

TUITION TIP: EAR TRAINING



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For the full Tuition Tip archive including sound files and videos, visit the website: www.guitar-x.co.uk - Interact – Tuition Tips. Each issue Andrew will be featuring a specific class taught at the school, giving you a bite-size chunk of the lesson, and an insight into what it's like to be on a course.



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Skill Level:

Everyone knows that a musician needs 'good ears', but what does that really mean and how does one go about getting them? It's not about the size and shape, in this context 'good ears' means the ability to recognise and distinguish differences in melody and harmony. This can work on an instinctive level, and for some very talented people this is enough. For the rest of us, there are various ways of training your ears to be more skilled and accurate, and importantly we can learn how to put this into action to improve our overall musicianship and bass playing skills.

When people talk about musicians and hearing, you often hear the phrase 'perfect pitch'. This means to be able to identify or recreate the pitch of a note without any reference. As in, if you stopped a person in the street who had perfect pitch and you asked them to sing you a C, they would get it right. To truly have this skill is quite rare and isn't a necessity – many great musicians do not have perfect pitch.

What we can learn and what this article is about is called 'relative pitch'. This means to be able to identify the relationships, or distances between notes, without necessarily knowing what the actual notes are called. The stop in the street test wouldn't work, unless you played the person two notes. In this case someone with good relative pitch could identify the interval between the notes, say a 5th, and if they knew the first note was a C, it would make the second note a G. Not as impressive as the first test, but actually very useful.

The benefits of improving your sense of relative pitch are many and varied, and if you want to apply for a more advanced music course such as a degree, you'll probably have to sit an ear training or aural test as part of the audition. This is such an important skill that every course at Guitar-X has ear training as a separate weekly lesson, giving you the chance to put down your bass and give those ears a serious workout!

As with learning any skill, you should start with the basics. The difficulty you face is that the sort of exercises you need to do first won't seem that related to the end result - sort of like learning the alphabet but not knowing any words or sentences. The other

hurdle to overcome is the fact that the best way of testing and improving your aural skills is to use your voice. Yes I'm talking about singing. You don't need to make a sound like Stevie Wonder, it's just a way of testing your skills – if you can accurately sing a specific note or interval, then you will definitely be able to recognise that sound in musical setting.

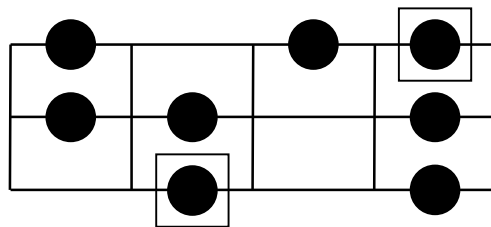
As with most things technical or theoretical, we are going to start with the major scale. I've written out an example of the C major scale, but any major scale will do. It's best to

find one that fits in the range of your voice comfortably, so I've included the shape for it that can be played anywhere on the fretboard.

Exercise 1: C MAJOR SCALE

Musical notation for Exercise 1: C Major Scale. The top staff shows the scale in bass clef with notes: C2, D2, E2, F2, G2, A2, B2, C3. The bottom staff shows the fingering: 3-5-2-3 | 5-2-4-5 | 5-4-2-5 | 3-2-5-3.

MAJOR SCALE SHAPE (ANY KEY)



NB – This shape only covers three strings and can be played anywhere on the fretboard.

Exercise 1

Play the major scale and sing or hum each note as you play it. Go slowly and try to be as accurate as possible.

Exercise 2

Play the first note of the major scale, and then sing the rest of the notes without playing them. If you get stuck or are unsure, check the note you should be on by playing it on your bass. Keep doing this until you can sing up and down the major scale and land back on the right note.

You can even do this exercise without your bass, i.e. in the shower or driving a car.

Just pick any random starting note and sing the major scale. If you are not convinced that you are correct, go back and sing along with your bass again.

Exercise 3 - Intervals

Now that you have the scale or 'ladder' in place, you can start to recognise larger jumps, known as intervals. Play through Exercise 3 and sing the intervals at the same time, then try just singing and without playing the notes. Each of these intervals has a name that is the same in any major scale. The fingering or shape of the interval will also be the same in every major scale – see BGM Issue 34 for more on these shapes.

Exercise 3: MAJOR SCALE INTERVALS (in C)

major 2nd major 3rd perfect 4th perfect 5th

major 6th major 7th octave

Exercise 4

Play the first note of the scale, chose an interval at random and sing or hum it. Check the note by playing the note on your bass. As with Exercise 2, as you get better at it you don't need to have your bass with you. Try pitching intervals wherever you are, and if you are unsure go back to your bass and check.

MELODY ASSOCIATION

When learning the sounds of these intervals it can be useful to associate them with a well-known tune that also uses that interval, usually at the start. For example, the second and third notes in *Happy Birthday* are a major second apart; the first two notes in *When The Saints Go Marching In* are a major third apart. Use the melodies in the table as a guide or find ones of your own if you don't know them. The more simple and annoying the tune the better!

MELODY ASSOCIATION EXAMPLES

Ex 1. Major 2nd Ex 2. Major 3rd

Ha - ppy birth - day to you Oh when the saints

INTERVAL	MELODY
Major 2 nd	Happy Birthday
Major 3 rd	When The Saints Go Marching In
Perfect 4 th	Auld Lang Syne

Perfect 5 th	Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
Major 6 th	My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean
Major 7 th	Superman Theme (not the very beginning)
Octave	Somewhere Over the Rainbow

It can take a while to get good at these exercises. If you've never tried this before then don't worry – it doesn't mean you are a bad musician if you can't do it straight away. Like most things, everyone can improve with practice so stick at it. To help you practice there are various websites that will play you intervals to identify, such as www.auralworkshop.com or there is a very good book by Gary Willis called *Ultimate Ear Training for Guitar and Bass*. Ultimately having 'good ears' will enable you to learn and understand music quickly, react to situations on the spot, transcribe music and be a better composer – all very worthwhile strings to add to your bow!

Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like me to cover, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk. See you next time.