

LISTENING TO MUSIC

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It would require a hundred lives merely to get acquainted with all the good music that exists.

~Robert Schumann, composer (1810–1856)

Listening to music, or more to the point, finding the music you want to listen to, has never been easier. Between live performances, televised performances, traditional radio, cable music channels, DVDs, CDs, mp3s on mobile devices, YouTube, Spotify, and a list that goes on and on, we are surrounded today by various means to hear music. The world of recorded music has changed remarkably with the advent of digital recordings and consumer access to YouTube, online radio, and other streaming music services. These industry changes have had a terribly negative impact on the recording industry and have been blamed for major musical artists touring less frequently, for shorter periods of time, or not at all.

But these industry changes have also put previously unimaginable amounts of music at the fingertips of computer and mobile-device users. Instead of calling or writing stores in search of the one recording missing from a collection, or generally making a habit of searching yard sales, thrift shops, and second-hand shops for those obscure recordings, musicians and music lovers can now download quite a bit from online stores like Amazon and iTunes. In addition, the Internet makes it remarkably easy to scour the planet for that aforementioned recording needed to make a Coltrane or von Karajan collection complete. Now we can also download a single song from an album, or a single movement from a larger piece, without having to purchase an entire album. This, by the way, is a great money-saver for music students.

For professional musicians and music students alike, listening is a huge part of learning. Imagine learning to play basketball, or any other sport, without ever seeing a professional or college game, learning to paint or sculpt without ever having seen a painting or sculpture, or learning to cook Italian cuisine without ever having tasted it. Students learn a tremendous amount about sound production, pitch, rhythm, and style by listening to professional musicians. Music teachers will often give listening assignments that include several recordings of the piece a student is playing in order to let them hear different interpretations as they study the piece. Many teachers also recommend that students

“listen around” a piece of music they are learning. If a flute student is working on one of the Mozart flute concertos, they should be listening to some of Mozart’s concertos for other instruments. A student learning some Ellington tunes in jazz band should listen to Ellington, as well as to tunes by other jazz greats of the era and covers of those tunes by other artists.

For singers, listening is an absolutely essential tool for learning music. Singers cannot put in the hours of practice that an instrumentalist can—the voice just can’t withstand that kind of workout every day. Therefore, singers rely on recordings to help them learn pieces as well as pronunciations of foreign-language lyrics. They also use accompaniment-only recordings of their pieces, often recorded by their teacher. They listen to the accompaniment while following the music, inhaling in tempo and preparing to sing, but then silently “singing in their head” to learn how their part fits into the accompaniment. They also sing along with the recorded accompaniment, learning what to listen for in the piano part.

Helping your child listen well is an important part of supporting their music education. This doesn’t mean you have to amass an enormous collection of CDs or go on weekly downloading binges. Libraries lend recordings. Internet auction sites carry used recordings, as do some second-hand stores. YouTube is an excellent resource for listening to a variety of recordings of a single piece. If you do purchase music online and download it, remember to back it up immediately after purchase to avoid losing it accidentally.

Attending live performances is also an important part of listening well. Take your child to hear local choirs, orchestras, and bands, if you can. Colleges and universities are a great source of free or inexpensive concerts and offer the added bonus of letting your child hear and see performers that are not too far from their own age. Watch for arts programming on television as well. Most cable providers offer numerous audio-only music channels. Some cable providers carry channels devoted to great performances with video included.

Don’t forget how much you bring to the table in terms of introducing your child to music and including it in their daily life. Play music when you’re in the car with your child. Play music while you prepare dinner, clean the house, or spend some downtime at home. Point out interesting music you hear on films or television shows you watch with your child. By all means listen with your child and start conversations about what you’re hearing. Remember to share your own favorite music with your musical child. You may get some eye-rolling, or take a little teasing about “old-fashioned” music, but whether you see it immediately or not, sharing and talking about the music you love will create a shared-interest bond with your child.