



How to Play by Ear

Emett Wilson

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I am well aware of the widespread and well-justified antipathy toward playing by ear. I was indoctrinated with this same antipathy, but, at the age of sixteen, after my first appearance with a symphony orchestra, I revolted and attempted to doodle at the piano. To my dismay, I discovered I could not play Dixie by ear—even in one hand. Alexander's Ragtime Band came to the rescue and opened up new vistas in music. May all other musicians, young and old, popular and classic, dilettante and professional, enjoy the same opportunity.

The curse of notation is that it uses a psychological unit different from that which the composer uses. Our objective in musical performance is always to re-create the musical thought and experience of the composer. But the composer thinks in terms of musical sound; the symbols of notation are a necessary evil—the machinery of communication. We can best recapture the musical thought when we reproduce it directly and do not need this disconcerting mechanism of notation.

Everyone can play by ear. Some can go farther than others. Unfortunately, no one has ever attempted to teach serious music students to depend upon their ears as much as possible. Eventually the ear player reaches his limit and must use notation to study music further; but this limit is much broader than is generally supposed. Moreover, our musical horizon—our limit of comprehension—is not far beyond this point where the ear must yield to rational machinery for guidance.

Everyone can play by note. Some can go farther than others. In any event, musical comprehension is expected to accompany this note playing. But eventually the note player reaches his limit. He will do well to investigate what ear playing can contribute to his further progress.

When we learn to talk, either in our mother tongue or in a foreign language, we do not all begin with the same words. We learn most easily the words which have to do with our chief interests. Similarly, in playing by ear the student should follow his own inclinations rather than the order of this book. One does not need a text to learn to speak a language which he is hearing several hours every day; but a grammar and a dictionary are a great help. One does not need a text to play music which he is hearing on radio and records several hours each day; but this book will help. The ear player must practice, just as the note player must practice; but the practice need not be drudgery. The most effective practice consists in having a good time with the instrument.

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