

“Beginning Ear Training”

by Rich Corpolongo

Have someone play some notes on a piano in the medium range. Try to sing the notes that were played. Next, try to play those notes on your instrument.

If you can sing and play those notes without too much trouble, you are ready for your next lesson. If for some reason you can't sing or play those notes try some other combination of notes. If this fails, a suitable ear training program should be considered. In order to improvise, musicians have to be able to hear the note, recognize it in their minds and then be able to vocalize it to transfer it to their instrument.

Once you know that your ear is sound it is time to develop your ear to where it can be used to your advantage. Start by picking a simple tune, nursery rhyme, traditional song, standard, television theme, commercial jingle, or any tune that you are sure that you can sing or hum without too much trouble by memory. If you can not think of any tune off the top of your head then the only way to learn one is to read it off the music. Play the tune by memory or read it off some music. Try to sing the tune after playing it. Keep on playing the tune until you can sing the tune by memory. Turn the music over and try to play the song. If your memory fails go back to the music and correct the problem. Try to play the tune by memory using only your ear. If you continue having trouble go back to the music and find where you made your mistake. This first attempt might be hard but will get easier as you continue finding more tunes to play by ear and memory.

By going up another one-half step play the tune by ear without looking at any music beforehand. Now, continue going up one half step using nothing but your ear until you return again back to the original note that you first started with. This process is called using the Chromatic scale as root or starting notes. The Chromatic scale consists of 12 half-steps: E, F, Gb, G, Ab, A, Bb, B, C, Db, D, Eb. When you have successfully played a tune using all 12 notes without looking at the music, and only using your ear and memory, you have begun the process of relating the melody notes to the same pitches on your saxophone. In short, you are starting to transfer the notes in your mind directly to your saxophone.

Get used to playing one tune every day in all 12 keys. At the end of a six month period you will see a major leap in your ability to hear and distinguish melodies in all keys. This ability is crucial in your future improvisation studies. A musician has to know many tunes in order to work. These tunes most often are played in different keys. Written music sometimes is not available especially when people ask for requests. You have to know it by memory in any key, and start on any note.

Make a list numbering 1 through 30. After you have successfully played a tune in all 12 keys write the title of that tune on that list. The next day after playing a tune in all 12 keys write the title on the same list. After 30 days of tunes in all 12 keys, start another list. The second 30 tune list does the same thing as the first 30 with one addition. When adding tunes to the new list of tunes review one tune from the first list. Once you have reviewed the first list and added a new tune in the second list simply check off the reviewed tune of the first list. Do this every 30 days. Every new list period starts with a review of one tune from the last period and a brand new one. Repeat this exercise for at least 6 months, or until you have acquired a good grasp of playing in all 12 keys.

The practice of singling out certain intervals is also a great way to develop your ear. Start by using a Major 2nd interval, then a Minor third, Major third, Perfect fourth, Augmented fourth, Perfect fifth, Minor sixth, Major sixth, Minor seventh, and finally a Major seventh.

Play each interval using the chromatic scale as root notes. For example let's take the Major 3rd interval to show how this practice would be done (C-E/F-A/Bb-D/Eb-G/Ab-C/Db-F/Gb-Bb/B-D#/E-G#/A-C#/D-F#/G-B).

With only the use of your natural ears and memory get into the habit of playing and singing a tune everyday through all the keys.

Review: After playing and singing a month of tunes by ear and memory begin a procedure of reviewing one tune while learning another. Thus, you would be playing two tunes starting the second month. One would be a new one while another would be a reviewed one. Once you have reviewed a tune scratch it off your list.

Play and sing all intervals starting with the Major 2nd and going upward to the Major 7th through all the keys.

Conclusion: Practicing ear training this way establishes a more direct link between your mind, fingers and memory. No matter what style of jazz or contemporary classical piece you might be playing, your tool for a successful solo depends on the depth you went to train your ear in recognizing all intervals both randomly as in playing songs and through patterns as in all the keys.