

Aural and the
University Music
Undergraduate

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By

Colin R. Wright

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9799-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9799-0

To my wife, Margaret,
for her unending loving support and ongoing interest
over many years in the progress of this book
which otherwise may well have lost its way!

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PREFACE

The central aim of this book, which has developed from research for a doctoral thesis recently undertaken at a British university, is to review the relevance of aural in a university music degree and in the professional career of a classical musician. A number of strands of research have been brought together in which two main areas are investigated: firstly, the analysis of the relationship between university music students' aural ability as measured in examination marks and overall success on a music degree programme and in conjunction with an investigation of current university music students' views on aural and its importance in a music degree programme; secondly, the research probes into the views of professional musicians about aural and its relevance to their career, linking back to the first research area in an estimation of the importance of aural for music students as a preparation for such a career.

Previous research indicates that aural skills are vital in developing musical expertise (see Karpinski, 2000a), yet the precise nature of those skills and the emphasis placed upon them in educational contexts merits closer attention. An extensive review of literature provides an introduction to terminology as well as a framework with which to understand research perspectives on aural, specifically to address aural in practice and aural as process. The discussion that follows of four empirical studies pursue the two major topics outlined above: Study 1 compares aural test scores with overall marks obtained in a music degree so as to investigate their potential correlation; Study 2 analyses the views of current undergraduate and postgraduate music students from the same institution via focus groups about aural alongside their response to the data obtained in Study 1. Studies 3 and 4 address the second issue described above in which the views of professional and semi-professional musicians provide details from their experience in their career work about the relevance and significance of aural and the associated skills.

Findings from the first two studies indicate that there are positive correlations between students' aural test marks and overall degree results, although these are not always significant. The views of current students about aural reflect shifts in understanding from undergraduate to postgraduate level, with the former offering specific ideas about what it entails and highly subjective attitudes towards it, and the latter providing

abstract and broad appreciation of aural in music practice. The students also provide tentative remarks about the main statistical outcomes of Study 1.

The findings from Studies 3 and 4 are strongly supportive of those in the first two studies and suggest that professional musicians rely considerably on their aural skills in a variety of ways, for example, in teaching and performing, conducting and rehearsing, analysis and musicology. The importance of aural skills in the study of music as well as in the preparation for a music career therefore are underlined, also leading to the view of the need for the inclusion of their further training within a music degree programme.

The subject is investigated in the light of the current socio-educational background of the past fifty years which has greatly influenced the participation of music and the study and development of musicianship. Many related issues are touched upon in the research that has been undertaken as part of this project and these emerge as relevant topics in the discussion of aural. Apart from students' and musicians' views on training and singing, aspects include the role of improvisation, memorisation and notation, examinations, absolute pitch and the affinity with language, all of which have a part to play in the debate about aural.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am much indebted to Dr Elaine King for the support and encouragement she has given me in the writing of this book. Her wide-ranging experience and attention to detail has been invaluable over several years and her expert guidance has enabled me to maintain momentum alongside other commitments that have arisen during the course of the project.

I am grateful to the University of Hull for access to data in order to complete the first of the empirical studies and I should particularly like to express my appreciation to the Music Staff for their help and backing in providing the opportunity and approval for this research to proceed. I extend thanks particularly to those students and musicians who assisted in the provision of data for Studies 2 and 3 by participating in focus groups and interviews, and whose perceptions and views across a wide spectrum of experience have been especially appreciated. I am also indebted to those anonymous musicians who similarly responded so positively to the online survey. I also extend my thanks to Dr Mary Stakelum for her enlightened overview of the research and encouragement for extending its scope.

Last, and most importantly, I am exceptionally grateful and profoundly appreciative of my wife, Margaret, for her unswerving encouragement and confidence in the eventual completion of this book and in her long-suffering capacity to provide sustenance on demand and constantly undertake house-jobs that required attention when I was unavailable!

INTRODUCTION

My understanding of what constitutes aural has developed across my career as a professional musician, including performing, teaching and examining. In particular, my extensive work in teaching aural to university music students led to an awareness of the different ways in which individuals hear and process musical sounds as well as the apparent ease or difficulty with which they do so. Personally, having begun piano lessons at the age of 5 and developed what was with hindsight an acute ear, including absolute pitch (or “perfect pitch”), I realise that my aural awareness has underpinned the whole of my musical career. Although now retired from full-time employment, I remain active in practical music-making, including conducting and examining, and aural skills continue to predicate my work, but it is in performance and composition that I believe the greatest application of my aural continues to be made.

Along with many of my peers who were learning to play a musical instrument and developing knowledge of music theory and history in the 1950s, attention was not especially given to the acquisition of aural during childhood, yet it was apparent that my facility of perfect pitch was not commonplace and that I had the capacity to perform from an early age by ear and create my own improvised music on the piano. Indeed, learning music at a time when pianos were a more familiar piece of domestic furniture than is perhaps the case nowadays, the circumstances of playing hymns at Sunday School and day-school encouraged growth in harmonic experience, and the frequency of playing previously unknown music strengthened the powers of sight-reading to the extent that continuous development of my “inner ear” was probably taking place subconsciously for many years from a young age.

It was also the case at the time that alongside performance and theory, specialist training usually included “aural exercises”, not just for examination purposes but as an essential part of musical development, reflecting the belief held by my teachers and many others in my musical surroundings, and which I have shared and retained throughout my life, that the fundamental characteristic of musical ability is the possession of a good “musical ear”. Furthermore, while musicians may have many other attributes on which they can call to carry out their musical activities, without this “musical ear”, the advancement of performance and conducting, for example, can only be limited, although the level of these skills may vary between individuals.

As with other skills, I believe that aural needs to be practised. It may be the case that there is not always an awareness of mental development in any field during an activity, yet it is possible that many subtle progressions in aural development occur during the habit-forming processes involved in performance preparation that necessarily call upon a number of personal deliberations, such as reading, listening, reacting, responding, creating, digitally transferring, and so on.

We are, of course, subject to the benefits and passions, as well as the whims and failures, of our teachers, often absorbing their values and beliefs, especially when we are young and impressionable, and although we might try to assume a musical personality and individuality, the probability is that pupils will absorb elements of their teacher's views and techniques to some extent. My teachers of the piano and organ were themselves products of the current system of that time and schooled me in believing in the importance of accuracy and application, and these are two of the traits that have remained with me throughout my teaching career. Perhaps as an off-shoot, the rigour of "practise until perfect" is another aspiration which has acted as a foundation of my own musicality especially in the preparation of solo recitals and accompanying work following my training.

Certainly without such dedicated effort, even though this may not have seemed to be as arduous at the time as it now sounds – the inspiration, devotion to study and practice, the reward of satisfaction in the achievement of goals, are common in youthful endeavours – I believe that I would not have succeeded in securing musician appointments as teacher, soloist, accompanist and conductor, had the extent of my aural ability not been so significant. From the earliest duties I have undertaken as musician, including positions of organ scholar at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge (1964-1967) and Musical Director, East Riding County Choir (2014-present, Assistant Conductor since 2002), as well as church organist (Assistant Organist, Beverley Minster 1996-2010), to the later role of continuo player in a professional capacity (since 2000), and from employment as a school and college teacher responsible for music and music education to university lecturer covering harmony, composition and aural training, all duties have been enhanced by my effective "musical ear". These musical activities represent the basis of the rationale to underline the importance of aural within this book, especially for university music students.

As with many other young musicians, my training in aural was mostly in preparation for graded instrumental examinations (piano, viola, organ) and involved completing various tests including the recognition of

intervals, clapping the rhythm and singing back a short melodic phrase according to the grade, many of which (with some modifications) continue to this day, as described in the current instrumental syllabuses (see, for example, Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), 2015). During my time at university, the level of aural ability of my peers was high and a session per week was attended in which, for example, complex chords and four-part harmonic phrases were dictated for transcription into written notation. There was, however, no examination in aural and the training sessions were regarded as purely support for study in other spheres of the music programme.

Much of my musical development after university centred on organ performance, from the access to instruments at both church and school, and the frequent opportunities of performance that that brought, to later achievement of prestigious awards and appointments which have provided many benefits, for example, in the way of travel to other parts of the world as accompanist or later as examiner, and performance on large instruments such as those in many English cathedrals. A significant element in organ performance often involves the skill of improvisation and extemporisation and this facility has been applicable on many occasions during services and ceremonies at which I have played the organ. The reliance on the “inner ear” and mental processing during improvisation has acted as a major element in my understanding of the concept of aural and its overall significance in both performance and composition.

The underlying support in practice and performance in all these contexts from my aural has therefore been enormous. Indeed, experience across a wide variety of musical activities has, I believe, been vital as an underpinning of my own musicianship, and now at retirement, having seen how each role in music that aims for excellence depends, for example, on access to mental imagery, on analytical listening, on interpreting theoretical elements, not just on practical technique, the recall of knowledge, or isolated creativity: each context requires a grounding of aural. Indeed, without an underpinning level of aural ability, this particular research into the subject would have been circumscribed and although it might be said that the very importance I have attached to aural has acted as the source of its inspiration, my experience has provided the background rationale and scope in the understanding of related research on the subject, including that of Karpinski (2000a), Kinarskaya (2009), Bailes (2003a) and Ilomäki, (2011) to whose work I have referred frequently in this book.

I am aware that my perspective of aural is perhaps traditional in that it inevitably reflects my experience of music in a variety of Western art contexts, from teaching and examining to listening and performing over

the past sixty years or so; nevertheless, this personal viewpoint has provided the initial motivation for this research and the impetus to explore other ways in which aural might be understood.

From my musical experience, I posit initially that aural involves the processing of sound in the “inner ear” and that it underpins a range of activities undertaken by musicians, including composing, performing, improvising, sight-reading and analysing notated scores. The “musical ear” may also be used to describe this kind of aural. My understanding is further shaped by the following three beliefs: 1) all individuals can develop their aural potential from childhood via musical learning, dedicated instrumental practice, and exposure to a range of different musical activities in different musical environments; 2) aural underpins all areas of musical activity; 3) a good “musical ear” – aural skills – is needed to be a professional musician. It is from these three founding beliefs that the research on which this book is based has developed and which leads to the confident conclusion that it is vital to reemphasise the significance of aural skills in the study of music especially within the university music degree programme.

CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH ISSUES

Preamble

“As performers, conductors, composers, arrangers, students, teachers, scholars, editors and copyists – musicians can apply their aural skills to all their musical activities” (Karpinski, 2000a, p. 223).

A significant amount of interest has been shown by musicians over many years about how we understand and develop skills in Western art music-making and, as stated by Karpinski above, aural has historically featured as a fundamental skill of the trained musician and been recognised as something that is deployed in the variety of roles in which musicians engage. The question is, however, what exactly are those aural skills and, perhaps more importantly, what exactly is aural itself? For example, McPherson and Gabrielsson (2002) highlight one kind of aural skill, namely “playing by ear”, and describe it from a purposeful as well as practical perspective within an educational context: “the skill of playing by ear helps student musicians to learn to coordinate ear, eye and hand [and] to perform on an instrument what they see in notation and hear or imagine in their mind” (p. 109).

The imaging of sound inside the head, sometimes referred to as the “inner ear”, could be regarded as an integral part of musical development, experience and activity, and it is the occurrence and concomitant growth of this kind of aural skill, along with others, that might be regarded as central to achieving success as a music student. This book sets out to explore this possibility, specifically to examine the nature of aural, and by extension, aural skills and aural ability, and its importance to music students and professional musicians. As a starting point, however, it must be recognised that aural is a complex phenomenon and in order to begin to consider the many ways in which it might be understood, it would be helpful perhaps to reflect upon my personal experiences as a musician, for

these provided the initial approach to this research as well as shaped my standpoint in exploring aural in its educational context.

Origins of the Research

While the substance of this book is based on research conducted initially as part of a PhD degree, the topic of aural is believed by some to be significant and warrant further exposure to scrutiny and debate in the context of both music practice and musicology and it is for this purpose, that the subject of aural should be extended to the examination of its training and assessment, and that the research undertaken should be published. Though included in the overall research work undertaken, the third and fourth studies described in this book did not feature in the final PhD thesis submitted in late 2015. They are included here as an integral part of the discussion about aural for music undergraduates as a preparatory ground for a career as a musician.

Research Motivation

Whereas it might be debated that undergraduate music students should have received training that adequately prepares them for further study that in turn leads on for many to a professional career in music, the social background to university study has considerably changed over the past several decades and developed an increased interactive significance perhaps at the expense of the study-time by students: “Higher education institutions are academically adrift but socially alive, active and attentive” (Arum and Roksa, 2014). Study at university was conceived in terms of specialist knowledge that led to career preparation and thereby commonly thought of as a preparation for adulthood rather than, as now, a precursor to the labour market (see University Alliance, 2012), whatever programme has been followed.

The situation now, in addition to the issue of personal choice and preferences, has opened up programmes to students who are studying for reasons of ambition, leading to a widening in participation with the number of young people who attended a university in 2011/12 reaching 49% (as documented on BBC News 24, in April 2013). The programmes are designed to meet the needs of a wider range of students than previously, with an equal range of skills, not necessarily those, in the case of music, which are required for going on to teach the higher levels of ability. Paradoxically, because of the problems in the employment market and high numbers of graduates failing to fulfil appropriate career

prospects, there have been criticisms of higher education programmes in that insufficient preparation is provided to students for employment in their chosen subjects, and consequently in professional careers (Barnett and Coate, 2005).

The anxiety concerning levels of aural ability in students has also been noted by others, namely, Palmer (2013), who relates his experience with conservatoire students that their aural ability is no better on leaving than on entering the conservatoire, with a “limited ability to hear accurately or understand their musical environment or to contribute creatively to it” (p. 271). Clearly little improvement seems to have been made since Odam (1993) reported twenty years previously, whom Palmer cites: “Far too many students graduating from BA, BMus and BEd courses cannot rely solely on their ear for fundamental musical decisions...” (ibid., p. 271). It is with this recognition of complex differences in aural skills and the desire to investigate the matter further that motivated the study.

Related literature demonstrates that there is much ongoing interest in the study of aural and, in particular, inner musical thought (e.g. Trevarthen, 2002; Sloboda, 1990; Rink, 2002; Parncutt and McPherson, 2002; Lehmann *et al.*, 2007), particularly about how exactly one perceives sound, from the foetal stage right through to adulthood, and how the brain encodes the signals and interprets the meanings of the impulses. With the technological development of electronic and computerised equipment, new channels of neuroscientific discovery have been opened up that have enabled us to answer some of the deeper questions about aural. Many attempts continue also to be made to devise methods of musical training that build on these newly found physiological discoveries and it is one of the challenges of this study to try to bring together these wide bands of new and traditional experience in conjunction with an examination of the understanding of aural within the narrower pursuit of music at university level.

In drawing upon the area of my personal experience as a lecturer in teaching aural to undergraduate music students at university, three significant issues arose. First, my understanding of aural and my assumption that it is fundamental to musical activity was not necessarily shared by the students I was teaching. Second, there seemed to be an apparent growing marginalisation of aural as a specialist area of study within the degree programme, for over the course of several years, the subject shifted from being taught as a distinct component within a module (with the word aural in the module name: “Instrumental Studies and Aural”), to a smaller component within a module (with the word aural removed from the module name: “Practical Studies”), to being absorbed

within a module involving no separate classes in aural (with the module name reflecting a broader approach to studying music: “Music in Practice”). Third, the music students that I was teaching possessed a broad range of musical abilities and interests when they entered university, and I wondered whether or not their final degree results were affected in any way by their ability to process musical sound in the “inner ear”, or, by their aural skills. These issues also raise the question of the extent to which general aural ability sustains the role of a musician and underpins students’ readiness for studying music at higher education level.

This book is thus set largely in two main contexts: the first, involving the situation governing higher education, is concerned with addressing the place of aural and aural skills in a university music degree programme and with exploring current music students’ understandings of aural alongside their views on its relevance in their studies. The second takes up the circumstances pertaining to professional musicians and their views also on their understanding of aural especially in the context of the application of aural skills in their professional work and career. The writing attempts to unpack some of the complexities surrounding the nature of aural, aural skills and aural ability, as well as related concepts, such as the “inner ear”. At the same time, it interrogates the assumption that aural is a fundamental basis of musical activity by evaluating the relationship between university music students’ aural ability and their degree success, and the potential relevance of aural skills in their work later as a musician. There are only a few existing prior studies about the operational role of aural in higher education (for example, see Wolf and Kopiez, 2014; Papageorgi *et al.*, 2010c; Harrison, 1990), and this exploration of aural acts as a starting point in the debate about the relevance of aural skills to a university music student and as an instigation for further research in this domain to be undertaken.

The target subject of this book is the undergraduate music student of a recognised British university, in particular the BMus student who is perhaps uncertain about where their proposed musical studies will lead, whether as historian, analyst, practitioner, teacher, or any other occupational pursuit within or outside the profession of music. This student is different from the one who might attend a British music conservatoire whose experience may already be proven especially (though not exclusively) in performance or composition. The aspirations and goals of conservatoire music students are likely to have been established before entry to higher education due to their initial leaning towards performance, though this ambition may be adjusted according to their study experience. As Long (2013) remarks, young musicians now grow up influenced by the

lure of the “celebrity culture” surrounding musical activity. The issue as to how central aural skills are to the university music student is addressed in the light of this factor along with the extent to which aural ability, its understanding and relevance, is perceived to be a core basis of musical activity and indicative of success on a degree programme.

Aims and Objectives

Thus, the overall aim of the book is threefold: first, to investigate the potential relationship between university music students’ aural test marks (as a measure of their aural ability) and their undergraduate degree results (as a measure of degree success); second, to examine both current university music students’ and professional musicians’ understandings of aural; third, to explore the level of importance attached to aural by both student and professional musicians as part of their musical experiences and work. These aims open up a number of investigative avenues, including attitudes towards aural, as well as consideration of the nature of aural ability, and the understanding of aural skills. The objectives of the research referred to are thus to determine whether or not there is a correlation between university music students’ aural ability and degree success; second, to theorise about current music students’ and professional musicians’ understandings of aural, aural ability and aural skills; third, to establish the extent to which each group believes aural to be relevant: to music students in their degree programme, and to professional musicians in their career. The book is therefore issue-based rather than one in which a theory is put forward and tested and in addition explores a number of related issues that have a bearing on the subject as a whole.

Research Questions

The following chapters consider three main questions that arose during the research and these generated four separate studies which are described in turn below.

RQ1. Is there a correlation between the aural ability of university music students and their degree success? (Addressed by Study 1.)

RQ2. What are the views of current university music students about their understanding of aural, its importance in a music degree programme and its relationship to degree success? (Addressed by Study 2.)

RQ3. What are the views of professional musicians about their understanding of aural, and its importance and relevance in their music careers? (Addressed by both Studies 3 and 4.)

Empirical research was undertaken in order to address these three questions. Firstly, a longitudinal case study focusing specifically on past and current music students at the University of Hull was carried out with a mixed-methods approach involving the investigation of past undergraduate music students' aural test marks and degree results (Study 1), followed by discussions in focus groups with current music students at different stages in their degree programme (Study 2). Secondly, two further studies were undertaken in which a selection of professional and semi-professional musicians were interviewed on an individual basis (Study 3) in addition to an online survey of a larger number of musicians who similarly responded voluntarily to a series of similar prepared questions (Study 4).

Chapter Content

The subject matter in this book is potentially very broad, reflecting the extensive role of aural and its potential contribution to all major musical activity. Its social and cultural underpinnings influence not only its frequency of presence in daily musical life but its implications for understanding musical ability, musical development and musicianship in general. The book takes account of this through discussion of aural in its many dimensions by way of a review of current thinking and reference to related issues in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Following discussion of possible definitions of aural, Chapter Two provides insight into related concepts, such as the "inner ear", and provides a sense of different research perspectives on the subject.

While music is experienced in all cultures and in many different ways, Chapter Three focuses more closely on the way in which aural functions in the context of higher education and encompasses relevant literature in the social and educational milieu including the issue of aural development. Chapter Four explores the practical perspective, especially the role of aural in training and assessment, and discusses aural in other practical contexts such as improvisation, memorisation and the relevance of absolute pitch and use of language.

The methodology of the empirical research undertaken as part of the overall research is outlined in Chapter Five followed in the ensuing chapters by reports of the four studies respectively. Study 1 (Chapter Six) examines the extent to which aural test marks correlate with degree results

using past university music students' results. Study 2 (Chapter Seven) explores current university music students' views about aural, their understanding of its importance and their reactions to the data from Study 1. Studies 3 and 4 (Chapters 8 and 9) also explore views about aural but from the perspective of professional musicians respectively through interviews and an online survey and address the issue of the relevance of aural in musicianship and in professional work. Finally, Chapter Ten discusses the findings of the empirical research and summarises these findings. Limitations of the research are additionally considered along with implications for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

AURAL: DEFINITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Preamble

As stated in Chapter One, the central aims of this book are to explore the importance of aural in a university music degree programme, to assess students' understandings of aural alongside their views about its relevance to their degree studies, and to investigate the opinions of professional musicians about aural. Given that there is no direct exploration of this particular subject in the current literature, an investigation is first undertaken to examine the possible meaning of aural through a review of existing research that refers to the term both specifically and in the wider general context of musicianship, itself a challenging concept that is considered in the next chapter. The context remains broad since only limited acknowledgement is made in the literature to aural *per se*, although the review probes a range of perspectives so as to illuminate the potential depth of the subject.

This chapter will be divided into three main sections that provide a conceptual framework within which to scrutinise the subject. The first section will define the use of key terms for the purpose of initiating understanding of the subject material as well as consider its scope and relevance. The second section will concentrate on understanding *aural in practice* (that is, general music practice), with an emphasis on listening, standalone and integrated perspectives. The third section will examine research on *aural as process*, including consideration of related studies on imagery, representation and perception. The final part of this section will look closely at the workings of the "inner ear" to provide an explanatory tool for the empirical enquiries undertaken as part of this book.