

Memorization of Music by Ear:

By Lily Swan

The memorization process for those who learn music by ear is a little different from learning by notation. We don't have the visual cues that notation gives us at the beginning of a piece, such as key signature or meter. We still need to figure those things out when we listen. When we are learning by ear, we don't have the whole piece spread out in front of us, so it is a way of learning in real time, as the music is being played. Anyone can learn to play by ear; it just takes practice, not special genes. For me the step-by-step process of learning by ear goes something like this:

1. I listen to the tune all the way through. I am listening for several things.
 - a. What meter is the piece in? Is it in straight 4/4 time, or does it have the waltz feel of 3/4 or 6/8?
 - b. I am listening for the key signature. The last note of the piece (especially the last note in the bass) will usually be the name of the key. If it ends on E, it is in E (major or minor).
 - c. Does it sound like it is in a major or a minor key?
 - d. How is the piece constructed in terms of sections? Some pieces just have two sections, an A and a B section, and others have more.
 - e. Are there repeats? In learning by ear, we are still looking for patterns within the piece to help us memorize it.
2. I start "chunking" the piece. I listen to a short phrase and learn just the melody line. I will usually learn the melody all the way through in small bite-size pieces before learning the bass accompaniment.
 - a. What am I listening for when I am learning the melody? I am listening for the distance between notes (intervals). Does the phrase move in step-wise motion, or does it have large skips? Is it moving up or down from the starting note? This can be a trial and error process at first, but with practice you will train your ear to recognize the distance between notes.
 - b. Learning fingerings is a little different when playing by ear. We have to figure out what works as we go. Part of fingerings and placement is preparing for what is coming next so that we don't run out of fingers. Since we don't know what is coming next until we listen to the next phrase, sometimes we have to backtrack and work the fingerings out a couple times.
 - c. Listen for the rhythm. Make sure you are getting the count right so that the feel is smooth and even.

3. Learning the bass line accompaniment is something I usually do in chunks too, not just in terms of phrasing, but in terms of how many notes I am adding under the melody. I often learn the bass line in conjunction with bite-size chunks of melody rather than by itself, unless it has a complex arrangement. The reason for this is because the bass is supporting the melody. Listening and then playing both parts in small phrases shows us how they fit together rhythmically.

The bass line is going to harmonize the melody. Again, figuring out what those lowest notes are can be trial and error at first, but with practice, it becomes easier.

Whereas with the melody, I am listening for the distance between notes, with the bass, I am listening for the *quality of harmony* underneath the melody. Is it major or minor, or perhaps even diminished? There are only so many ways to harmonize a melody note. The melody note will usually either be the root, the third, or the fifth of the chord, so that is one of your clues when figuring out the bass. For example: if the melody note is a G, it could be the root of a G Major chord, the 3rd of an E minor chord, or the 5th of a C Major chord. Sometimes you will not have all three notes represented in a chord, but the bass and melody note will outline or imply a triad chord.

The bass note or chord will usually fall under a strong beat. The strong beats will usually tell you which melody note is getting harmonized. You don't need to harmonize every single melody note; just one or two per measure usually.

- a. Listen for and find the main root bass note under the melody phrase you are working on. The bass is usually the root (bottom) of the chord.
- b. Determine whether the harmony is major or minor or diminished. This will tell you what additional notes may be in the chord or broken chord arrangement under the melody.
- c. Listen for a repetitive pattern in the bass. Sometimes the same pattern is repeated on a different chord.

In summary:

1. Listen for the key and count of the piece, and listen for sections that may repeat.
2. Learn the melody line in chunks, listening for intervals (distance between notes).
3. Learn the bass line in chunks, listening for harmony.
4. Put it all together phrase by phrase.