

Bonus Chapter 1: Playing by Ear

For some reason there's a huge misconception that playing by ear is an innate "talent" that people "just have a knack for." This is completely false; playing by ear is absolutely learnable by anyone by anyone willing to put in the effort. When I started playing, I couldn't play by ear at all. I practiced for a while and now I learn new pop songs every week without sheet music. Here are the top tips that helped me.

Tip 1: Sing the Melody

I'm a terrible singer. I'm not being humble, I'm being honest. My vocal chords weren't built for music, that's why I play piano :P. But singing is still an *essential* tool for learning how to play by ear.

If you've ever learned a language (let's say Spanish), you know you learn it much better if you learn words in *each direction*. By each direction, I mean you can see a Spanish word and translate it into English, AND you can see an English word and translate it into Spanish. Learning it like this helps your brain develop a true understanding of the language.

There are two parts to playing by ear: hearing the pitch with your ears and creating a pitch in your head. When you learn a song by ear, you are taking the pitch you hear and translating it into a sound you can create in your mind. But you also need to practice in the other direction, creating a sound in your mind, and then hearing it with your ears and correcting it.

If you can't hear the pitch in your mind, you can still learn to play the song on piano with the "guess and check" method, but you *won't improve at all*. Every time you try to learn a new song by ear you'll have to go through the long process of guessing and checking each individual note. So when you're learning a song by ear, first *try* to hear the sound in your mind and really think about which note might be next, don't just blindly guess.

When you sing the melody, you are *forced* to create the pitch in your head. This is how you start learning pitch relationships, and you'll get a feel for what different intervals sound like.

Don't worry about your vocal tone, focus on whether or not you're hitting the correct pitches. Try singing along with the song playing for the difficult parts. Then turn the music off and see if you can sing it a cappella. If you can't find the notes, turn the music on again. It's going to be bad at first, trust me, but everyone goes through that tough first stage of learning. Once you get the hang of it, it'll get much easier.

Simple Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Does the pitch go up or down?
- Does it change by a small step or a large leap?
- Is the note in the key or an accidental?
- Does the interval sound major or minor?

Tip 2: Use the Sheet Music *Just Enough*

Now it's time to start learning the actual song on piano. It's going to be challenging, so start with the easiest, most recognizable part of the song, usually the chorus.

When you first start learning, you're going to need the sheet music, but you're going to want to try to use it *the least amount possible*. You want to use it *just enough* to get you going. So start by using the sheet music to find the first note of the chorus.

Then try to find the second note just by singing it and trying to find it on the keyboard. Start by asking yourself simple questions like "does the pitch go up or down" and "does it sound like a small step or a large leap." If you can't find it, the second step is to put the headphones on and try to find it by listening to the song. If you still can't find it, *then* use the sheet music to find the next note.

Keep doing this with all the notes of the melody. You'll notice a lot of times it's just a couple tricky notes that are tough to figure out, but the rest of the melody is pretty easy. And if you're learning a pop song, there's a lot of repetition, so once you learn part of the melody you'll have actually learned much more of it.

When you're using this method, it's really easy to get lazy and just go to the sheet music more than you should. *Really try* to learn it without the sheet music, and only use it when you absolutely need to.

Tip 3: Learn Your Theory

Knowing your theory gives you a HUGE advantage when playing ear. It gives you "clues" to what the next note is and narrows down your possible notes.

For example, if you're in the key of C Major, you're only going to be playing the white notes (for the most part, there could be accidentals but there probably won't be many for pop songs). So instead of 12 possible notes, there are only 7 possible notes to choose from.

You'll also get the feel for which scale degrees are more common than others. For example, the majority of pop songs start on the first, third, or sixth scale degree. So for your first note you can be pretty confident that it's one of those three notes!

Tip 4: The Trick to the Left Hand Chords

Learning to identify the chords in the left hand is *much more difficult* and complex than learning the melody. Fortunately there's a way around this.

A little trick that a lot of people don't know: *you don't have to play the "right" chords*. As long as it sounds good, nobody is going to care (or even notice) if you use the exact chords used in the song.

Most pop chords use 4 chords, the I, vi, IV, and V (this is another good reason to learn your theory!). So in C major, you'll be using the chords C, A minor, F, and G.

Even if the song uses other chords, *you can still harmonize it with these 4 chords and it will sound good*. So don't worry about using the "correct" chords, just find ones that sound good.

To figure out which chord to use when, just play the melody and notice which notes are played the most in that section. Then just play the chord that has similar notes in the left hand. And remember, the bottom line is if it sounds good it sounds good. So use your ear and decide which chords you want to use.

Tip 5: Learn to Recognize Patterns

When you learn enough songs by ear, you'll start to recognize common patterns in popular songs. For example, "do re mi" is a very common pattern used in a TON of popular songs. "Mi re do la" and "sol mi re do" are two other very common ones.

Once you start learning these, that's when your playing by ear will really take off and skyrocket. You'll be able to string together common patterns and start learning songs *reallllly fast*.

Wrap Up and Key Points

Just like anything else, playing by ear takes time and commitment, so don't get discouraged when it gets frustrating! It might take a month or two before you really start getting the hang of it. But once you do, it starts getting really fun, and once it's fun it's a lot more motivating to practice.

So put the time and commitment in to push past that first phase of learning, I promise you it'll be worth it. Here are the key points again for you to remember:

- Sing the Melody
- Use Sheet Music *only* as much as you need to
- Learn your theory
- Harmonize with any left hand chords that sound good
- Learn to recognize patterns

And remember, you're ALWAYS welcome to contact me if there's something you're confused about:

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