KS3/4/5

Active listening

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by Jonathan James

INTRODUCTION

'Active listening' is a skill that has been pursued in various different guises over many fields, from counselling, policing and healthcare through to business, mentoring and music. Over the last decade, the skill has become even more 'on trend' through the increased popularity of mindfulness, where listening attentively to the immediate environment is a key tactic to centring the focus on the present moment.

As musicians we may well feel, rather smugly, that we got there first and that others have jumped on the bandwagon. Developing the inner ear has always been fundamental to building musicianship in any genre, and we might argue that active listening is just the latest terminology to describe what has been a core practice in our training since the Middle Ages.

And yet, the literature on aural skills within music education is unanimous in finding that we are, if anything, spending less and less time in the classroom honing the ability to listen attentively and analytically. And with that comes a drop-off in those activities and skills directly allied to active listening, such as playing by ear, sightsinging and improvisation.

This resource translates the wisdom on active listening from its original therapeutic setting to a musical one, asking how processes in the first might be applied to the second. It then surveys attendant concepts within music, such as aurality, audiation and playing by ear, before addressing common barriers to their adoption, both as a student and as a teacher.

To demonstrate some of the main ideas, two worksheets are given to show how students across Key Stages 3 to 5 might be facilitated to listen actively and respond to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?

Whatever the field, most definitions of active listening begin by highlighting the difference between 'hearing' and 'listening'. Where hearing is a passive process of mere perception, listening is an active and dynamic process that involves manipulation of the auditory material in some way.

So, although we may be hearing a lot more music in today's multimedia environment, that does not necessarily translate to better listening. If anything, the ability to download or stream music at a click of a button on any number of devices has left us saturated, and has sapped our ability to concentrate on a single item.

Recent research shows that 80% of Spotify tracks are only streamed for a minute or less before the listener hops to the next track on the list. We are getting into the habit of absorbing our musical material in ever smaller bites.

A basic distinction can therefore be made between *hearing* music in the background while you get on with another activity, to settling down with a mug of tea, headphones on, and really *listening* in. How often do we create time for the latter, in reality? Ask your students:

- How long, on average, do you listen to a track?
- When was the last time you did nothing but listen to a track from beginning to end?
- Which activities do you do with music in the background?
- Why? Would it be the same without the music?
- When is the last time you made a connection between something you heard and your own musical practice?

Learning from the world of counselling

Dr Thomas Gordon made active listening into a popular concept in the 1960s and 1970s through using it as a main tool in his much-cited book *P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training*. He argues that active listening implies a five-part process that distinguishes it from passive hearing:

These five phases can be applied to listening in so many different fields, not least music. Let's consider their applications in turn.

DESIRE

Active listening starts with the listener actually caring about what they're about to listen to. A parent cannot connect with their child and seek to understand them unless they have an open attitude to hearing their point of view in the first place. A counsellor cannot offer therapy if they're distracted and disconnected from what their client is saying.

In musical terms, it helps to cultivate an enthusiasm not just for the piece you are about to listen to, but also for the act of listening itself. How do we do that? Increasing the desire to do something is a question of clear incentives and motivation. We have to make the connection clear between the act of active listening and:

- deeper enjoyment of the music.
- the ability to recognise similar features and processes in other pieces.
- improved playing and singing ability.
- fluency in imitating and inventing sound.
- creative inspiration in a number of different areas, not just music.

Our role as teachers, then, is to keep such incentives clear and a regular part of our approach. If we present listening just for listening's sake, it will quickly perceived as a sterile, box-ticking exercise.

To that end, it helps if the listening environment is welcoming and a space the listener can look forward to retreating into every day – whether that means a desk, a beanbag or a favourite corner. Active listening should be 'me-time', undisturbed and an important part of the day.

FOCUS

First, to attend to the basics: we need to tackle distractions and head them off before they can take hold and draw the attention. Therefore, in an ideal listening session:

- the phone is off.
- screens are blank.
- eyes are closed.
- the piece is listened to in its entirety, without skipping or fast-forwarding.

Imagine you walk through the park every morning before work, listening to the birds greeting the day. Now imagine – or recall – the difference it makes to spend some time studying birdsong. When you walk now, your ears are attuned to whether the chirping is from a robin or blackbird, what kind of call it is, and whether it is being echoed in the other corner of the park. Your ears will pick up on more and more subtle variations with every walk, whether the cadence changes, or the phrases mutate. And once you start learning one birdsong and are able to identify the common songbirds, so you are drawn into finding out more about the rarer varieties. It started, though, with focusing on just one sound.

The same is true when focus is applied to listening to music. We are able to:

- identify features that have passed us by before.
- spot their recurrence — and gain confidence from our ability to do so.

- note the variations.
- develop a curiosity for other similar, or rarer features.
- extend, therefore, our listening into previously unexplored territories.

INTERPRET

Active listening in a counselling session requires the therapist to contextualise their client's statements within a variety of contexts, such as biographical, medical, psychological and socio-cultural. So, too, the musical listener needs to apply their knowledge of facts around the genre of music they are listening to, its creator(s), different strata of content, as well as consider the affective components. All of this belongs to successful interpretation.

Active listening for the musician recruits all of our faculties: our analytical ear, our emotions, our imagination and recall of salient facts. You could represent this as a series of questions:

- Who created this?
- Why did they create it?
- When was it created, and for what?
- What techniques are the performers using?
- What is the style and structure?
- What features and devices can I identify?
- How does it make me feel, and why?
- So what?

There are many more questions we could ask, but these at least take us through the first levels of interpretation:

- Historical and cultural context
- Biography of the composer/creator(s)
- Overall shape, style and structure
- Compositional details and features
- Technical issues of performance
- Emotional content and response

And yes, many of the above could be simplified to the standard interrogatives:

- When and where was it written or created?
- Why?
- For whom? And who is performing?
- What are they performing?
- How are they performing it?
- How does it connect with me?

Then there is the 'so what?' as well, the moment where the listener challenges themselves to take the new information and channel into action that is relevant to themselves. This might be thought of as 'activating' the listening, and we will look its implications in the worksheets later.

These questions, in whatever form, push the listener from passive reception of the material into a quest for meaning – even if that meaning is personal to the listener and not valid beyond their individual understanding. Searching for meaning requires the listener to push into the peripheries of their thinking, to look for associated images and to employ the imagination. In other words, it takes some intellectual boldness.

REMEMBER

The above quest for meaning is enhanced when connections are made between past and present statements. An experienced counsellor will log certain phrases and observations within the conversation in order to reflect them back effectively to the speaker and enable deeper reflection. The musical listener, too, needs to develop their memory of features and devices by actively noting them, singing them or transcribing them somehow.

The first listen might well be enhanced through focusing purely aurally, but a notebook or manuscript should accompany repeated listens, so that details can be captured and connections made. Most of us need prompts for our memories, however trustworthy our powers of recall may seem.

Active listening is a process of discovery, and that is best facilitated when knowledge is constructed methodically. The more that is noted and recalled, the deeper the discovery can be on subsequent listens.

RESPOND

Going back to the world of parenting, Gordon notes that active listening is often evidenced in some form of response by the listener to the speaker, either verbal or non-verbal. Sometimes, however, the urge to respond at length should be resisted. The speaker is just looking for reassurance that they have indeed been heard, not for a clever opinion or hastily assembled solution.

An active musical listener needs to allow time to reflect, while avoiding jumping to hasty conclusions. Particularly with more challenging material, an open mind needs to be maintained and repeat listens encouraged. Just as a client will feel unheard if there is no signal from the listener of engaging with them, so a piece of music will quickly get lost in the hubbub of the everyday unless there is some time left to think and respond, whether in writing or not.

BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING

In the introduction, the point was made of how we take it as a given that 'having a good ear' – another potential benefit of active listening – is central to good musicianship. However, if we are honest, our own active listening habits and practice might be in poor repair, particularly when faced with a hectic teaching schedule. Finding the time to sit, pause and listen to a symphony or an album on headphones might feel like an indulgence when there's homework to mark.

The question then is: how do we expect our students to develop their own active listening habits? Notice the emphasis on 'habits': active listening, like any creative pastime, benefits from some element of discipline and routine, from carving out a time that will be regularly free from distraction and committing to it. The best incentive for any student is to see their teacher committing in a similar way to regular active listening, to have it modelled, and to be enthused by what the teacher shares after their own listening sessions.

Active listening and its cousin, aural training (in the traditional sense), have been shown to be in decline in the classroom, even when emphasis is given to them on paper in the curriculum. The law of diminishing returns sets in when teachers who are themselves lacking in aural skills side-step the requirements to teach them in class, and the students are only too happy not to be challenged in that way.

> The composer Aaron Copland wryly observed in his seminal book *What to Listen For in music:*
>
> **'The modern listener uses music as a couch; they want to be pillowed in it, relaxed from the stress of daily living.'**

The reality is that active listening can be hard, even when softened by a favourite comfy chair and a nice hot drink. It is perhaps harder than anything else on the curriculum. To return to the themes of the previous section, active listening requires:

- focus and energy.
- patience and time.
- deep reflection.
- creative thinking.

When unsupported by a score, the listener is constantly grappling with abstract rather than concrete concepts. It is like solving a quadratic equation without a whiteboard, or trying to understand a news report in a foreign language when you only speak a few words and stock phrases.

You might think this is exaggerated, but when our musical listening does not entail some form of mental wrestling, that's probably an indication that we're being content to stay at the surface. That has its own place and set of benefits, but it does not correspond to the definition of truly active listening.

That's not say that active listening cannot be fun, however. As with any other form of listening comprehension, the process can immediately be rewarding and the understanding quickly accelerated through repetition. We – and our students – just have to stick at it.

OTHER EXPRESSIONS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

As we've established, the subject of listening and ear training has attracted much research within music education. Active listening as described above has gone by many different names within this research, and there are three inter-related concepts that are worth looking into briefly, as they all offer an extra layer of meaning to the term when applied to music. They are:

- Aurality
- Audiation
- Playing by ear

Aurality

The meaning of aurality, within the domain of music at least, has come to encompass everything that pertains to the aural functions of musical communication, most often through non-verbal means. Technically it differs from 'orality' in that the latter puts emphasis on the verbal sharing of ideas, and there are some distinctions around whether the source of the sound is originally textual or not, but the two are generally used interchangeably in the literature.

The main finding within music education research is that aurality is relegated to being a secondary objective in teaching and learning where there is an increased emphasis on musical literacy. It seems that when the primary goal is to have students reading and writing notation, so the ear can be neglected, whether deliberately or not. However, it should not be a case of having to have one without the other. Many prominent educators have rallied against this tendency, arguing for aurality to be as highly prized as literacy. You will recognise the main names in the pro-aural camp:

- Zoltán Kodály
- Carl Orff
- Shinichi Suzuki

Different styles of music have privileged aurality over literacy – jazz, pop and world music in particular – but even within jazz education there is now a countercurrent that insists on symbol first and sound second.

The balanced view is to see both aurality and literacy as being as important as each other, and to look for ways of allowing them to work symbiotically together in the classroom, creating a virtuous cycle. Before we consider what that means in practice, let's look at the other two related ideas, as they will feed into this practical response.

Audiation

Audiation is means of conceptualising how aurality is expressed in the musician's thinking. Teacher and researcher Edwin Gordon used the term for when the listener applies thought to what is being heard, and then considers its application. It is an assimilation process much like the one we have already observed, except that Gordon makes the connection with practical skills. The more we listen, the better we play. Drawing on the analogy of a young child learning language, he reminds us that: 'The more you spoke, the more you listened, the more you listened the better you spoke.'

Gordon and others make the case for immediately translating the heard sound into something more concrete, for example through:

- **Interpretation** – putting words and concepts on what is being heard.
- **Imitation** on the instrument or in the voice.
- **Memorisation** for later recall.
- **Manipulation** of the idea in some way (eg same pitches, new rhythm).

NOTATIONAL AUDIATION AND 'THINKING IN SOUND'

This is the term Gordon gives for 'hearing' the notes as they are read on the page and making a mental construct out of them that can be used in some way later. This is where we get to the unique property of music that differentiates it from other forms of active listening: as musicians we are required to **think in sound**.

To us as musicians, thinking in sound is a basic requisite – so basic, in fact, that it often gets overlooked or taken for granted. To non-musicians it seems like a superpower. 'How can you possibly hear all those notes in your head?' they might say. The more we take pride in this 'special power', the more we train ourselves to think accurately in sound, the more we shall see the benefits across all areas of our music making, from pitching through to fluent improvisation.

Playing by ear

Playing by ear – as opposed to 'by rote' – is another expression of aurality and audiation in practice, and perhaps the best known of them all. Based on just listening to an excerpt of music, the musician responds on their instrument (including voice), either to play back what they have heard, or to analyse it under the fingers, or to reinterpret it in their own way. Playing by ear is commonplace in popular music jamming sessions and when learning a new piece or song from a recording or another person. Lucy Green, in her influential study of these and other practices *How Popular Musicians Learn*, has argued for such skills to be elevated to the mainstream of classroom pedagogy, as indeed they have been in many cases.

Applications and overcoming resistance

These three terms – aurality, audiation and playing by ear – have much overlap in their definitions, but each gives us more depth of understanding in terms of what active listening means or could mean for the musician. The main points for application in the classroom are:

- Working on ear skills needs to be held in tandem with literacy skills, not relegated to a secondary goal.
- The two work best when devised as a figure of eight, as integral parts of the same exercise rather than as separate activities.
- Where possible, seek to activate what is being heard immediately on the voice or on the instrument.
- Encourage 'thinking in sound' through sight-singing or some kind of vocalisation and interpretation of the notes on the page.

RESISTANCE

Although many will champion the principle of having a good ear, this often butts up against resistance in the classroom. This is because, among other things, ear-led exercises are often perceived as the 'fun' ones, and notation-based exercises as the 'serious' ones. That means that they can easily get squeezed out of a time-poor music schedule. Why spend time playing back a track from a recording when you could be studying a set work, for example? When the task is not directly linked to the specification, nor easily assessable even when it is, then it's not surprising that ear-led work gets put on the back burner.

We need to find ways around this by integrating creative aural musicianship into literacy-based study and by making using the ear and thinking in sound a natural and organic part of engaging with the score. The following worksheets offer some starter ideas on how we might do this.

PUTTING IT ALL INTO PRACTICE: MUSSORGSKY'S *PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION*

Any recording of Mussorgsky's programmatic masterpiece will work here, initially with the standard Ravel orchestration, but you may want to follow this Spotify playlist for ease of reference.

Worksheet for KS3 learners with guidance notes

Length: 1 hour

Resources: Basic hand percussion, coloured pens and paper, keyboards if time

Objectives:

- To promote active listening.
- To introduce programme music as an idea.
- To start discussion about orchestral colours.
- To develop vocabulary around instrumentation and texture.

Initial instruction:

Close your eyes and listen to the following piece without opening them. Imagine a story to go with the music. Try and remember which instruments are used and where.

Play 'Gnomus' then ask the following:

- Which character did you think of?
- What are they up to?
- Can you hear when they are cackling 'ha-Ha! ha-Ha, ha-Ha!' (0:18 on the Spotify track)
- Which instruments are playing in the low bit (0:50)?
- Some instruments are sliding down note from note (1:35). Which are they?
- Can you imagine that effect in a scary film?
- Put up your hands when you can hear the shake of a rattle (2:19).

Play the opening of 'The Old Castle', just the bassoon introduction.

- Can you sway in time to the bassoon tune?
- How about tap out a rhythm that goes with it?
- Can you sing some of it?

Play an excerpt from the saxophone solo, 0:41 to 2:02.

- Listen carefully and imagine characters to go with the saxophone, the strings and the oboe.
- Using colours, draw textures or symbols that go with each of the sounds.

Play the 'Promenade' theme.

This grand walk around the galleries is actually written in a mixture of 5/4 and 6/4, alternating between the two until the strings come in.

- Count up to 5 and 6 on your fingers to the music, alternating between the two: 5 first, then 6.
- Can you sing back the first four bars in the brass?
- Is it in the major or minor key?
- The picture is meant to be of large Russian men ambling around an art gallery. What makes it sound like the men are large?

Mussorgsky said the promenade was a self-portrait. He wasn't in great shape.

Creative response ideas:

- Take the rhythm of the first two bars and share it out between you in a group, either clapping or on hand percussion.
- Create some 'special effects' that could go with the 'Gnomus' music (horror movie style: eerie old notes, sudden surges, creaking and rattling effects, etc).

Extension exercise on the keyboards:

- Inspired by the 'Old Castle', find the same lilting rhythm on one note in the bass and create a two-bar idea above it that works above.

Worksheet for KS4-5 learners with guidance notes

Length: 2 hours+

Resources: Manuscript and note paper. Instruments should be unpacked and at the ready.

Objectives:

- To activate the listening.
- To develop vocabulary around instrumentation and orchestration.
- To identify musical features and comment on their effect.
- To connect listening to improvisation.

Play both piano and orchestral versions of the 'Promenade' theme.

- Mussorgsky originally wrote this piece for piano. Listen to the two versions of the 'Promenade' and comment on why Ravel's orchestration works so well.

Don't forget to include discussion on articulation, dynamics and texture.

- Memorise the opening statement and then try playing as much as you can back on your instrument.

Isolate the intervals, particular the perfect 4th on the quavers, and encourage students to have a go at the first four bars at least, in whatever key suits their instrument.

- How does Mussorgsky create the evil character of the 'Gnomus'?

Consider convulsive rhythms, suspenseful pauses, growling register, predominant tritones, chromatic scales, glissandi and percussion effects.

- The conductor and orchestrator Leopold Stokowski thought the Ravel orchestration lacked Russian colour. He therefore did his own version. Compare the two, making notes as you listen to which instruments are used and the effects they employ. Which do you prefer and why?

The first section – about a minute of music – will be enough for this comparison. Play each at least three times.

- Listen to this version of the 'Old Castle' played on the accordion. Now imagine you were the orchestrator. Which instruments would you use for each bit of the tune and why?

Once you've had the discussion, play the Ravel version and compare notes.

- Memorise then sing back the saxophone solo (seven bars). Can you play the opening of it on your instrument? Can you write it down on the manuscript?
- Create your own 'Old Castle' picture.

With instruments, recreate some of the atmosphere of the troubadour's ballade in this picture: the dancing 6/8 pedal, simple four-bar ideas in Aeolian then Phrygian modes, and two-note oscillating accompaniment.

Listen to the final 'Great Gate of Kiev' played on the piano.

- Hands up when you hear Russian orthodox hymn material (0:52, 1:56), pealing or tolling bells (1:27, 2:26) and the 'Promenade' theme (2:49).
- Going back to the opening, sing along to the bassline of the opening 'Great Gate' theme.
- Can you recognise any of the chords in the first four bars? Can you notate them?

  Ib – Vc – I – vi – Vb –V
- Create your own 'Great Gate' picture, complete with the descending scales and other bell imitations, and a march tune of your own over it.

This improvisation works best if you set up a simple eight-bar march using chords I, IV and V, and then overlay the bell effects afterwards. It doesn't have to fit harmonically – it's more the collage of sounds that is effective here. A build-up on a pedal note can be added either at the beginning or as a middle section.

CONCLUSION

These worksheets are meant as templates for creating your own active listening exercises that suit your particular schedule. If there's no time for an extended session, then even ten minutes as a regular feature of the week would be a good start. This needs to be combined with the students building their own private listening habits outside of school hours.

For those busy in exam terms, you could emphasise how active listening is a stress-busting exercise in mindfulness. Whatever the occasion, present active listening is a core daily habit, as important as getting a good breakfast or regular exercise. Students can feedback as a regular session-opener on recent listening, swap playlists, or contribute to a class playlist that grows over the year.

With time, 'active listening' will hopefully become a redundant expression for them as their listening naturally absorbs the principles in this resource. As a musician, to listen is to be active. Our ears should have it no other way.