



Listening, Really Listening by Laurie Riley

At some time in our lives most of us, musicians and non-musicians alike, have played and re-played some favorite recording until, from repeated listening, we know every note of it. But did we realize this is actually a form of practice?

How often do we treat recorded music as something more than background ambience? How often have you really listened to a recording? Not just to enjoy it, and not just in your car, but purposely and carefully analyzing everything about it: melody, harmony, phrasing, dynamics, chord structures in the arrangement, ornamentation and so on, including an analysis of the time signature, tempo, and key?

When I got my first harp, there were no teachers around, and I wanted so badly to learn all I could that I decided to learn what I could by listening over and over to the Chieftains albums I had (the only recordings of lever-harp music that were readily available at the time), to analyze Derek Bell's playing. This didn't give me any info on technique, but it did teach me a great deal about traditional Irish harp arranging, chord structures, patterns, and what to expect from a harp. By the time I got some technique instruction and got my hands working right, I had no trouble creating my own arrangements on the harp as well. I had a head start.

Not only had I learned some very useful information, but what I had learned made me able to not have to rely on other people's arrangements. Not that there's anything wrong with others' arrangements; new ideas and inspirations are there as well. But relying solely on what you didn't create is less satisfying. Sure, you need some music theory under your belt, or at least a very good ear (which comes with practice) to create your own arrangements, but it's not so esoteric that anyone need think themselves unable.

Aside from our tendency to not take advantage of really listening to recordings of our instrument, there's also a way in which we tend to actually sabotage ourselves musically. Instrumentalists tend to listen mostly to recordings of whatever instrument they play. Luckily, those who play ensemble instruments (cellos, banjos, mandolin, etc.) also hear the other instruments in those recordings, or they get to know how those instruments function by playing in bands with people who play them, but those who play instruments that are mostly solo (lever harp, classical guitar, etc.) often don't make a point of listening carefully to other instruments. That causes a handicap.

It's limiting to be familiar with only your own instrument. If you found yourself wanting to play in a group, you'd be in unfamiliar territory - you wouldn't know what to expect or how to blend in. But more than that, there's so much that we can emulate from other instruments. (Irish harpers, for instance, originally learned many of their tunes and ornamentation from bagpipers. So why don't we listen - really listen - to good bagpipe music to become better harpers?)

Lately I'm having fun discovering that although Irish-style plectrum banjo players usually don't hammer on and pull off, my experience with clawhammer banjo style gave me that skill and it translates well to plectrum playing. I've not heard other plectrum players do it, but since plectrum playing is relatively new to Irish music anyway (banjo was originally an African instrument), I figure that the tradition is still developing and I can get away with using these techniques. On many instruments, doing something new and different is a respectable thing to do.

IMHO, in the world of acoustic guitar, Michael Hedges was a great example of someone who did something totally new and unexpected with his instrument. Where it had always been an accepted fact that the strings were fretted with the left hand and picked with the right hand, he showed us that the left hand is an equal partner in plucking, and he also made the guitar into a melodic percussion instrument. He created all kinds of new sounds that no one had ever dreamed a guitar could make. He changed the way acoustic guitars are perceived!

Many musicians limit themselves by never dreaming beyond being able to play basic things, just getting the notes right and struggling through a tune. If one is a perpetually intermediate player, I don't think it's because they lack talent. I think it's often because they don't allow themselves to have imagination. Notice I didn't say they have no imagination - I said it's a matter of allowing yourself to have it. Accepting that it's OK to do something bigger, better, newer.

Years ago when I first took up guitar, being able to play a few chords and to strum or fingerpick was considered adequate for a folk guitarist (does that tell you how very long ago that was?). But eventually, people like Joni Mitchell came along with entirely new ways of playing. It opened us to the possibility that the guitar didn't need to be simplistic - and before that we hadn't even realized it wasn't living up to its potential.

Instrumental boundaries are pushed more and more over time. With many folk instruments, what was considered advanced skill in one generation becomes beginner material in the next. Why? Because expectations change. When people hear the best players now, they assume that anything less is easy. And so it is!

Where do we get inspiration for our imaginations to soar? By listening. Really listening. Hearing what's possible. Listening to the best players of your instrument, the best players of all kinds of other instruments, by exposing

yourself to other styles of playing, other teachers, new peers. Why amble when you can fly?

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