

part of the country where you live, and that would be fine. But is that all a visitor should experience of the United States? What about its other great cities and natural wonders? The analogy with music seems clear. There is a vast and varied world of music out there. Why confine yourself to just one small portion of it and miss out on other kinds of music that could enrich your life? The more people know about music, especially concert music, the more quality they add to their lives.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN

You deal with acquiring information in every course you take in college. But music is probably the only course that requires listening skill, because hearing what happens to the sounds is the very essence of music. For this reason, it is vital to know what to do to improve your ability to perceive musical sounds. The following are suggestions for doing that.

*Realize that hearing sounds and listening to them are not the same thing.* Most people use the word *listen* in a very casual way. When musicians talk about listening, however, they mean an activity requiring concentration. There is a vitally important and fundamental point here: *Listening to music is much more than just being aware of its sounds.* Unless you really grasp the basic difference between hearing and listening, chances are that you will hear music only superficially, and as a result, will find limited meaning and satisfaction from listening to it. Unless you have a rather strong background in music, listening perceptively is going to require some effort. It doesn't happen automatically.

*Adopt the habit of listening for the features of the particular musical work.* Don't just let the sounds wash over you. Don't stop with just being aware that some music is playing. Don't daydream or think about other things or visualize scenes while listening to concert music.

Instead, as you listen, decide something about:

- The nature of melodies and themes
- The texture of the music
- The nature of the rhythm and its patterns
- The changes in dynamic levels
- The more important tone qualities
- The forms and other musical techniques

At first, this will probably not be easy to do. But over time, you will get better at noticing and describing these aspects of music. Try to determine these six points, even if you're not sure your answers are correct. The effort will help you to listen better.

*Develop different modes of listening.* At least three different modes are available, and each has its place when listening to music. One mode involves listening for the sensuous qualities in a musical work, for the physical effects it produces. The chills that run down a listener's back when an orchestra or choral group reaches a climactic point in a musical work is an example of music's sensual power.

A second mode of listening centers on the expressive power of music. A musical work may give an impression of sadness, for example, but it does not describe what has caused that feeling. The emotional responses produced by music are general, not specific. The fact that music does not express definite meanings is one of its virtues. Words are too conventional and inflexible to allow for full expression. Music can be, and often is, a direct route to one's deepest feelings.

A third mode of listening is sometimes termed "sheerly musical." It consists of listening for what happens in the music, what notes are being played or sung, at what speed, in what combinations with other notes, on what instruments, with what degree of loudness, and so on. It is also the mode in which you become aware of the skill and imagination that musicians bring to creating interesting combinations of sounds. This

Remind yourself often of this crucial fact as you progress through the course.

Fantasizing may be enjoyable, but it takes your attention away from the music.

All of these musical terms are explained in the following three chapters.

Adopting the habit of listening for specific features applies to all kinds of music from all parts of the world.

*Sensuous* means "of or appealing to the senses."

Listening perceptively is an active experience. It requires that listeners mentally participate in the process.

mode usually requires some education to achieve, something this course and book and its ancillaries seek to provide.

The three modes of listening are not mutually exclusive, of course. People frequently switch back and forth among them as they listen. They can sense the rich warmth of a particular chord, respond to the romantic power of a flowing melody, and also understand that the music follows a certain form.

*Develop different expectations about different types of music.* Everyday life teaches us not to listen carefully. People learn to ignore the sounds of traffic, clocks ticking, and air conditioners turning on and off. People learn to “tune out” music too. They must, because music is heard nearly everywhere—in airports, supermarkets, dentists’ offices, and while driving the car. Music accompanies almost every activity from cleaning house to jogging. People would become mentally exhausted if they listened intently to all the music they hear each day.

What’s more, most people don’t listen carefully to the popular music they hear. Instead, they get most of what it has to offer by “absorbing” it, much as they absorb the impression of the pattern in wallpaper. It’s *not* a question of which kind of music is better! *Popular music and concert music simply have different uses, and therefore they have different listening requirements.* You should use a casual style of listening for most of the music you hear every day. But you should also learn to listen in a contemplative, thoughtful way to concert music.

And what are the differences in listening to classical and popular music?

- Most concert music is not played as loudly as popular music. To a novice listener, concert music may seem pretty pale when heard at its much more restrained level of sound.
- Most popular music consists of short pieces that last only a couple of minutes. The time span of many concert works is *much* longer. To someone not used to it, listening to concert music may seem like watching a video of a basketball game in slow motion.
- Popular music rarely contains any development of themes or the other more complicated musical practices found in concert music. It is simpler and requires little or no effort to understand.
- With the exception of stage productions, concert music is presented without theatrics, flashing lights, or gyrating performers.

*Improve your memory for music.* Remembering is absolutely essential for understanding music. At any particular moment, only one millisecond of a piece of music can be heard. What was sounded before that millisecond exists only in your memory. What will be heard in future moments can only be a guess based on what was heard previously.

It’s not like that with what you see. An entire painting or piece of sculpture can be seen in a second or two. If memory were made an essential part of looking at a painting, it might be something like this: An unfamiliar picture is covered except for one thin vertical opening. You can see the picture only as that opening moves across the painting from one side to the other. Your comprehension of the picture would result from: (1) your memory of what you’ve seen, (2) the tiny portion you could see at the millisecond, and (3) your guess about what would be revealed in succeeding moments.

Would this be a difficult way to see a picture? Definitely! But that is the way music is perceived, and that is why memory is so important in listening to music. To pursue our analogy further, the more times you see the opening drawn across the picture, the better you would recall its images and the more accurate your comprehension of the whole. That is why listening to a musical work several times, especially a complex one, is necessary for understanding it.

*Become more sensitive to musical sounds.* Each sound in a musical work evokes some response, *if it is noticed.* A changed rhythm, a note in a chord, or the instrument playing a melody affects a listener’s response. A sensitivity to what is heard in music is nearly as important as remembering it.

The careful analysis of an artwork requires more time, of course.

Not only is hearing the same work several times a good way to remember it better, it also helps in acquiring positive feelings for the work.

You can’t respond to something you don’t hear.