

Calling All Musicians...

Why You Need Music Theory

A free article from Spring Day Music

by Gary L. Ewer, B. Mus.
Author of Gary Ewer's Easy Music Theory on CD-ROM



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What good is theory, anyway?

As a music teacher I am often asked the question, "What good is music theory?" "Why do we need it?" "Isn't it possible for me to play in a band without knowing theory, or even knowing how to read music?"

And while of course it is possible to develop a career as a performing musician without being able to read a note of music – you need to know: your knowledge of music theory will open doors to a world that was previously closed to you. Used correctly, music theory will help you not only *understand* your music, but will allow you to *communicate* your musical ideas, and to explore music in ways you have never experienced before.

Used correctly, music theory allows you to be *literate*, and to expand your musical horizon, and to give you a vocabulary and method for doing so.

Our desire to create

Humans have an innate desire and need to create. It is part of what makes us human. Once we have created an artistic work, there is usually an immense feeling of satisfaction and resolution– a feeling that we have "made a statement". Sometimes it is almost impossible to say what that statement is, but nonetheless we usually experience a feeling of satisfaction and completion.

Some artists have likened the process of creating to giving birth, as if the work they have created is their offspring. Composing music is, for those who engage in it, a tremendously satisfying artistic release. Whether "classical" music, or garage-band rock & roll, creating a musical work is a way humans have of expressing the *often inexpressible*.

During times of great euphoria, and times of national trauma, musicians will compose and/or perform music that attempts to describe their feelings in a way that they feel cannot be expressed in any other way.

Composing results in a work that is unique. More to the point, the authorship of a musical work can often be determined by the style of the writing. Many people can tell they are listening to an Eric Clapton guitar solo purely because of the *style* of the playing, or by particular note patterns. Jerry Lee Lewis's piano style is immediately identifiable, and yet it is difficult to express in words exactly what makes it distinguishable from others. That lack of ability to express musical details verbally is sometimes attributable to a lack of theoretical background - a lack of vocabulary.

Theory is history

So, will learning music theory improve your musical abilities? *Not necessarily*, because musicianship is not primarily a result of theoretical knowledge. But an understanding of theoretical knowledge can help you more accurately articulate your musical ideas, and can help you understand musical structures, and this can lead to an accelerated musical development. In my article *Writing Music - Making it Work!* (a free article provided to purchasers of the ***Easy Music Theory*** CD-ROM set), I mention that music theory is not intended to give the composer license - it is intended only to describe certain structures within the piece. Theory tends to be *historical* in the sense that if something is done enough, musicians develop a theory to explain it. In music theory class, we might learn to write scales, or to analyze and build chords, or to demonstrate an understanding of time signatures. And though we can use that knowledge in the composing of new music, *it does not necessarily demonstrate music ability.*

Theory versus creativity...

It sounds like I am making a brilliant case for not needing music theory! But let's use an analogy to continue: In your English class at school, you will doubtless learn about nouns, verbs and adjectives. You will learn how sentences are structured, and you will learn all the rules of grammar. Those things are the *theory* of English. Does the knowledge of those rules make you an author? Does your understanding of sentence structure ensure that you will write the next great novel? No, not necessarily. Only a very small percentage of individuals seem to be blessed with that gift.

But to say that understanding how sentences are put together is irrelevant to developing writing skills is generally thought to be ludicrous! The more you understand, and the greater your vocabulary, the further your abilities will develop.

Sometimes musicians will claim that they don't want to study music theory for fear it will stifle their creativity. They equate increasing theoretical knowledge with diminishing artistic sense. And nothing could be further from the truth. The world's greatest composers were all masters of music theory: J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms— all had a keen understanding of the theoretical constructs of the music they composed. They spent years studying, in minute detail, the music of other composers, analyzing compositions to gain a greater understanding of how music worked.

This understanding certainly did not stifle their creative abilities - *it enhanced* them! Far be it from any of us to claim that Mozart's musical abilities were stifled by his highly-developed understanding of theory – such a claim would be extraordinary!

Playing by ear

I am a huge fan of playing by ear - of picking out tunes without the aid of written music, and of allowing your ears to be your guide. I believe that musicians with strong theoretical training often thoughtlessly dismiss the skill of playing by ear. They believe that figuring out a melody by picking it out in a "trial and error" method is resorted to by those who can't read music. On the contrary, I personally believe that every successful musician *must* have the ability to play by ear. Here is an analogy to explain:

When you were born, and until you were approximately one year old, you were essentially a non-verbal person. You communicated your needs and desires with crying, gurgles and nondescript vocalizations. Your parents became experts on how to interpret those vocalizations. By hearing speech around you, and with occasional corrections by your parents, you slowly began a process of developing a vocabulary - completely by ear. You did not "study" English. You did not learn about nouns and verbs, and yet within a couple of years, by the time you reached the age of three or so, you were communicating your ideas *verbally*, using nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs more or less correctly.

This all happened without you actually understanding or studying the *theory* of English. At a certain point, several years later, you learned how to *read*. You began to study the parts of a sentence, and how sentences are structured. You learned *why* words work together the way they do. And by doing so, you enhanced your own use of the language, and increased your ability to communicate ideas. By learning to read, an entire world was opened up to you. Like Mozart's ability to study other composer's music, you were able to begin to read other people's words, and to thereby further heighten your own abilities to use and manipulate words.

So the process was clear. You:

- 1- Learned the language *in context*, purely by ear.
- 2- Learned the *theory* of English, and learned to read.
- 3- Enhanced your use, and increased your ability to communicate your ideas.

Step two would have been extraordinarily difficult had you not already had a working contextual understanding of English. And step three would have been, it can be argued, totally impossible had you not already known how to use the language as outlined in step one.

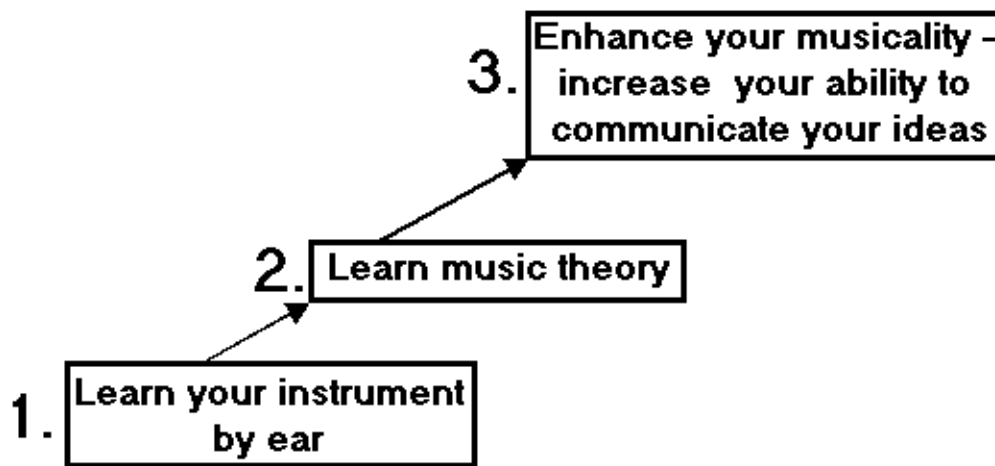
And if you question the accuracy of my point here, perhaps you were not one of the people who took French or Spanish as a second language in a non-immersion setting. If you have tried to learn a second language by learning how to conjugate verbs, and by learning lists and lists of vocabulary, then **you know** what I am saying is true. Learning a language by ear first is the only successful way.

The same is absolutely true of music! I am an enormous supporter of learning to play one's instrument by ear first. I believe that this kind of "non-theoretical" stage of learning is absolutely essential to a solid development of musicality. That is not in question. The regrettable thing is when musicians stop after step one - they learn their instrument by ear, but then stop there, never proceeding on to steps two or three. And they stop because they believe that steps two and three will squash their creative abilities. ***Nothing could be further from the truth.*** Music theory was never intended to tell you what to play, or what to write. On the contrary, knowledge of music theory will *open up the world of music* to you by allowing you to fully understand and articulate the music you are hearing. The song in your head can now be written down and communicated to another musician. It is always so sad to me when I hear otherwise creative and imaginative musicians say to me, "Is it alright for me to write this chord?" Or, "Can I have a melody that does this...?" The answer is always, "If that's what you hear in your mind, then of course it is OK!" Music

theory was never intended to allow or not allow *anything*. It was meant to allow you to understand what you are imagining, not *dictate* what you should be imagining.

The famous French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918) had a very keen understanding of music theory. And yet he was often criticized in his own day for writing music that did not seem to conform to the rules of theory. Of course he knew that, but... that was not why he valued music theory. He studied theory, and then wrote music that went beyond the theory, that broke the rules of theory. He used theory to *enhance* his understanding of music, and to better communicate his ideas.

I know so many rock & roll musicians whose creativity, I believe, has been stifled by an inability to communicate properly. And their inability to write down their ideas, or study and properly understand other people's ideas has led to a diminished overall musicality. To become a fully-rounded musician, you cannot stop at step number one; you **need** the other two steps:



Conclusion

Music theory will *not* cause you to lose touch with your creative side - that simply will not happen! It cannot happen! Did learning to read English stifle your ability to be creative with words? Such a claim would be ludicrous! It did not stifle your abilities - it increased them! Music theory will do the same for you. Don't be stuck on Step one - let music theory increase your musicianship and your ability to communicate those ideas that are in your head.

About the author

Gary Ewer is the author of Gary Ewer's Easy Music Theory on CD-ROM, at EasyMusicTheory.com. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, he is a composer/arranger and school music teacher. He received his Bachelor of Music degree from Dalhousie University in 1982 and subsequently continued his studies in composition at McGill University under Alcides Lanza and John Rea. He returned to Halifax in late 1985 and taught trumpet, music theory and music history at the Maritime Conservatory of Music.

In 1987 he became musical director of Pomorze, a Nova Scotian Polish dance ensemble, and subsequently helped to found the Kalina Singers, a Halifax-based choir specializing in eastern-European folk songs. In 1990 he began teaching for the public schools, and has been teaching in Halifax for the past eight years, primarily at St. Patrick's High School. He presently conducts four choirs encompassing various eras and styles - Renaissance through to modern pop and jazz.

Mr. Ewer is also director of the St. Patrick's High School Concert Band, Soundtrax (Halifax's High School Honour Choir) and the Halifax Schools' Symphony Orchestra. He is actively involved in composing and arranging music for various ensembles. His music has been recorded by the Camerata Singers (conductor: Jeff Joudrey), the Cape Breton Chorale (conductor: Sr. Rita Claire) and by the Rhapsody Quintet. He continues to teach at St. Patrick's High School in Halifax as well as the Fine Arts Department of the Halifax Regional School Board, and plays with Symphony Nova Scotia as required. In the Spring of 1998 he began to write the "Easy Music Theory" course as an extra resource for his band students. Based upon the overwhelming success of these music lessons, Gary worked with Spring Day Music to develop the complete music theory course called Gary Ewer's Easy Music Theory on CD-ROM. It is available at www.EasyMusicTheory.com.

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