

SEVEN BASIC REQUIREMENTS TO PLAY MUSIC BY EAR

Sometimes I get a call from someone inquiring about lessons and say they specifically want to learn to play by ear. They've tried to teach themselves and now need help getting over the current hump. Or they've tried the note reading approach but found it too difficult or slow. Admittedly, reading the staff isn't needed in every situation. For example, sometimes at a gig, a song will get requested. Everyone in the band may not have it learned but be somewhat familiar with it. So we'll either talk through the chord changes or quickly scratch them out on paper as needed and we're good to go.

Being able to read the staff is undoubtedly beneficial. What you pursue depends on what you want to do. Classical? Note reading is a must. Jazz? Very helpful to at least be able to read the melody line, but jazz is mostly played by ear. I know some smoking hot improvisers that can't read a lick of music and have amazing ears. Pop music? Maybe not, but it still helps. Learning to play strictly by ear may even be more demanding than the note reading approach. Learning about music via the staff, in my opinion, will help the student connect to the basic patterns and layout of the instrument. In the long run, the student that learns both approaches will come to know the benefits inherent in both note reading and playing by ear.

You've probably seen the myriad of music courses pushing the idea of playing by ear over the sight reading approach. You can even play like a pro overnight! So what's required to play by ear? Good visual perception for one. Allow me to share some ideas from personal and teaching experiences. Here's a list of at least Seven Basic Requirements to Play Music By Ear. The student must at least **know**:

- 1♫ how to think ABCDEFG, the foundation of the music language - forwards and backwards
- 2♫ the names and location of all the notes on the instrument (piano, guitar, sax, etc) – natural notes, sharps, flats, etc)
- 3♫ how to spell the 12 major scales and triads/chords for every key, which also means knowing...
- 4♫ key signatures, i.e. the name of every key according to the number of sharps and flats in the spelling of the scale
- 5♫ how to spell at least the basic chord qualities (major, minor, diminished), identify their sound qualities and know all chord inversions in every key
- 6♫ the numerical relationships between the scale tones and chords of any given key
- 7♫ how to transpose using alphabets and numbers

This is a short list of concepts that should be *memorized* so that they can be quickly accessed from your very own personal hard drive – your brain. Depending on the skill level one wants to reach, only part of this list needs to be learned. With that said, I've found that developing the technique - gaining physical control of the muscles used in playing, and coordinating the eyes, ears, and hands is the real challenge. Number 8? Intellectually understanding music concepts, which is basically a logical, systematic language of alphanumeric symbols related to sounds, is really quite simple. I've seen many a student get discouraged when the awareness of "this is harder than I thought" sets in due to physical limitations. The mechanisms of the instrument have to be manipulated with the fingers in order to hear the sounds. It can't and won't happen any other way. Some fingers are naturally weaker than others and need to be strengthened. Add to this coordinating the breathing with the fingering in the case of wind instruments. So it isn't so much the music itself - it's *execution*.

This is one of the reasons why teachers "push" students to practice scales and exercises and the resulting benefits are amazing. Repetitious training isn't necessarily supposed to be fun. Let's just be honest and tell it like it is. Sometimes that's why beginners quit - they only want the fun part. Truth be told, playing music isn't fun until a certain threshold is crossed, until a required process is completed. How much time this takes is different for everyone. In the early stages, there's such a focus on eye/ear/hand coordination that the relationships between the notes never reaches the point of being heard and subsequently understood! True playing by ear happens only after getting a good handle on execution, developing the required muscle memory as it relates to the instrument itself. When the student can make the basic major scales sound musical, he's on the way, but this is only the beginning! Your instrument odometer needs to reach well into the thousands of notes played before things really begin to make sense.

Primarily, a basic knowledge of music is a must to play by ear as you've seen. Playing a musical instrument is also physically demanding. No one can just 'play'. It's a combination of thinking in the language of music and physical execution of the notes on the instrument. When one is thinking in the language (French, Spanish, Music), they aren't reading, be it words or music notes. They're simply *speaking*. Dedicated musicians know this very well. They keep pushing the technical boundaries, crossing new thresholds and exploring harmonic landscapes. At that level, almost everything is played by ear, which in essence means drawing from the wellspring of musical ideas that have been practiced until memorized (there's that word again). The physical connection to the instrument has been developed to the point of not

having to think too much, if at all, about execution. Making music is more natural and effortless. To reproduce the melodies heard in the inner ear (speaking) or from sheet music is now just a matter of working out the fingering.

Looking at the seven requirements, **#1**-knowing the names of the notes is obviously very important. **#2**-The pattern inherent in keyboard layouts makes note location relatively easy. Every instrument has its own design and note pattern layouts that must be learned. **#3**-There are 12 notes and 12 major scales that are the foundation for ear training. The patterns are all different since sharps and flats must be included in the various scale spellings. *[Story time: I had a student who could play several hymns in the key of 'C'. He was also a singer and wanted to learn to transpose songs for his vocal range. No matter what method I tried, it was like pulling teeth to move them from the habitual comfort zone of 'C'. That student never worked through that obstacle and still happily plays with vigor in the key of 'C' to this day.]* What you pursue depends on what you want to do, but you also need follow through! **#4**-A key signature will actually be read from the staff of sheet music. But a successful play-by-ear musician will have this knowledge memorized from knowing how scales are spelled with their respective combination of sharps and flats. The skills learned in **#5, 6, & 7** come from lots of time spent experimenting, observing, listening, playing lots of songs, bugging your great guitar playing neighbor, and doing this repeatedly until the process becomes more natural. I believe that once a student gets the basic scales and chords learned, they'll have a good foundation for advancing a bit more easily.

But when it's all said and done (and it is easier said than done), it still comes down to knowledge and execution. Without training the hands, progress in making music will be slow and a bit cumbersome. The Bible speaks of two home builders: one built a house on a rock, the other built his house on sand. Referring back to that certain smoking hot improviser, I found out he didn't read music whatsoever. You could never tell, though, by listening to him play. Some speculated he surely had classical training. But because he had basic knowledge and great execution skills, (built on a rock) he was in position to easily fill in the blanks where he may have lacked. A solid foundation is necessary before you can build upon it.

In summary, I offer you this: you aren't learning to play an instrument – you're a student of music and will learn to play the instrument as a by product of learning about music - understanding the relationships between alphabets, numbers and sounds. Surely every instrument has its physical requirements in regard to execution. But knowing about music will help you better understand how to make music on that instrument. It can all be done by ear by way of the vocabulary of music without ever having to read one single note if you so desire. What you pursue depends on what you want to do. Regardless of what you choose to do, gain the necessary skills and knowledge you need to do that particular thing. It's all a process and there are no shortcuts. But by all means, stay *with and in* the process. If you stop, it's like starting over again. The adage 'use it or lose it' is still alive and well. Keep using and exercising your skills. You only get better by doing so. Blessing and peace!

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On add2, add9, sus4 and sus2 Chords