

Listening skills

KS3

James Manwaring

Introduction

Listening is one of the most important skills that a music student can develop. The more they listen to music, the more they discover. Listening opens their minds to different musical instruments, styles, genres and approaches. It can make them a better performer, composer and analyst. And as music teachers, we need to encourage an active, deliberate and consistent approach to listening. But we also need to listen to music ourselves, and use our own listening experiences to enhance our teaching.

This resource will look at listening in the Key Stage 3 classroom, with practical ideas to encourage students to listen.

What does it mean to listen?

To listen is to give our attention to something. Very different from simply 'hearing' something, listening is about paying thoughtful attention to sound, and considering exactly what it is that we're experiencing. Listening is much more than just a task in a lesson: so often, we'll put something on for students to listen to, but they won't necessarily come away as better musicians as a result of it.

Listening is a skill – especially in the modern world, where we're bombarded with audio stimuli left, right and centre. Growing up in the 1990s meant listening to music on CDs, or on the radio, and there wasn't a simple and easy way to hear certain styles of music. A trip to a local music shop or library might mean discovering something new, but this might involve handing over money for something you weren't sure you'd like. Fast forward to 2022, and listening has become easier than ever. I'm constantly amazed by the sheer quantity and diversity of music available to us on a daily basis. We can stream basically anything we want, and even access different versions or recordings of the same music.

To listen in the 1990s, when I was growing up, was much more deliberate, with more calculated decisions. I'm a firm believer in bringing back this more deliberate approach to listening – while also taking advantage of this new ease of access to music.

Deliberate listening

The idea behind deliberate listening is that we consciously choose what we listen to – we're deliberate in our approach to listening. If a student is trying to understand something, or learn a new piece, they deliberately listen to music that will help them.

If you're teaching a topic or process in your lessons, you might encourage your students to deliberately explore music that will enhance this classroom experience. Not all listening needs to be deliberate, but it's a helpful approach when it comes to developing our students' understanding of music.

There are several ways to deliberately listen to music, and students should be encouraged to consider them:

- 1 Listen out for key musical features or concepts: if you're studying chord progressions, for example, then students can deliberately listen to music that has similar or contrasting progressions. This could be something they do on their own, or you can guide them in the classroom or with homework indicating listening examples.
- 2 Deliberately listening to music from a specific genre, style or composer.
- 3 Students can be asked to listen to music from a specific year, decade, or period in musical history. This could then extend to a 'compare and contrast' approach – 1822 vs 2022, for example.
- 4 Exploring a specific instrument: this can be particularly valuable when that instrument appears in different genres. For example, students could look at how the clarinet was used in classical music in the late 18th century, in early jazz, and also in film music.
- 5 Exploring a key signature: this is an effective way to encourage students to deliberately listen to music across different genres and styles. Finding examples of pieces in C minor, for example, would be a good way to get them both researching and listening.

These are just a few ideas, and there are, of course, lots of other ways to encourage deliberate listening. It's our job to point students in the right direction at Key Stage 3, so that they can continue this deliberate listening as they move into GCSE and A level.

James Manwaring is Director of Music for Windsor Learning Partnership and has been teaching music for 18 years. He is a teacher support lead for the Music Teachers' Association and writes a music education blog.



See Music Teacher, August 2019, for a full resource devoted to [active listening](#).

Practical ways to listen in the classroom

Listening starters

Have you ever tried having some music playing as students enter the classroom? Starter tasks in music offer the chance to do something different when compared to other subjects. Instead of a maths equation on the board, for instance, we can have some music playing that will instantly get students listening. As teachers, we will then need to offer them some ideas to think about – you might like to start with the following questions:

- 1 How did the music make you feel as you entered the classroom?
- 2 What do you think were the intentions behind this music – why was it composed?
- 3 What one musical feature stood out as you listened?

Quick-fire questions are a good way to make the listening starter a relevant learning opportunity. It's also useful to link the listening to the lesson itself. You might like to try having some eerie horror music playing if you're studying film music, for example: it sparks curiosity, and gets students thinking and experiencing music from the second they walk through the door.

Listening to the elements

One key skill for music students is to be able to identify key elements within a piece of music. At Key Stage 3, we can embed this skill and begin to develop it as students move towards GCSE. At first, we can scaffold this task for students by giving them options to choose from when listening out for musical elements. This can then be developed, giving them a chance to strategically listen out for key elements.

The starting point is to ensure that students know what the elements of music are – and most should hopefully know these by Key Stage 3. We can then move on to listening out for specific things to build up their understanding and confidence at spotting features of a piece of music.

- 1 Choose an extract of music in advance that includes the key musical elements that you want to focus on. This could be dynamics, chords, a melody or a specific rhythm.
- 2 Give students questions that don't rely on prior knowledge, but instead help them focus on the music. For example, ask them: does the music get louder, or quieter, or does it stay at the same volume?
- 3 You can vary the questions depending on students' ability, but start with questions that are phrased in such a way that they can focus on the music. As they become more confident, you can ask them to describe the music for themselves, giving them a chance to show that they can pick the element and then describe it.

Our goal should be that students can hear a piece of music and spot key features for themselves. But we must take them on this journey and ensure that they're confident at spotting elements. Starting with focused listening and then building up for a freer description of music will help students to develop this skill set.

Spot the difference

Listening out for differences in a piece of music is another way to help the students focus. Again, we want students to learn how to listen and focus on the music that's being presented to them. Spot the difference involves you creating a short rhythm, melody or chord progression that you then change. Students are then presented with the two examples and asked to spot the difference. This takes a bit of time to create, but once you have the resources, you can use them again and again. They don't need to be long, and you can use notation software or a DAW to make your examples.

You could, of course, also come up with something live or nominate a student to clap a rhythm and then make a subtle change. This task will focus students' ears, and it's an engaging way to get the class listening.

Listening bingo

Bingo is a very well-known game that involves listening out for numbers: when you match a line of numbers, you win. For this version, students listen out for key musical features to see if they win.

- 1 First, students will need to create their bingo cards, and I would suggest maybe a four-by-four grid as a good starting point.

- 2 They now need to fill this grid with musical features that they hope to hear in an extract of music. You could give them options, or ask them to focus on a couple of elements of music at a time. The process of selecting features is a good way to check knowledge and see that they can generate ideas. They will need a good variety of musical features, and they should spread features around the grid in order to potentially fill a row or column. They might even be lucky and have 16 features that are all in the extract.

Dotted Rhythm	Crotchet Rest	Crescendo	Staccato
Rallentando	3/4 time signature	Ascending pattern	Diminuendo
Major Tonality	Descending pattern	Group of 4 Semiquavers	Forte dynamic
Upbeat	Triplet	Minor Tonality	4/4 time signature

- 3 Point out that the aim of the task is to get the students identifying key features in an extract of music. Explain to the class that they will need to justify their win. You're now ready to play listening bingo and see if anyone matches a line – across, down or diagonal.

Listening bingo makes for an engaging listening task and the more you do it, the more variety the students will include in their grid. If they struggle to create the grid, then you know that they're lacking in knowledge. Students need to know what they might listen out for in a piece of music if they are going to become confident listeners.

Peer listening

Listening to compositions is an important process for students. When they're completing work on a piece of music, a useful task is to then encourage peer listening. Students pair up with someone and they each listen to the other person's composition. They then offer supportive, helpful and constructive feedback to each other. The more they listen to different pieces, the more they will develop as composers. You can give them marking criteria if you feel that will help, or they can have a fairly free discussion.

Dictation exercises

Dictation exercises involve students listening to a rhythm or melody before having a go at writing it out on paper. It's a feature of some GCSE music exams, therefore starting at Key Stage 3 will help prepare students.

Start with simple rhythmic patterns that students listen to and then write down. You can give them a starting point on the board, or just clap a rhythm and ask them to notate it. This will link in to notation skills, as they will need to have the knowledge of note values in order to write out the rhythms.

Once they can complete rhythmic dictation tasks, move on to short melodic patterns that combine note values and pitch. You could make these up on the spot, or prepare examples that you share with students. If you have access to computers in your classroom, then you might like to try this website that creates free dictation exercises: <https://tonesavvy.com/music-practice-exercise/14/rhythm-dictation-game-eighth-notes/>

Listening scavenger hunt

If you have computers available to you, this task is another way to get students actively listening. You will need access to the internet and YouTube in order to complete your scavenger hunt.

- 1 Give your students a list of features that they need to find, for example a dotted rhythm, syncopation, viola and a melodic sequence.
- 2 Check that they understand all the key terms and, if necessary, scaffold this task by giving less complex words to some students.
- 3 Now give them a list of genres, styles, composers or historic periods, eg the Beatles, Kate Bush, Baroque, Clara Schumann.
- 4 Their task is to now find examples of pieces of music that link as many features to the genres and composers. They might, for example, find a Beatles song that uses a viola, syncopation, dotted rhythms and a melodic sequence. You can vary the task, the rules and the links, but in essence they are finding music and then telling you what they've found.

Encouraging listening at home

Students will hear a great deal of music at home: they'll be surrounded by it in most things they do, whether that's watching television, playing video games or listening to their favourite band. We should encourage them, however, to learn from all these opportunities, as well as simply enjoying listening to music.

I always say to my students that the easiest and most enjoyable homework I can set is to listen to music. As they walk home, go for a run, or walk the dog, they can complete their weekly tasks. They don't need to write anything down, but of course they could keep a listening diary of some kind. Listening at home is something we need to encourage, and here are some practical ways of doing that:

- 1 Taking a piece of music for a walk is a fun challenge, and you can set pieces of different lengths. You can challenge them to 'walk with' a song, an album, a concerto movement, or all of a Mahler symphony. This is hopefully something engaging they can do – and you can do it to.
- 2 QR codes are an interesting way of sharing ideas and creating some mystery around information. There are various ways of creating them, and the code is simply scanned by a mobile device, where it links immediately to a webpage or file. Here's an example of a QR code: feel free to scan it and enjoy the music!

SCAN ME



I created this code very quickly once I'd chosen the YouTube link I wanted to use, using www.qr-code-generator.com – but there are lots of other websites that do the same thing. You can use a QR code to link to anything, so you could expand this technique to other areas in your department. Students can quickly scan the code, and get something to listen to every day. You can also share this image on your learning platform, over email or on social media.

- 3 Using one of the online streaming services, create a playlist that students can access at home. You can also add to the playlist over time, and ask students to contribute to it. Here is a playlist I have created for Music Teacher Readers on YouTube, for example, as well as a QR code to link to it:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPOfa_ypfEpe1ZQYhNPJV_uHiLufINOc-



SCAN ME

- 4 Listening is a skill that we must also link to performing. Students should be encouraged to listen to professional recordings of pieces they're learning to play.
- 5 Composition work is also something that students can listen to at home in order to work out how they can make improvements. Sharing work is easier than ever using learning platforms or email. This gives students a chance to focus on their work away from actually creating the work. They can listen out for ways to improve and spot any 'mistakes' in their work. We should always encourage students to use their own ears to analyse their work.
- 6 There are various ways to create online listening assessments and tests (there's a section later in this resource that gives ideas for online and cloud-based options).

Your own listening journey

As a teacher, you should ensure that you yourself are also listening to as much music as possible. Much of this listening will almost certainly come naturally, but it's worth considering your own listening history. When you listen to music yourself, you will not only be enriched by the experience, but you will also discover music you didn't previously know, which you might well be able to use in the classroom. If you're asking students to keep a listening diary or journal, then do the same thing yourself. You can then come to lessons and play students the music that you yourself enjoy and the music that has shaped you as a musician.

Online resources

Alongside the ideas in this resource, there are some online resources that you might like to consider for your Key Stage 3 students.

Focus on Sound

[Focus on Sound](#) is a cloud-based platform where students can develop listening skills and explore theory, instruments, key terms and composition. The useful thing here is that listening can focus on very specific key terms, instruments or musical devices. The software comes with ready-made listening tests in a range of formats, as well as the ability to create your own. A particularly useful feature is the ability to quickly create a listening test based on key terms that you have used in the lesson.

ABRSM Aural tests

When you take an ABRSM exam, you're required to complete an aural test. These tests focus on listening and there are some free downloads online to get you started. This may then be something that you wish to pursue as an approach to listening assessments. The mock aural tests are available at the following here: <https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/preparation-for-exams/mock-aural-tests/>

Teoria

Teoria (www.teoria.com) is a free website that includes tutorials and exercises that will help students develop their listening ear. It includes ear-training exercises that allow students to work on recognising intervals, notes, chords, scales and a number of other skills. It's a free site, so there are adverts that might pop up. The content is useful, and will help students to focus on their aural listening skills. The website is possibly more aimed at the top end of Key Stage 3 music, and will lead nicely into dictation skills for GCSE music.

Musictheory.net

This site is similar to Teoria, but does have a number of other exercises and lessons included. It is again free, and therefore a useful resource to start using with your students. The keyboard ear-training exercises include an on-screen piano keyboard that students can use to select notes that are played to them. This is again possibly more aimed at higher end Key Stage 3, but there is nothing to say that all ages can't access this kind of ear training.

Conclusion

Listening to music is something that needs to go hand in hand with composition and performing. These inter-related dimensions of music are all part of a rich music curriculum. The more students see the power in listening, the more they will develop as all-round musicians. Students need to enjoy the listening tasks, become independent listeners, and know where to go for examples and resources. Making listening part of Key Stage 3 music is essential, and this resource has suggested some ways of embedding listening in your curriculum. The goal of a music teacher is to expose students to as much music as they possibly can. Enjoy making your own playlists, resources and tasks.