

Improving Dictation as an Aural-Skills Instructional Tool

By Edward Klonoski

Many high schools in the U.S. offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses in music theory for students seeking to study music at the college level.¹ Others devote part of the music curriculum to theory and aural-skills instruction, but do not offer AP courses. In either case, high school theory and aural-skills courses typically strive to cover all, or part, of the material presented in first-semester college theory and aural-skills courses. Music dictation is a mainstay in most college aural-skills classes, and the College Board advocates including dictation in AP music theory courses. This raises an important question: is giving prospective college music majors a head start with dictation in high school the best way to help them develop the listening skills necessary to succeed in college and beyond? At first glance, the answer would seem to be a resounding yes. However, dictation's effectiveness as a tool for developing listening skills varies considerably, depending on how dictation exercises are constructed and implemented.

This article will examine some traditional dictation practices, identify perceptual skills required to listen to music critically, and offer strategies for acquiring and integrating broader listening skills that will more directly develop students' critical listening and musicianship.

Characteristics of Traditional Dictation Practices

Traditional dictation exercises isolate musical elements such as melody, harmony, and rhythm. This is intended to develop students' listening skills by constructing the whole from the parts; that is, by first teaching them to hear intervals, then chords, then chord progressions, and so forth. Instructors develop exercise materials that target specific tasks to be learned. This practice, in part, stems from the belief that real compositions present musical and perceptual complexities that are too demanding for students to handle, especially in the early stages of study.

Students' responses in traditional dictation exercises are either correct or incorrect, with little room for interpretation.

Consider the following description of a melodic dictation exercise for an AP music theory class:

To take melodic dictation accurately, students must be able to hear intervals and rhythms simultaneously and to recognize scale and chordal patterns. A programmed learning sequence of examples, progressing from extremely easy to complex, will slowly and methodically train students for the challenges ahead.

In such a programmed sequence, I first decide on the melodic and rhythmic concept that students should be exposed to (for example, the interval of the minor third with quarter-note and paired eighth-note values). I then compose or select a three- or four-measure "chunk" for dictation. Before playing the example, I often demonstrate the intervals in order to prepare the students' ears. After I play and identify the first note and establish the quarter-note tempo, I play the example four times with thirty seconds to a minute between listenings, tapping the beat through the example if I feel the class needs the help. Sometimes I walk around the room to see how students are faring. After completing the exercise, I choose students at random to dictate their written answers to me as I write them on the board.²

The process described above typifies the traditional dictation exercises found in many aural-skills classrooms. Students hear an unaccompanied melody multiple

Dictation needs to be used properly to give students critical-listening skills they need for the rest of their musical lives.

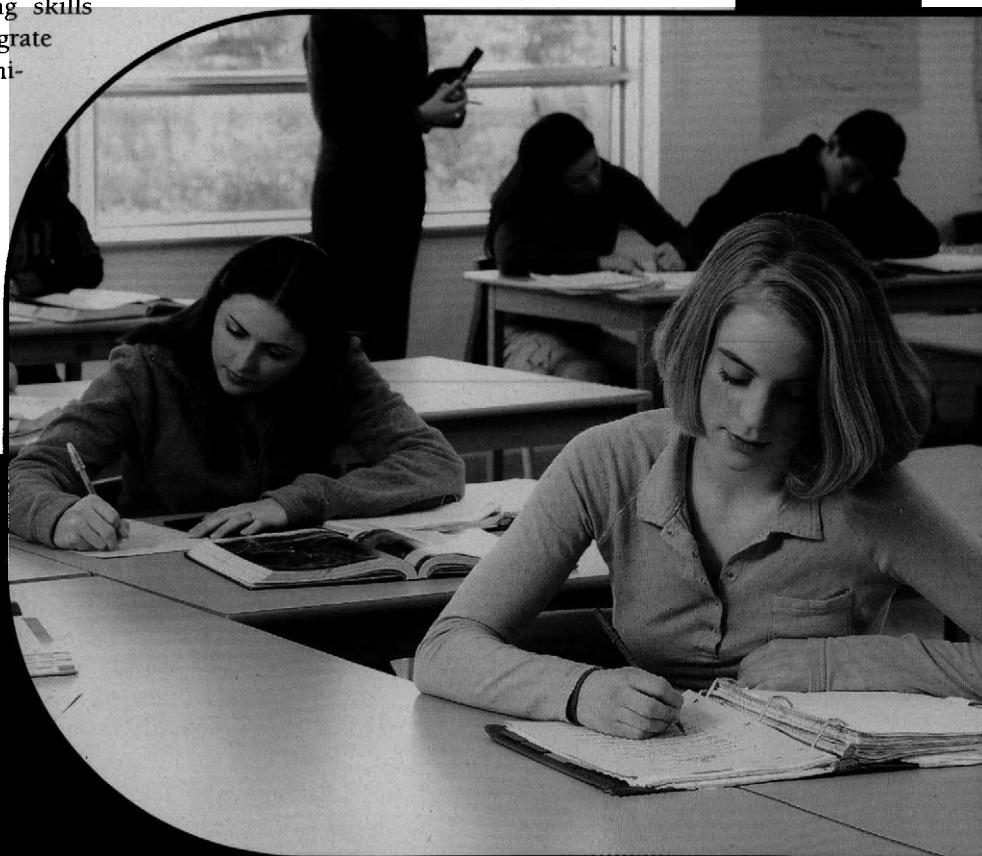
times and are asked to notate what they've heard, with certain pieces of information provided as references (e.g., starting pitch, meter signature, and number of measures). Often, students aren't allowed to sing during the activity, and the instructor provides little or no guidance as to *how* to execute the task, besides pointing out *what* to listen for.

This type of learning relies almost exclusively on repetition. When presented this way, dictation serves more as a test of the students' existing abilities than as an instructional tool. What little instruction may occur is indirect at best. Students are left to discover on their own how to find the correct answers. In the absence of direct instruction, some students develop bad listening strategies, while others never find a way to solve the puzzle put before them. In what other area of education is testing the primary instructional tool? Where else are students not shown a specific process for arriving at correct answers prior to being tested?

While music dictation provides instructors with objective, right-or-wrong answers to assess student dictation skills, it provides virtually no insight into why student responses are incorrect or correct. For example, what specific skill deficiency is revealed by an incorrect response in a melodic dictation exercise? Is it inadequate key orientation, poor tonal memory, lack of a proper metric framework, inference of an incorrect harmony, failure to consider harmonic implications at all, or a combination of factors? Since dictation involves all of these skills, a wrong answer alone cannot pinpoint the problem. Dictation isn't a single activity; it's multifaceted, requiring numerous listening skills and a clear understanding of how to integrate those skills in support of one another in a unified listening experience.

Traditional dictation activities may train students to notate isolated musical components, but they do little to prepare students to listen to and comprehend real musical compositions. After all, how many of us actually listen to real music interval by interval? How often do we separate rhythm from pitch in our lis-

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If implemented properly, music dictation can be an effective tool for developing listening skills.

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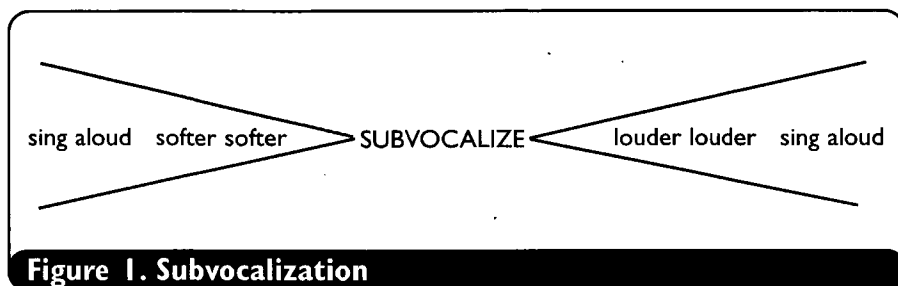


Figure 1. Subvocalization

tening? Where, but in a very limited number of pieces, will students encounter unaccompanied melodies performed on the piano?

While isolating a particular music element may sometimes have pedagogical benefits, the ultimate goal of aural-skills training is to teach students to integrate the various musical components of real compositions into a meaningful, informed listening experience. We need to ask where in our curricula we teach these synthesis skills. Real compositions present numerous complexities that didactic exercises intentionally avoid. We must teach students to deal with musical realities such as rubato, phrasing, arpeggiated harmonies, metrical ambiguity, timbre, and register, to name a few. Contrived exercises, which seek to limit the complexities of the musical environment, fail to prepare students to deal with the realities of actual music. This renders dictation a skill to be learned and forgotten, rather than a productive part of every musician's daily listening and performing experience.

The following quote by Gary Potter appears in a study he conducted to identify successful dictation strategies. It reinforces the view that traditional dictation activities do not necessarily result in enhanced listening or musicianship skills.

Dictation, while it may be the best tool we have for evaluating ear training progress, is a unique skill, one that some excellent musicians do not maintain without frequent specific dictation practice. More than half of the subjects of this study apologized for "being rusty" at dictation. I had expected that professional musicians and music students, involved in daily active music performance and listening, would

continue to improve at dictation after finishing formal aural-skills training. I was wrong. I have come to the unsettling realization that, for some fine performers and teachers (including theory teachers!), dictation ability seems to have little relation to their successful musical lives.³

It seems undeniable that the skills acquired through traditional dictation training, skills developed through the study of isolated and contrived materials, do not transfer easily to real musical environments, nor do they continue to develop in the absence of regular dictation practice. Isn't the goal of aural-skills training to provide students with critical-listening skills that they will use routinely for the rest of their lives?

To use dictation as a transcription tool in support of critical-listening skills, we must identify the skills involved in critical listening, develop those skills independently of one another (always within a broader musical context), and teach students how to synthesize those discrete skills into a unified listening process.

Skills for Critical Listening

The first step in teaching students to listen to music critically is to identify the requisite skills. Here are the six essential skills for listening:

■ **Subvocalization.** Subvocalization, or silent singing, is a way to retain the benefits of singing during listening activities without disturbing others.

■ **Meter identification.** Students need to learn to identify meters based on the perceptual clues in the music, not by looking at the score. Meter should first be learned as sound, then in notation.

■ **Key context.** Students need to be able to identify (and sing!) the tonic of a piece based on the harmony,

melody, phrase structure, and meter. That is the best way to help students use the tonic as a reference to identify the functions that constitute a key (e.g., dominant, leading tone, subdominant).

■ **Harmony.** Students need to learn how to hear harmonic progressions in various contexts, not just block chords played on the piano. Additionally, they need to be taught to identify harmonic function as it relates to phrase structure, rather than focusing on isolated chords.

■ **Tonal memory.** Musical memory is among the more difficult and elusive skills to develop. One of the most effective ways to increase musical memory is through the process of "chunking," where the listener segments the flow of musical events into more easily remembered units according to harmony, meter, and rhythmic patterning.

■ **Extractive listening.** Extractive listening teaches students to identify melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and metric features in a piece (e.g., starting pitches and harmonies, cadence pitches and harmonies, high or low points, pattern repetitions).⁴

Strategies for Developing Discrete Listening Skills

Before the skills listed above can be integrated into a unified listening process, each must be developed through, and applied to, real music. That is, although instruction should focus on the individual skills, using actual compositions forces students to consider the influence of other musical elements while developing each new skill. For example, perceiving meter requires the listener to consider the interaction of melody, harmony, rhythm, and phrase structure. Therefore, although meter identification as a listening skill must be developed independently, it cannot be developed in isolation.

Subvocalization. Some instructors don't allow students to sing during dictation exercises, so as not to disturb others in the room. However, recent research in auditory imagery reveals that the voice plays a prominent role in listening skills.⁵ Prohibiting students from singing during listening exercises seriously

compromises the inner ear's ability to function. Subvocalization provides a solution. The following steps guide students through the subvocalization process:

1. Sing a pitch aloud.
2. While fully engaging the vocal mechanism—lips, vocal cords, tongue, breath, and so forth—gradually decrease the volume until no external sound is being produced. You should still be able to mentally “hear” the pitch, even though you aren’t producing externally audible sound.

3. Reverse the process: Engage the vocal mechanism and do all that is necessary to sing the pitch, short of making audible sound. You should be able to hear the pitch with your inner ear as though you were singing it aloud.

4. Gradually increase the volume until you’re producing audible sound (see figure 1).

Meter identification. Meter is both a perceptual and a notational phenomenon. However, many instructors and textbooks devote far less time to perceived meter than they do to notated meter. Most textbooks introduce meter through time signatures, which represent a single level of beats. Meter is multileveled, and the beat level represented by the time signature may or may not reflect how the music sounds. Students need to learn to identify meter when listening to a piece in the absence of a score. The steps below can be used to teach students to develop their perceptual understanding of meter:

1. Clap a steady beat (unaccented) and have the class join in.
2. Have the class clap beats twice as fast or half as fast, while still remembering the initial beat level. Initially, you may choose to model the activity for the class.
3. Find the extreme levels; that is, the unclappable level on the fast side and the level where the beats are too far apart to accurately place them on the slow side.
4. Return to the initial beat level and practice alternately dividing the beat into two and three parts. This helps students learn to determine whether a meter is simple or compound.
5. Impose dynamic accents and

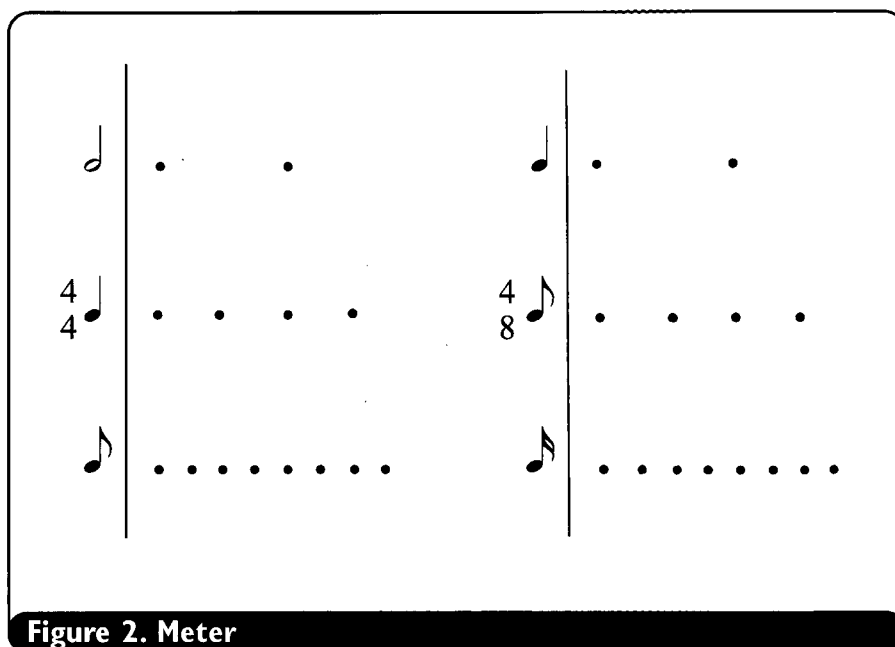


Figure 2. Meter

explore duple, triple, and quadruple metric patterns. This is an opportune time to introduce conducting.

6. Play a recording or have the class sing a song whose meter is relatively uncomplicated. Children’s songs often work well. The song should be accompanied so that students can take into consideration the influence of harmonic rhythm (the rhythmic organization of chord progressions). The class begins pulsing to the music by tapping or clapping without imposing a metrical pattern. Once a steady pulse is found, have the class move through the adjacent faster and slower beat levels while the music is playing.

7. Choose a moderately paced level of the meter and have the class feel where the natural stress occurs and, most important, why! It’s vital to discuss with your students the musical factors, such as harmonic rhythm, phrase structure, and motivic patterns, that help to establish the meter.

8. Determine if the meter of the song is duple, triple, or quadruple.

9. Determine if the meter is simple (the beats on that level are divided into two beats on the next faster level) or compound (the beats on that level are divided into three beats on the next faster level). Do not identify perceived meters with meter signatures, since the bottom number of any meter signature represents a notational value and cannot be known without looking at the score. Instead, identify meters as either simple or compound and as

duple, triple, or quadruple. Meter signatures can be assigned later (see number 12 below).

10. Move to a different level and determine if the meter on that level is simple or compound and duple, triple, or quadruple. Repeat this step on as many levels as possible.

11. Ask the students to hypothesize two plausible meters for the piece, determine which one is better, and give musical reasons to support their choice.

12. Assign two possible meter signatures for the meters they chose. For example, if the student hypothesizes compound duple or simple triple meter for the piece, some possible meter signs for compound duple include 6/8, 6/4, 6/2, and for simple triple, 3/4, 3/2, 3/8. This exercise will help students better understand various meter signatures.

13. Finally, assign a meter signature to a given level and determine what note values would be represented by the other levels. In figure 2, if the middle level is taken to be the notated beat level in 4/4, the slowest level would be the half note, while the fastest would be the eighth note. If the middle level is the beat level in 4/8, the slowest level is now the quarter note, while the fastest level is the sixteenth note. This presents notation as proportion, and rather than assigning a note value to a specific meter signature, students become accustomed to the idea that any note value can be

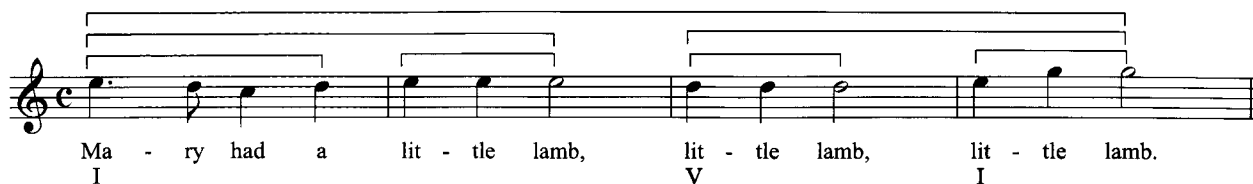


Figure 3. Tonal Memory Example

assigned to any beat level.

Key Context. One way to define a key is by the specific set of pitch relationships that revolve around the central pitch or tonic. The ability to recognize and recall the tonic pitch is essential for understanding tonal music. Students need to be taught to use musical clues to deduce and retain the tonic. The following exercises help students develop key-recognition skills:

1. Establish a key by having the class sing a familiar pattern such as a short harmonic progression (I–V⁷–I) or all or part of a major scale. Play or sing a brief melodic pattern in the established key, after which the students must sing the tonic pitch. Initially, patterns should contain the tonic note and strong key indicators, such as the leading tone and the seventh of the V chord. Subsequent patterns, in the same key, should gradually increase in complexity and length and include chromatic pitches. The students' task is to retain the original tonic.

2. Have students discuss what clues they used to infer the tonic in each example.

3. Have students improvise their own patterns for which others in class must deduce the tonic.

4. Repeat these activities with a variety of real compositions, since every piece provides a new context in which the tonic must be deduced.

Harmony. Auditory images are "heard" with the mind's ear in a context; that is, we associate every image with the context in which it was formed. In tonal music, harmony provides much of the context for melody. Every pitch is either a member of the sounding harmony or a specific type of nonchord tone (e.g., passing tone, neighbor tone, suspension, appoggiatura, escape tone). Stripping mel-

odies of their harmonic context forces students to create a new context to identify each melodic pitch; hence, the long-standing tradition of using familiar songs to identify isolated, random intervals. The songs provide the harmonic context for the various intervals. The following are suggested activities to introduce and reinforce hearing harmonic progressions:

1. Use standardized patterns, such as the twelve-bar blues, to introduce and develop an intuitive understanding of harmonic progression. Using songs can make it easier for students because the relationship of the text and the harmonic progression provide additional clues for students having difficulty identifying chords in instrumental contexts.

2. Explore harmonic rhythm in various contexts, not just block chords at the piano. Encourage students to move—stepping, walking in place, pulsing with their hands—in order to feel when the harmony changes.

3. Introduce all melodic-identification exercises with harmonic accompaniment. Subsequently, the harmony can be omitted, though the students should be encouraged to imagine the sound of the harmony even though it isn't being played. This type of imagery helps students learn to infer harmony where none is provided.

4. Sing arpeggiated harmonic progressions, such as I–V⁷–I, to reinforce the sound and construction of chords and to highlight the melodic component of harmonies. Solfège syllables help reinforce the functional meaning of scale degrees within a key.

Tonal Memory. While many authors and instructors urge students to try to remember more of an exercise with each successive playing, students must be taught *how* to increase their musical memory. Most people's short-term memory capacity lies somewhere

between five and nine events. Once that memory store is full, the listener cannot remember more, despite the prodding of the instructor or repeated playings. To recall musical passages that contain more than nine notes, individual notes must be grouped, or "chunked," according to meter, harmony, and rhythmic patterning. The first phrase of the familiar children's song "Mary Had a Little Lamb" (see figure 3) contains thirteen notes, which exceeds the average short-term memory capacity. When grouped in larger and larger chunks by meter, harmony, and rhythmic patterning, the entire phrase has fewer distinct items to be remembered.

The dotted figure in the opening measure sets it apart from measure 2, especially since the rhythmic figure in measure 2 recurs in measures 3 and 4. The rhythmic patterns in measures 1 and 2 reinforce that the song has four beats in a measure, as do measures 3 and 4, which are the same as 2. This further reinforces the division of the phrase into four measures.

Measures 1 and 2 can be heard as a single group because they both belong to the tonic harmony. Also, the grouping ends with the emphasis falling on the third beat of measure 2, due to the strong text accent on the word "lamb."

Although the harmonic change in measures 3 and 4 again reinforces grouping at the measure level, the repeated rhythmic pattern in measures 3 and 4 allows them to be heard and recalled as a single group.

Finally, the entire phrase can be remembered as a single group.

Extractive Listening. Extractive listening focuses on analyzing particular events in the music, rather than on memorizing an entire passage. Unlike tonal-memory drills, extractive listening involves both remembering and

identifying specific events. The goal of tonal-memory practice is to recall and be able to sing back what was heard, not to identify individual events. Extractive listening represents the initial stage of synthesizing the information provided by different musical components. Students need to learn to deduce the details from the broader context, rather than building context from the details.

The steps below introduce students to extractive listening:

1. Play an eight-measure, two-phrase section of music for the class, without giving them any information except the key, and ask them to do the following:

2. Hypothesize a plausible meter and, based on that meter, the number of measures heard.

3. Identify each cadence as either complete (perfect or authentic cadence) or incomplete (imperfect or half cadence), and determine whether the phrase structure is periodic (i.e., two or three phrases in which the final cadence is strongest).

4. Characterize the two phrase beginnings as either similar (parallel period) or different (contrasting period).

5. Identify the starting harmony and melodic pitch for each phrase.

6. Identify the harmony and melodic pitch at each cadence.

7. Fill in the missing harmonies and melodic pitches, working both forward and backward.

The number of repetitions needed depends on the example, but four to six times is good. You want the students to deduce the context in as few playings as possible.

Understanding Real Music

As students develop proficiency with individual skills, they must be taught to integrate those skills into a unified listening experience. They should avoid the tendency to focus on any single element—say, melody—to the exclusion of others. A unified listening process uses the understanding of one musical element to deduce information about other elements.

For example, if students can recognize a musical excerpt as being a parallel period, they can deduce the following information based solely on that understanding: The harmony at

the beginning of both phrases will be the same (likely tonic). The starting melodic pitch of both phrases will be one of three members of the tonic triad. The harmony at the end of the first phrase will likely be V, with the melody resting on a member of that triad, most commonly *re*. The last two chords of the second phrase will be V–I, and the melody will almost surely end on the tonic pitch. The harmonic rhythm will establish and reinforce the meter. The parallel construction of the melody, along with harmonic rhythm, meter, and phrase structure, will provide clues as to where to “chunk” for tonal memory.

Integration takes practice, and students should be encouraged to discuss and write about how they use information about one aspect of a piece to understand other aspects.

To help students develop the critical-listening skills necessary to succeed in college aural-skills courses and beyond, we must teach them how to listen to and comprehend real compositions. Our goal is not to teach students to take dictation. Rather, we must teach them to use their voices, through subvocalization, to assist their inner ear in understanding music; identify and understand meter both aurally and visually; aurally identify functional relationships within a key based on clues in the music; understand harmonic rhythm and function and their relationship to phrase structure; develop musical memory and understand how to increase their tonal memory capabilities. Finally, our highest goal should be to teach students how to synthesize the aural information provided by meter, harmony, melody, and phrase structure into an informed, meaningful listening experience.

Notes

1. The College Board provides complete information about Advanced Placement music theory courses at its Web site: <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>

2. Raymond Lucia, “AP Music Theory in Your School,” *Music Educators Journal* 80, no. 1 (July 1993): 40.

3. Gary Potter, “Identifying Successful Dictation Strategies,” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 63–71. Potter’s study used twenty-five sub-

jects, including a professional musician (a symphony oboist), university music professors (a performer and a conductor), and music students: ten doctoral students, five master’s students, six undergraduates at or near the end of the ear-training sequence, and one freshman.

4. Gary Karpinski first used the term *extractive listening* in *Aural Skills Acquisition: The Development of Listening, Reading, and Performing Skills in College-Level Musicians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71.

5. Eric Johnson and Edward Klonoski, “Connecting the Inner Ear and the Voice,” *Choral Journal* 44, no. 3 (October 2003): 35–40. “Silent whistling” provides the same benefits as subvocalization and may be more effective for students with poor vocal control. ■

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