to develop well-rounded, creative musicians, you should maybe try the second model, which actually has far less verbal instruction.

Some teachers might point out that in focusing primarily on the sound, you're concerned with the result, not the process. I would argue that the sound is the process, and as you develop as a musician, that focus on sound will make progression much smoother.

There is very little technical instruction in the second model, which might worry some teachers. What needs to be developed, however, is the trust that a clear sound picture can control technique. It's rare that, as musicians, we learn something completely new. As long as we have the basic physical ability to do it, and have performed the task before, we can certainly work purely through sound picture and let the technique follow. I'm constantly amazed by the way that focus on sound can bypass technical issues, even in beginner students. When they can create a clear sound picture, the correct fingers suddenly go down, synchronised with the correct breath and lip work, and a great sound is made.

Progression

Obviously we need to teach much more than how to play one note. Both models can be extended from working on one note to a phrase and then through to a whole piece. In the second model, the only major change comes in the second stage, where the teacher playd the note or phrase. When I demonstrate on an instrument before a student forms a sound picture, I call it giving them a 'present'. I'm giving them my sound to use in their sound picture. It's my sound, not theirs, so it is not exactly their sound picture.

This progresses to me giving them just the first note, or two, of a phrase to give them a start with their sound picture. Eventually, they can form their own sound picture purely from the clues in the musical notation. This opens up a world of musical possibilities.

Develop a technical range

If we were to ditch our usual mindsets of trying to improve and learn as fast as possible and had unlimited time and patience, we could all learn by sound picture alone. However, as we're usually employed by a parent who wants to hear improvements in their child, and faced with students who want to develop and play harder and more advanced music as soon as they can, this is not usually possible. Instead, I would advocate setting up a technical range system as a backup to the focus on sound.

In the creative, sound-driven model above, you'll see an option for teacher bodywork intervention if the student can't match their sound picture. This is where the teacher earns their money, but first they must resist the temptation to give a direct physical instruction, such as 'blow the air faster'. Instead, work on a 'technical range' inside which the technique that's needed by your student lies. For example, I may do a quick exercise on blowing air speeds, ranging from really slow, warm air to very cold, fast air. The correct airflow for my student to play the desired note is somewhere in this range. Then I can return to the sound picture knowing that my student has the physical capabilities to play the note, and I invite them to find it by, again, returning to sound.

Practical advice

The most important piece of advice is to relate everything to sound, constantly and enthusiastically. You should get excited about your student's sound, and this will become infectious. You might even find lessons less stressful when you both have a common focus.

Call and response

Many teachers use versions of 'call and response' in lessons, often as a warm-up game or when teaching new pieces. The call is either a sound picture present or inspiration for a different musical response. Although this has great value, I would advocate a version leaving a gap between the call and response that's long enough for the student to imagine the response in their head.

For example:

- Bar 1: teacher plays a call.
- Bar 2: silent. Student forms a sound picture.
- Bar 3: student plays response.
- Bar 4: silent.

Manuscript whiteboards

A few A4 whiteboards with blank manuscript on them are a great investment for a teacher. I like to have one board for myself and one for my student. We each write down a bar or two of music and then look at them one at a time. (Getting the student to write sows the seeds of composition and also gives you an insight into what they think they're capable of.) Each phrase should have as much detail as possible, even if it consists of just one note. There must be notes, rhythm, dynamics, a style marking and possibly articulation. The teacher must make sure the student can hear the first note, at the very least, in their head, so should play that to them before inviting the student to form a complete sound picture. The exercise then follows the creative, sound-driven model in the diagram above.

Problem solving via sound

A common counterargument to this way of learning is that students should be given a solid technical foundation to start. If you start students off talking technically about how to play, however, they believe that that is the way to learn, and try to use intellectual skills to solve problems. Then complications arise further down the line.

When you learn via sound, you find technical solutions based on the musical issues you're dealing with. As your student is focused on sound, when the musical challenges get more advanced, their technique should seamlessly adjust to meet those challenges.

An example: taking a big breath

The inhale before you play a brass instrument is a common battleground for teachers and students. 'Take a big breath!' is an instruction that continues, with varying degrees of desperation and frustration, right though from beginners to extremely advanced students.

But why should a student take a huge inhalation of air before they play? Does their body need more oxygen because they're just sprinted 100 metres? Are they about to be pushed into a swimming pool? Should they do it just because an adult has told them to?

An actor would ask: 'What's my motivation?' And for a musician, your motivation is your sound. If you truly want to play a long, sweeping phrase with a huge, full sound that soars across a large concert hall, you will take a huge breath. You have to. If you have no concept of the sound you want to make, you won't.

Benefits of learning through sound

1. Forming a practice habit

To form any habit you need a reward to motivate you to do it. Rewards may include, 'Stopping my mum nagging me to do my practice' or 'Making sure I don't get shouted at in front of my friends again in band practice'.

But focusing on loving *your* sound and wanting to enjoy and develop it gives a student a much simpler and more satisfying reward, since what they're doing is purely for themselves.

2. Developing aural skills

How many times have we heard students say, 'I can't do aural'? Is that their fault, or ours? If, two weeks before an exam, we sit down at the piano and ask our students to listen carefully to what we're playing, without them ever having really listened to anything carefully before, then their responses can be quite shocking. However, if you're constantly thinking of sound and developing your student's listening skills, you will find that by the time you do an exam, their aural skills are as developed as their ability to play a piece of the required level.

3. Sightreading

I once heard a peripatetic teacher say, 'I'm getting so annoyed. All my students are so bad at sightreading.' It was as though they had been specifically assigned students who were 'bad at sight reading'. Standard advice includes thinking about meter, or pulse, then how the rhythm goes and where the pitches move. Add the dynamics, and don't forget the key signature, then add the articulation. How are you supposed to process all that in 30 seconds before a sightreading test?

Instead, try this:

- Pitch the first note or two.
- Form a complete sound picture in your head.
- When asked, recreate the sound picture on your instrument.

4. Performance anxiety

When a student can sightread, much of the performance anxiety, and social anxiety, of playing in an ensemble disappears. However, most students' anxiety comes to the fore when their playing is exposed in front of others, whether that be in an exam, concert or competition. There is so much written and talked about performance anxiety these days that most people seem to think it's something that happens and then needs to be fixed. Many aspects involved are out of the teachers' hands, such as the expectations of parents, who may also keep telling their children not to be nervous. (I've been in exam waiting rooms before and had to tell the parent to kindly stop saying the word 'nervous' over and over again.)

Here are some pieces of advice that are sometimes given with regard to performances:

- Don't worry about playing wrong notes.
- Just share your sound with the audience.
- Don't rush into it. Get focused before you start.

These are all good pieces of advice, but is it a good idea to completely change the way you think about playing at the time when you might feel under the most pressure? If your daily practice concerns getting the notes right, why should you then start thinking about sound at the moment you want them to be right the most? Surely the answer is to do these things *every* time you play your instrument.

5. Enjoyment

When you perform, all you need is a clear sound picture and to allow your body to recreate it the best it can at that particular moment. Knowing that's all you have to do can generate huge self-confidence. The ultimate payoff from learning this way is that it greatly increases the enjoyment you get out of playing music.

When you allow your sound picture to control the huge number of muscles that are involved in playing an instrument, your body discovers great freedom. When you see an elite performer using extremely complex movements but looking graceful and free, we often refer to it as 'effortless'. Their sound, however, is intense with infinite musical possibilities. There is no secret here. The player is completely controlled by sound. They have learnt, and are performing, through sound. Why don't we all do that from the very start?