

Bruce Adolphe



THE MIND'S EAR

Exercises for improving
the musical imagination for
performers, listeners and composers

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of performers, listeners
and composers

BRUCE
ADOLPHE



PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The exercises in *The Mind's Ear* are used by The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, New York, in the "Performance Awareness Seminar" created by Bruce Adolphe.

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*To my students in the original Senior Seminar at Juilliard
and to Linda Granitto, who was Director of Juilliard's
Pre-College Division when the exercises in this book evolved.*

*Also to my students in the Performance Awareness Workshop
at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.*

***A good technique serves the imagination
and is not noticed.***

FOREWORD

The exercises in this book range from amusing suggestions and games to rather challenging musical endeavors. They are useable by a wide variety of readers, from the devoted listener to the advanced conservatory student and teacher.

This book is a direct result of an incident in one of my Juilliard Pre-College classes. I had asked the students to harmonize a melody which was written on the chalkboard. These students were a motivated group, all proficient instrumentalists with a lively interest in the work we did in theory class. However, they seemed to be silently struggling with this assignment. A hand went up, followed by the question, "May we go to the piano to work on this?" I replied, "Just hear it in your head. Use harmonies with which you are familiar." His answer was, "I don't really hear anything when I can't use an instrument."

I looked at him very seriously, "Do you mean you can't hear triads and seventh chords in your head?" He was a student whose theory work on paper was always excellent. He answered, "Not really. I just know what works." When I had played chords of various types on the piano for this class they had little trouble identifying the harmonies. So I asked the whole group, "How many of you hear printed music in your heads without using an instrument?"

Only one hand went up; then it went down. None of them felt sure that they could hear in silence, in the mind's ear.

Feeling challenged, I said, "Put your papers away and listen, try to hear what I describe. Hear a major scale played loudly on the piano." (I did not touch the keyboard.) "Now hear it played on a violin." (I waited and watched their faces which told of real effort and genuine interest.) "Now hear each note played on a different instrument: piano, violin, clarinet, oboe, horn, flute, trumpet, vibraphone."

Some of the students found this rather difficult while others became very excited because the sounds were so real in their minds. The exercises evolved in classes and in a newly organized seminar. Eventually the idea of musical suggestions for the imagination was combined with theater games and exercises to become a new approach to music education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction

The Techniques of Imagining	3
Something to Say	5
On Interpretation	6
On Performing New Music	7
Hearing in Silence	8

II. Exercises

Exercises in Silence (hearing in your head)	11
Hearing Voices	12
The Understudy	13
Imagining a new work in performance	14
Imagining a musically complicated situation	15
Mozart has something to tell you	17
Prelude to hearing orchestration	18
Hearing orchestration	19
The conductor leaves the podium	20
In training	21
A senseless activity	22
Pulse and energy	23
Exercises Involving Groups (No instruments Needed)	25
Conducting a speech	26
Conducting an improvisation	27
Hearing counterpoint	28
Noises signifying something	29
Moments of truth	30
Exercises Using Musical Instruments (Solo Instruments)	31
If Stanislavsky were your violin teacher	32
Play the Moonlight Sonata for laughs	34
The soliloquy by Shakespeare sans Words	35
You are Glenn Gould	36
Playing Critic	37
Hello, how are you?	38
USE IT!	39

Accompanied poetry reading	40
An intriguing performance	41
(Groups of Instruments)	
The phrase by phrase improvisation for two	42
The debate for two players	43
Atmospheric improvisation	44
Modal improvisation for three	45
The impromptu sonata	46
Exercises that Involve Writing Music	47
The new second phrase	49
Imagining a new work by Beethoven	50
New tunes for old songs	51
Sliding around	52
Transfusion	53
Arranging folk songs	54
Be Shostakovich	55
Compose your leitmotif	56

PART I:

INTRODUCTION

"I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life."

(from *The Importance of Being Ernest* by Oscar Wilde.)

The Techniques of Imagining

**Have you ever heard a pianist
who was "all fingers and no soul"?**

At conservatories and music departments, young musicians are taught technique. They are taught the mechanics of instrumental playing and usually learn phrasing and style by practicing pieces. Hopefully, a student's interpretive powers deepen as more and more music is practiced and performed, and through coachings and chamber music experience. But what of the musical imagination? Some would say that not everything can be taught and that a student is either imaginative or not, talented or not, and that the musical imagination will blossom of its own accord.

My sixteen years of teaching at Juilliard has taught me that it is possible to stimulate and enliven the students' imagination through exercises. The creative energy of young musicians is not fully nourished by practicing, performing, and the conventional theory and solfege classes. It is time serious music educators acted to correct the conservative approach of the conservatory.

The musical imagination and the "inner ear" (the ability to hear in one's head) can be improved by practicing the appropriate exercises, just as with instrumental technique. The exercises in this book are designed to provoke and challenge the mind, and to develop the mind's ear. These games and exercises were tested in my classes at Juilliard, and proved immensely successful and popular with the students. I have based my approach on the theater games which are so familiar to drama students but unknown to music students and most teachers of music as well. My inspiration has been the work of Stanislavsky, Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, Jerzy Grotowski, and others who have brought vitality and technique to the training of actors, helping them to get in touch with their emotions, stimulate their memories, and free their imaginations. My work with drama students at New York University is thus synthesized with my experiences teaching composition, theory and solfege at Juilliard to produce this new approach to music training.

Practicing for six or more hours a day, as many musicians do, will not produce a mature performer if the musical inner life is not attended to. Strengthening the memory, imagination, and inner ear can lead to more meaningful interpretations, more communicative performances, and even shave off a few hours of learning-by-rote time.

This book not only contains exercises for performers, but also for composers. As a composer and composition teacher, I have sadly noted how little input most students get from their composition teachers. It is also disturbing to see that many young composers think that you can make a good piece out of anything, that ideas are not as important as compositional technique. I have even heard some point to Beethoven as an example, citing the simplicity and supposed arbitrariness of the opening of his Fifth Symphony. They then explain how Beethoven magically develops the opening idea, showing the richness of his technique and the skill with which he transforms a trivial gesture into a magnificent structure. This is absurd. As Arnold Schoenberg has shown clearly (using this very example of Beethoven) the whole musical conception of the work is present in the opening idea. "Put a hundred chicken eggs under an eagle, and she will still hatch only chickens."

With my composition students, I stress the value of the idea. Techniques of variation and development, formal procedures and even dramatic devices must be taught, and can be taught to any interested student. But to be a real creator, one must get in touch with one's inner life.

The exercises in Part II of this book are not only for performers and composers, but also for devoted listeners who wish to enrich their musical understanding and have some fun with their creative powers. Good listening is also a skill that can be practiced and improved.

Some of these exercises may seem extremely simple at first. Do not be fooled. Any good musician knows that to play scales and arpeggios beautifully is not at all easy, just as a good dancer or athlete knows the difficulties of moving efficiently.

Some of the exercises can be done by one person alone, in silence. Some need two or more people. Some need musical instruments. There are even a few that require composing--these for the more advanced musicians only. All of the exercises work well in a classroom, whether at the high school, college, or conservatory level.

Something To Say

A common criticism of a new work (whether it is a musical composition, dance, play, or painting) is: "it was well-crafted, but I don't think (s)he had anything to say."

Are some people blessed with "something to say" while others are not? I heard a comedian say, "I wish I lived in Eastern Europe, then I'd *really* have something to write about." A colleague of mine at the N.Y.U. Drama Department was teaching a course in comedy writing. After giving a demonstration to a new class, he overheard a student say, "It's no fair, his life was really funny."

We all have something to say, if only we will learn to really use our imaginations and explore our inner lives. Our education, musical and otherwise, can and should address this more rigorously.

I have heard composition students complain, "After studying composing and getting a degree, I can't decide what style to write in, what suits me. My teacher composes in an idiom that I found exciting when I studied with him, but now I feel like an imitator instead of a composer."

At least this student is aware of the problem. After all, why *should* a 23 year old composer write like his 70 year old teacher whose style matured over a lifetime of serious effort? This is not addressed very often, and it is a problem that cuts to the heart of what's wrong with music education in general.

Teachers must teach more than procedures, methods, and techniques. They must challenge the student to know his own mind, to liberate the imagination, to find out what he has to say.

I asked a class at Juilliard to compose a melody that would fit with a harmonic progression by Brahms. "And you have to really love the melody," I added. "Oh, no," a student said, "*that* makes it hard."

The love of music which originally motivated the student to choose an artistic life should never be forgotten during training and study. The love of one's art is an aspect of technique.

On Interpretation

To interpret a work means to discover and identify with the essence of a work, and to communicate it through faithful execution. A great performer uses technique in the service of the music, and does not use the music to display technique. Similarly, the artistic performer does not use a piece to exhibit his own personality, but identifies with the spirit and the message of the music. The performer enters into a partnership with the composer, a relationship which is sympathetic and passionate. The depth and variety of the performer's personality is made evident by the extent to which the meaning of the piece is communicated.

A note-perfect performance which does not realize the essence of the work is of no value. An impassioned performance which is full of inaccuracies is also without meaning.

To be able to connect with the essence of a work, the performer needs to understand himself, to explore his own emotions, get in touch with his inner life and musical imagination. The artist uses his intelligence and imagination to understand the larger historical and aesthetic context of the work to be performed. Good performers are intuitive people, and the intuitive capability can be strengthened by exercising the imagination.

To divorce the study of technique from the philosophy of interpretation is unartistic. A good technique serves the imagination, and is not noticed.

On Performing New Music

I have never heard of an actor who would only act in Shakespeare, Ibsen or the works of established modern authors such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Actors want to play new roles, to be the first to create an interpretation, to work with the playwright and participate in the birth of the literature which speaks of our time and ensures the future of the dramatic art.

However, there are many musicians who lack interest in new music. They use the word "modern" as if it meant "alien," and act as if there were one modern style rather than see that it is a world of many personal voices, varied, colorful, and challenging.

An actor who has worked in new plays can bring a freshness, spontaneity and sense of immediacy to classical drama, just as a great classical actor can bring perspective, tradition, pacing, and resonance to modern works. This is true for musicians as well.

What prevents someone from participating in new music? Usually the core of the problem is a lack of imagination. An imaginative performer loves to try new things and is versatile by nature.

An imaginative performer approaches new music with the same care he brings to established repertoire, and brings to established repertoire the sense of discovery and vitality learned from new music.

Hearing in Silence

To hear in silence means to imagine vividly how music sounds, so vividly that it is as if it were really being played.

Good musicians can look at printed music and hear it. Some can hear only one line, others entire orchestral scores. Some can hear only what is printed for their own instrument, a facility learned by experience but left undeveloped. It could and should be developed, and that is one of the aims of these exercises.

Some composers tell me that they are surprised when they first hear their own music played on actual instruments, that it is quite different from what they expected. What did they expect, I would like to know. It is not so odd to be occasionally surprised by an effect made by large orchestral forces, where balance, dynamics and acoustics play a great role, but certainly in chamber music or in familiar orchestral situations this should not be the case. I believe it simply means that the composer's ability to hear in silence is not as developed as it should be.

The key to imagining is memory. A refined memory, capable of hearing in the mind a piece that one has heard of as if **IT WERE HAPPENING IN THE PRESENT**, is the complementary skill to imagining unheard music and events. By trying to hear **LOUDLY** in the mind something one has heard, and then **ALTERING** the memory slightly, one is already imagining unheard music.

Remember an event in your life. Tell it out loud with as many details as you can. Now tell it again but change some details. You are, obviously, now telling a story that is fiction. (Some say all memory is fiction.) It is the same with music, but it is not commonly practiced.

Hearing in silence is a great and useful skill for musicians, and it is also a stimulating and worthwhile exercise for anyone wishing to explore his inner life. Silence, these days, is increasingly hard to find, but worth the search.

PART II:

EXERCISES