

THE SEVEN LEVELS OF LISTENING TO CLASSICAL MUSIC

LEVEL ONE – First Hearing:

Hearing a piece for the first time passively without much active listening. General impression of mood, attention wanders in and out, some sense of liking or disliking. Would be hard-pressed to hum melodies or describe music a few days later. (This is not to say that a trained listener can't garner much from a first hearing. Also, some non-musicians are so innately sensitive to music that they can listen to unfamiliar music with a profound response and much enjoyment.)

Time and effort required: **minimal**

LEVEL TWO – Repeated Listening:

Listening to a piece over and over until very familiar. Still mostly passive, but piece is memorized at some level. Can hum along with tunes and anticipate favorite bits. Strong sense of personal appeal of music. May evoke vivid emotional response or inspire imaginative pictures/scenes. However, not able to accurately describe piece or understand how it is put together.

Time and effort required: **mild** – This is the easiest “bang for the buck” way to increase enjoyment of classical music.

LEVEL THREE – Structural:

Able to listen attentively to familiar piece, noting architecture and understanding musical events. Can follow moment-by-moment typical forms such as theme and variations, rondo, sonata form, minuet and trio, etc.

Time and effort required: **moderate** – This is the most accessible advanced listening skill for non-musicians to grasp. Most listeners are unaware of form, but it is surprisingly easy to learn when clearly explained, followed by some practice.

LEVEL FOUR – Readily accessible fine points:

Consciously noting shifting details such as: instrumentation, texture, phrase structure, recurring motives, duple vs. triple meter, shifts in mode (major/minor), obvious key modulations, etc. Hearing not just the obvious melody, but also bass lines and prominent inner voices.

Time and effort required: **moderate** – These are the subtleties that non-musicians can learn to hear relatively easily. It just requires having these elements pointed out and explained, followed by some practice.

LEVEL FIVE – Harmonic understanding:

Following in detail the harmonic events of a piece, on a large scale from key area to key area while also noting subtleties of individual chords and harmonization.

Time and effort required: **advanced** – This requires more extended musical training and the gift of a good ear. We all respond strongly at a subconscious level to this vital component of music, but usually only trained musicians have full conscious access here.

LEVEL SIX – Critical/Evaluative:

This level may helpfully be divided into two sub-categories: *Performance* and *Composition*.

Performance: Focusing on the quality and interpretative choices of a specific performance, noting nuances of phrasing, rubato, ensemble, etc. Evaluating musicianship, temperament, and insight. How does this performance compare with others of the same piece? (Also, questions of historical practice and original instruments belong here.)

Composition: Judging quality of composer's work: effectiveness, compositional craft, taste, originality, inspiration, etc.

Time and effort required: **advanced** – As with **LEVEL FIVE**, this tends to result from much experience. Trained musicians typically emphasize this level, often above most of the others. Many innately musical non-musicians will have strong and valid insights here, too. (Most reviews of concerts and recordings operate at **LEVEL SIX**.)

LEVEL SEVEN – Historical/Contextual:

Listening to a piece while possessing a knowledge of the other works by the same composer, the works of contemporary composers, the artistic and social conditions of its era, what music came before and after it, generally a broad knowledge of overall classical repertory and musical history.

Time and effort required: **advanced** – Real mastery can only be achieved with many years of study. However, even a little of this is very enriching to the listening experience.

The first five levels may be thought of as advancing sequentially, with each building on the previous. The last two levels are really equally advanced, with neither one having greater importance. A trained listener will ideally listen at multiple levels simultaneously or move seamlessly from level to level as fancy and inclination prompt.

MUSICMAP NOTES

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