



Music Musings No. 1: What is Music?

Music Facts to play with! by Suzannah Doyle • www.SuzDoyle.com © 2004 Suzannah Doyle Music

Music is a language. Like any language, people can “speak” it and understand it long before learning to read or write it. While mathematical in nature, music is a language of the emotions.

There are **3 main ways to learn music**, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. This fact sheet covers these very different approaches to learning music, which will help you choose the one that best suits your needs and learning style. Most of this info focuses on how to learn to play piano, but the concepts apply to other instruments as well.

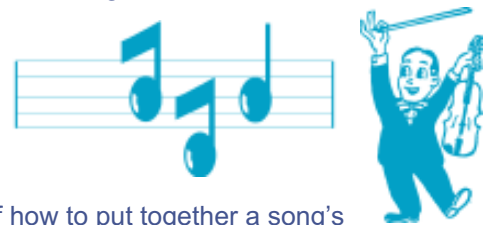
Here are 3 different ways to learn music:

1) By sight-reading (written tradition)

-- learning to read notes on a piano staff and play them exactly as written. Each dot (note) you see on a line represents a specific key on the piano/ keyboard to be played, as well as information on how long to hold the note, what other notes to play with it, and how loud or soft to play.

Notes on a piano staff represent three things:

- 1) **The Melody** (main “tune”)
- 2) **Harmonies** (other notes that give the song a certain feel and style)
- 3) **Rhythm** (the timing and underlying feel of a song).



With sight-reading, you are playing the composer’s or arranger’s opinion of how to put together a song’s melodies, harmonies and rhythms (and many of these opinions are excellent!). The music usually contains dynamic markings to help you interpret the feel of a song, and is often available in various levels of difficulty (from easy to advanced); some also includes additional info for students, such as suggested finger and hand positions. Sight-reading is the primary focus of piano teaching (although many teachers now also integrate improvisation skills -- how to “make things up” -- into lessons), and provides a crucial foundation for musicians to communicate with one another. It is an essential skill for classical musicians, and works well with those who are more visual learners.

2) By ear (oral tradition)



-- playing by listening and figuring out how something might sound, without necessarily reading or writing notes. This is most commonly used by folk or old-time musicians, who “jam” or make up music on the spot. They may focus mostly on how to play harmonies and chords, along with improvising lead lines, and they tend to learn songs best by listening to someone play it. Playing by ear works best for those who are aural learners (who process information best by ear).

3) By chord-theory

- a combination of the above. You play by sight-reading a melody, while improvising (making up) accompaniments, harmonies and solos to go with the melody, based on understanding what key the song is in (which 7 note scale the song is based on), what chords are used for harmonies (the 7 chords from that scale), and how those chords are put together (the chord progression used in the song).

When playing by chord-theory, you understand the basic melody and “blocks” of the songs, and you get to decide how to explore/ play this in Music Musings 2 and beyond!) This style of playing is most commonly used by folk musicians, and is increasingly being incorporated into piano teaching. When playing by chord-theory, you get to: 1) learn to read, write and play notes and melodies exactly as written and 2) change the arrangement and style of the song if you’d like.



harmony (chord) “building these together. (More details on commonly used by jazz, rock and lessons. When playing by

When you understand how chords work and what all songs have in common, then you can easily make up and play songs RIGHT AWAY and experiment with playing a song in any style you like (hmmm, a boogie version of Moonlight Sonata, perhaps???)!. These fact sheets present hands-on info about how to play music right away using the chord-theory approach! Well, what are you waiting for? Turn the page!!

Let's look at the song "Für Elise" as viewed from each of the three styles of learning:

1) By sight reading

Für Elise

Ludwig von Beethoven

The image shows the first six measures of the piano score for 'Für Elise'. The top staff is labeled 'Piano' and 'pp' (pianissimo). The bottom staff is labeled 'Pno.'. The tempo is 'Poco Moto'. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/8. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the accompaniment is in the bass clef.

A whole lotta notes! Each note represents a specific key to be played on the piano. Notes on the top (treble) staff are played by the right hand, and notes on the bottom (bass) staff are played by the left hand. No guesswork is involved!

2) By ear



Oops! Nothing to see, folks. The musician would listen & "figure out" how to play the song without looking at any notes, using what sounds right.. Or, they might learn the song "spatially" by watching someone else play it, and then copying them.

3) By Chord Theory

Für Elise

Ludwig von Beethoven

The image shows the first six measures of the piano score for 'Für Elise', similar to the sight-reading version. However, instead of individual notes in the bass staff, chord names are written above the notes. The top staff has 'E' above the first measure, 'Am' above the second, 'E' above the third, 'Am' above the fourth, and 'E' above the fifth. The bottom staff has 'Am' above the first measure, 'E' above the second, and 'Am' above the third. The tempo is 'Poco Moto' and the dynamics are 'pp'.

Melody notes only (the "right hand" part), and CHORD NAMES are shown. Or sometimes, just the words of a well-known songs are shown along with chord names above the words.

When playing by chord theory (as in the above example), you would sight-read the right hand melody part, and make up how to play the harmonies that go with it using notes of the A minor and E minor chords where indicated. (Each chord consists of 3 notes.) You can either play the song exactly as notated (in the sight-reading version of the music), or you can make up your own version of it, or try it in an altogether different style than intended. This is where the fun begins!

..... The rest of these fact sheets will get you started in exploring how to play by chord theory right away!