

Transcription, Ear Training, and Learning by Ear

Transcription has several meanings, but for this lesson we will use one of them: the act of taking music we hear and writing it down on music paper. Most of the time when we are learning an instrument the music is already written down for us, but another way of learning is to listen to a song or melody and learn the notes *before* it is written down.

Learning the notes just by listening is what we will call “learning by ear”. So if you figure out the notes to a song you are listening to, that is learning by ear, and then if you write those notes down on music paper, that is transcription.

Why do we need to learn by ear? Well, being able to find a note on our instrument that we hear from a song means we have to be *thinking* of the sound of the note in our head; then we can try to guess the note on our instrument. If we practice doing this a lot, that is what we will call “ear training”. Getting good at guessing notes this way makes us better at playing our instrument, even playing music already written down, because we start to hear our notes before we play them, and that makes it easier to read sheet music.

How to Start Practicing Ear Training and Learning by Ear

- Choose a song or melody that you know really well. As you get better at learning by ear you can choose songs that you don't know as well, but at the beginning it is easier and less frustrating if you choose songs or melodies that you have heard a lot.
- If possible, find a way to listen to the song that lets you pause it partway through. We will probably need to learn one note at a time, and we will need to push “pause” **right after** the note happens. If we can't pause the song, the notes kind of run together in our head and it is harder to find each one. You will also probably have to “rewind”, or replay note you are trying to guess several times.
- Write reminders. You can use music paper if you want, but if you don't know how to write the notes down on music paper that is okay! Find a way to keep reminders of the notes you learn so that if you don't get to practice for a while you won't have to relearn them.
- Be patient! Ear training is a slow process at first but it goes faster with practice!!