

MUS 775

Discussion 3 - Introduction to MLT

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1.28.21

Music Learning Theory, or the Gordon Approach, is not a method, but a theory about how we learn music. It is based on the idea that we learn music in the same way that we learn a language. The two ideas that are at the heart of MLT are Audiation and Sequential Music Learning.

The main focus of MLT is developing audiation, meaning to think in musical sounds. **Audiation** is not perception or inner hearing, but hearing and understanding music in your mind. It is very similar to thinking in language, like understanding a sentence in your mind without hearing it outloud. Audiation involves prediction, in that you can process musical sounds, make sense of them through your experiences, and make a prediction as to where the music is going to go.

Aptitude is the ability to do something, and so a person's music aptitude is the capacity for that person to learn and understand music. Most people have an average music aptitude, with very few having a high or low aptitude, meaning that most people have the ability to learn and understand music, and perform at a high level. MLT approaches students individually, accounting for all music aptitudes. Students with high music aptitude are not bored, while those with low musical aptitude are not frustrated.

Just as children experience a sequence of learning in acquiring a new language (listening, speaking, thinking/conversing, reading and writing), there is a similar **sequence of learning** in music. Babies listen to songs before attempting to sing them. As they develop musical skills, they begin thinking in musical terms and conversing with others (audiation and improvising). Reading and writing in music should only happen after the first three stages are developed, starting with familiar melodies and rhythms before moving to unfamiliar melodies and rhythms.

The **Whole/Part/Whole** approach is a common way for teachers to organize content, and I like to term "Macro/Micro/Macro." In this approach, a teacher might start by singing a song to familiarize the students with it, then focus on one aspect of that song more intensely, and come back to sing the song again, hopefully with a greater understanding or more precise performance. This is my preferred method of rehearsing ensembles. I like to start by running a section of a piece, then digging into whatever concept we are working on for that rehearsal, then run the section again and reassess. If the band has a good understanding of the section or

concept, we move on to the next section. I find the organization of this approach helps with pacing and management, as long as the “micro” section moves quickly.

Gordon created a **Skill Learning Sequence**, which is divided into two categories: Discrimination Learning and Inference Learning. **Discrimination Learning** serves to build vocabulary of notes and rhythms, and is typically taught by rote via call and response. There are five levels of Discrimination Learning: Aural, Verbal Association, Partial Synthesis, Symbolic Association, and Composite Synthesis. The Aural level involves students performing tonal and rhythm patterns on neutral syllables. The Verbal Association level is where students attach names to the patterns learned in the Aural level (i.e., do, re, mi). At the Partial Synthesis level, students are able to internally recognize familiar tonal and rhythmic patterns, which helps them listen to music at a higher level of engagement. When students visually associate musical symbols with what they’ve already experienced aurally, they are at the Symbolic Association level. Finally, at the Composite Synthesis level, students are able to give language to notes and rhythms.

In **Inference Learning**, students are not rote learning, but are instead using the information they acquired in Discrimination Learning to identify, create, and improvise new patterns. During this stage, the teacher guides the student through the process of learning, and the student determines what they actually learn. Inference Learning consists of three levels: Generalization, Creativity/Improvisation, and Theoretical Understanding. **Generalization** is subdivided into aural, verbal, and symbolic sub-levels, and they are similar to their Discrimination Learning counterparts, except that the student is able to audiate unfamiliar notes and rhythms by comparing them to the familiar patterns they learned by rote. Those notes and rhythms they learned help them to create their own unique musical ideas in the **Creativity/Improvisation** level. **Theoretical Understanding** strengthens what was learned at the prior levels by adding proper terminology to musical concepts that the students already understand.