

MUSICAL LISTENING - AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Musical education in today's schools is founded on a set of laws and principles that imbue it with educational and scientific value. This value is conferred by the nature of music as an artistic phenomenon, by the distinctive human psychic activity involved in creating–perceiving–interpreting musical works, and by the specific process of training and developing students in the values of musical culture.

Keywords:

Music-listening, established methods, active musical school.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of records and other magnetic recordings in the second half of the 20th century paved the way for music-listening methodologies, a field exemplified by *La pratique de l'éducation musicale à l'école élémentaire* (Blin, 1969). In this work, the author draws a distinction between *hearing* and *listening*, the latter involving the analysis of the development of sensitivity and its placement in the cultural domain. He notes that hearing is limited to surrounding sounds that require no intellectual or volitional processes, whereas listening is a more complex, conscious intellectual guided process offering meaningful cognitive benefits. Hearing can be of three types:

- passive hearing, without verbal or nonverbal involvement;
- active hearing;
- empathetic hearing, involving both understanding and sharing the feelings of the sender's message.

Musical perception is regarded as the cornerstone and essence of musical activity. The act of perceiving music is redefined as a series of actions: hearing, feeling, experiencing, understanding, internalizing, and attributing meaning to music.

According to the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary (DEX), musical listening entails identifying sounds through the sense of hearing, the act of attending to music or listening to a piece of music. The reception of music and its message is based on a lengthy and complex chain of neurophysiological and sensory-acoustic processes, requiring the involvement of the acoustic analyzer (the musical ear) as well as the reception of sounds in both symmetrical areas of the temporal lobes.

Auditory acuity is characterized by the ability to detect a wide range of sounds. Hearing is of paramount importance, serving as the foundation for human communication and cooperation. Although many students possess keen hearing, not all of them demonstrate musical aptitude. The perception of musical sounds must be “decoded,” which calls for an act of will, because “the volitional qualities of a person are not hereditary; they are not inherited but are gathered during the individual psychological development.” Research suggests that only a small number of students show interest in the usefulness of the knowledge their teachers wish to impart. Consequently, it falls to us as educators to spark their curiosity, foster a desire for learning, and cultivate their determination to study—particularly among students whose initial interest, while present, may need reinforcement.

“*Musical listening*,” as a practice of presenting music in the classroom through various means, must carefully select its repertoire in accordance with:

- the demands of the curricular cycles (the pursued objectives and the psychological traits of children at different ages with respect to attention, thinking, affectivity, imagination, etc.);
- the requirements set out by the school curricula: objectives/competencies, content (the proposed repertoire), with particular emphasis on cultivating imagination and enhancing general knowledge as prerequisites for both diachronic and synchronic connections in music listening.

Only through listening and performance activities can students be given examples for interpreting the messages embedded in musical works. This enables them “to observe, compare, recognize, identify, extrapolate, and generalize aesthetic criteria, develop their musical perception, and gain reasons for engaging with authentic artistic events” (Vasile, 2004, p.214).

When listening is purposeful, it may begin at school (later followed by concert hall or opera house performances or the like). To enhance its effectiveness, teachers must take into account the generally variable attention span of students. This may range from 1–3 minutes (in preschool) and progressively lengthen to around 20 minutes in the final grades of pre-university education.

The effectiveness of listening depends, directly or indirectly, on various visual stimuli presented before, during, or after the listening session:

- real or imaginary landscapes;
- portraits of composers or characters;
- performers, actors, lyricists;
- musical instruments, vocal ensembles, symphony orchestras;
- stage designs, theaters, costumes;
- posters, scores, documents;
- recordings, films.

Listening efficiency also depends on commentary regarding the music, whether offered by teachers, taken from music critics, or contributed by students who witnessed the performance. This diversity of perspectives forms an artistic environment that can only benefit the student, promoting the development of imagination, creativity, vocabulary, musical acuity, vocal range, interpretive skills, listening habits, behavior, and analytical capacity.

1. Established methods of active musical listening

Musical listening became a mandatory aspect of the music education process in the modern school, emerging alongside the development of the “active musical school” movement of the 20th century, whose core principle was to connect education, as a developmental factor, with the complexities of real life.

The surrounding environment powerfully influences a person’s emotional state through its sounds. This may happen unintentionally (e.g., being surrounded by music in homes, in streets, in shops, or in markets). Such a musical environment supports significant elements of musical education.

According to environmentalist theories, “the set of surrounding (environmental) conditions in which a child or an adult lives, works, or creates” should include both the natural/ecological and socio-cultural spheres. European and other international schools adopting environmental approaches have often redesigned their facilities into “school campuses,” comprising multiple functional buildings set within a park or even a forest. Inside these schools, one may find laboratories, concert halls, sports arenas, school workshops, appropriately designed furniture, and an appealing environment – essentially a second home for students. In this manner, the authentic ambiance of the sounds around students is integrated into the curriculum. School practice employs these natural resources – environmental sounds—as illustrative material: the sounds of nature, of the modern city, and of human speech, along with direct resources (concerts) or indirect ones (audio-video systems).

Such an environment supports key components of musical education. Musical listening may be coordinated and systematized through schools and cultural

institutions (see the educational concerts offered by philharmonic orchestras and by national or regional performing ensembles).

Around 1945 in the United States, the use of ambient sound resources, musical sounds, and even noise in medicine and education gave rise to music therapy—a field derived from music psychology, a discipline that originated in Germany at the turn of the century to explore the impact of music on the psyche. Music therapy, whether practiced individually or in groups, can address varying psychological issues and yield different psychological outcomes. In this sense, music can have a cathartic effect by reducing fatigue or replacing one psychological state with another; it can amplify certain mental states, intensifying a moment of sadness or joy; it can foster communication among people; and it illuminates the aesthetic emotions triggered by listening. Students can even engage in self-directed music therapy by choosing which music to listen to or by employing other means to reshape or modify their psychological states.

Therapist Christoph Schwabe proposed a classification of certain music therapy methods:

- Receptive methods, based on the functional musical listening of specific pieces to achieve cathartic or communicative objectives, forming receptive music therapy;
- Active methods, in which individuals or groups compose or perform music and engage in dance-based activities, forming active music therapy.

Musical listening should be viewed from two perspectives:

1. Structural and informational shaping “through the ambient sound environment,” commonly described as hearing. This refers to listening to surrounding sounds: spoken words, vocal or instrumental performances, noises with varying timbres, and so forth. Such hearing activities develop acoustic musical perception and lay the groundwork for acquiring elements of musical language. This category includes “listening to the surrounding environment” activities (per Maria Montessori) focused on strengthening auditory and sensory discrimination.

2. A more complex activity aimed at broadening cultural knowledge, possessing a cathartic function (Maurice Martenot), or involving persistent yet subtle repetition to reinforce musical memory (Shinichi Suzuki)—an activity more accurately described as musical listening proper.

Its objectives include:

- cultivating the capacity to listen to musical works (an ability analogous to reading literary texts);
- honing the skill to observe and analyze specific elements of musical language;

- forming the habit of relaxation through music, for instance by creating a therapeutic musical environment;
- becoming familiar with and memorizing a musical repertoire (vocal and instrumental). (Preja, 2021, p.36).

2. Beginners in the methodology of musical audition

Within the broader realm of musical education, the act of listening to both music and ambient sounds becomes a pedagogical resource, integral to school music lessons. Within music pedagogy, there are several innovative approaches to musical listening, each targeting different objectives. For instance, French pedagogy differentiates the type of reception according to its sonic source, calling the listening of nature sounds hearing, and the listening of vocal or instrumental music musical listening. Composers, psychiatrists, and pediatricians have established sets of effective procedures, named after them, which transform musical listening into a valuable resource for contemporary music education.

Maria Montessori (1870–1952), a pediatrician, proposed cultivating sensory acuity through sounds produced by instruments within the bell family (focusing on pitch, duration, and timbre) and by various noises (timbre and duration), to facilitate musical notation. Two sets of bells are introduced: one marked with the musical syllables (from C1 to C2) and one unmarked set, challenging children to “guess” the pitches. These playful exercises promoted musical hearing. After approval at the Montessori Congresses (1929–1934), these procedures were formally recognized as the *Montessori Method*. Although this method lays the perceptual foundation for music education, it remains limited to that initial developmental stage.

Maurice Martenot (1898–1980), a French composer and inventor of the *Ondes Martenot* (an electronic instrument built in 1928), discussed his ideas in music-education works (e.g., *Formation et développement musical*, Magniard, Paris, 1952). He argued that schools must teach students to appreciate music, equip them with skills useful in society, deliver musical knowledge in a playful way, cultivate an audience sensitive to musical quality, prepare students both musically and psychologically for instrumental study, and foster uplifting emotional states. The distinctive feature of *Martenot’s musical-listening methods* is their psychological orientation, aiming to stimulate a student’s curiosity about any sound source, any instrumental ensemble, or any musical genre. Alongside engaging students in playful activities, Martenot also advocates for periods of silence. By alternating sounds and silence, movement and rest, as well as tempo changes, students learn to identify what is most meaningful within a set of listening experiences. He further recommends complete relaxation while listening, inviting children to meditate.

Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904–1987), a Russian composer, musicologist, pianist, and conductor, developed a method that focuses on performing and listening to pieces drawn from just a few genres. In this approach, musical education centers around three main genres—song, dance music, and the march—presented within the framework of a Russian folk tale (*The Tale of the Three Whales*). This narrative context piques student interest while adhering to Kabalevsky’s emphasis on thematic organization, promoting active listening.

Shin-Ichi Suzuki (1898–1998), a Japanese violinist and educator, employed musical listening as a strategy to facilitate memorizing violin pieces. In his method, musical listening specifically targets the child’s instrumental initiation by presenting a carefully selected violin repertoire with Japanese elements, introduced from the first months of life and consisting initially of only a handful of pieces that the child gradually internalizes. These pieces are made available via constant playback near the very young child, as well as through listening to practice sessions by the child’s mother (who receives coaching in the earliest lessons), without forcing the child to remain still (it is assumed attention can be engaged in any position). The child’s progress is periodically showcased to family and peers. Ultimately, listening activities are supplemented by the written score of each piece in order to develop memorization skills.

Edwin E. Gordon, a researcher, professor, author, and lecturer in music education at the University of South Carolina, proposed a methodology grounded in extensive research. His learning procedures guide teachers to present melodic and rhythmic segments sung on neutral syllables, which students then reproduce. As the lesson proceeds, new melodies are introduced, and students learn to listen and compare them with what they already know. Referred to as the *Gordon Method*, this teaching approach aids music educators in setting sequential curriculum objectives aligned with their personal beliefs and styles.

In the 1960s in the United States, increased cultural diversity among school-age populations led music teachers to broaden the scope of their curricula by incorporating pieces from multiple cultures, often in partnership with ethnomusicologists and musicians. This effort, known as “*World Music Pedagogy*”, was later formalized by **Patricia Shehan Campbell**, a university professor and music-education scholar, who documented various global musical traditions and methods for including them in primary and secondary music classes.

The Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project (MMCP) adopts a *spiral curriculum* in which new concepts are introduced sequentially through cycles of development. Proposed by **Jerome Bruner** in 1960 in the United States, the “*spiral curriculum*” model soon became a standard for structuring school syllabi. *The Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project*, initiated in 1965, is an alternative approach

aimed at shaping positive attitudes toward music education, enhancing instruction through a student-centered model. Here, the teacher allows students freedom for creative expression, performance, improvisation, conducting, research, and exploration of various musical aspects. In such a context, students listen either for pleasure (the hedonic phase) or to discover new insights (re-creative activity).

Tabel 1. Comparative Perspective on the Main Methods of Active Music Listening

Method	Basic Principles	Specific Techniques
Montessori Method	Development of sensory sensitivity through sounds and noises to facilitate the learning of musical notation.	Using bells to recognize pitch and timbre of sounds; conducting listening exercises in the surrounding environment for auditory discrimination.
Martenot Method	Stimulating interest in various sound sources and forming an audience who is sensitive to musical quality.	Playful activities, alternating sound and silence, and including relaxation and meditation during musical listening sessions.
Kabalevski Method	Providing music education through a limited number of musical genres, accompanied by engaging stories.	Listening to and performing pieces from the genres of song, dance, and march, integrated into narratives drawn from Russian folklore.
Suzuki Method	Learning music in a manner similar to acquiring one’s native language, through repeated listening and imitation.	Repeatedly listening to musical pieces from a young age, involving parents in the educational process, and giving regular presentations of achievements for family and peers.
Learning Theory	Developing inner hearing and musical understanding through structured learning sequences.	Teaching melodic and rhythmic modules sung by the teacher, having students reproduce and compare them, and introducing new fragments step by step.

In recent decades, active music listening methods have significantly expanded, incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives and emerging educational technologies. A clear orientation toward personalized learning and fostering creativity can be observed, as reflected in Bauer’s (2014) model, which advocates for integrating digital technology in music teaching to increase student engagement in creation, performance, and reflection. Ruthmann and Mantie (2017) emphasize the role of technology-based music education in developing critical thinking and active listening skills through interactive media. Simultaneously, Campbell (2018) proposes world music pedagogy as an

educational framework capable of embracing cultural diversity and facilitating the empathetic reception of global sonorities.

Moreover, the role of music listening in social inclusion and emotional development is increasingly recognized, through learner-centered approaches and the building of learning communities (Dolloff, Hickey & Jellison, 2021). Studies by Geringer and Woody (2019) confirm that sustained music listening can generate profound psychological responses, contributing to aesthetic taste formation and the cultivation of musical empathy. Tobias (2022) likewise argues that active listening becomes a space for creativity, where students are encouraged to form personal interpretations in relation to cultural and experiential contexts.

Due to the advancement of technology – and especially digital technologies – new methods of musical listening have emerged based on these innovations. Several of them are worth mentioning:

Gamification in Music Education

This method uses game elements to make music learning more engaging and interactive. For example, applications like Rocksmith transform learning the guitar into a video game, adapting to the user's skill level and providing real-time feedback.

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) Technologies

These technologies create immersive environments that allow students to experience music in new ways. For instance, students can attend virtual concerts or explore musical instruments in three-dimensional environments, thereby enhancing their understanding and appreciation of music.

Interactive Online Platforms

Systems such as Meludia offer progressive musical listening exercises based on models of sensory perception, emotional response, memory, and analysis. These platforms enable users to develop auditory skills and deepen their understanding of music theory in a structured and accessible manner.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Based Learning Methods

Modern applications use AI to personalize the music learning experience. For example, certain programs employ automatic chord recognition to generate customized exercises, linking traditional ear training with real-world musical contexts.

Haptic Systems for Music Education

Wearable devices that provide haptic feedback allow users to feel music through vibrations synchronized with the audio signal. This enhances the listening experience and introduces a new dimension to music learning.

These methods reflect the integration of modern technology into music education, offering more engaging and personalized learning experiences for students.

Tabel 2. A Comparative Perspective on Alternative Methods of Musical Listening

Method	Description	Educational Focus
Dalcroze Eurhythmics	Uses movement and bodily coordination to internalize musical rhythms and forms.	Development of rhythmic sense, motor coordination, and musical expression.
Kodály Method	Emphasizes vocal training, solfège, and folk music to develop auditory and musical literacy.	Aural skills, musical memory, and cultural musical identity.
Orff-Schulwerk	Integrates speech, movement, instruments, and improvisation into music education.	Creativity, ensemble skills, and active participation.
Music Listening Journals	Involves reflective writing and critical thinking while listening to music.	Musical analysis, personal interpretation, and aesthetic sensitivity.
Technology-based Methods	Incorporates software, apps, and online platforms to personalize learning and enhance interactivity.	Individualized learning, motivation, and accessibility.
Gamification in Music Education	Uses game elements (levels, points, rewards) to engage students in music learning.	Engagement, feedback, and skill progression.
VR/AR Technologies	Offers immersive environments where students can experience and interact with music in 3D contexts.	Experiential learning and multimodal sensory development.
Online Interactive Platforms	Provides structured listening exercises based on perception, memory, and analysis (e.g., Meludia).	Aural training, theory comprehension, and self-paced learning.
AI-Based Learning Systems	Uses artificial intelligence to tailor learning pathways and generate real-time exercises based on user input.	Adaptive learning, musical autonomy, and integration of real-world contexts.
Haptic Feedback Systems	Wearable devices that allow users to feel music through synchronized vibrations.	Sensory enhancement, accessibility, and multisensory engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

The ultimate aim of musical listening remains establishing direct contact with music, connecting with the authentic values of the art, and developing advanced

listening skills and an aesthetic perspective. This goal comprises two interlinked components: honing music reception abilities and cultivating cultural breadth.

Musical listening continues to evolve, engaging increasing numbers of specialists from various countries. Making it a constant presence in music education enhances its educational and formative influence, both by deepening students' understanding of the musical works they hear and by fostering imagination and creativity.

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