

# Playing by Ear

✘ I was never a musical child. As the saying goes, I couldn't even carry a tune in a bucket. Once, in my twenties, I bought a tin whistle and a book of folk songs with music, and I tried to pick out tunes in that.

Music theory was a locked book. I did not have the key. I did not even have a clue what a key was.

Move on forty years, to my present self-isolation. I found the old tin whistle again. It was cracked and dented, but I repaired it with some Sellotape. I put it to my mouth and blew, moving my fingers at random to try to recapture some once familiar tune. The notes were strange, but there was no one else to hear and so I persevered. I searched the Internet for simple whistle tunes, and I discovered Letter Notes.

Letter notes are the simplest form of notation you can get – just the letters to indicate the pitch of each note: D E F G A B C d e f g ... Remember which fingers you need for each note, and you can play any tune, or at least any tune that can be played on a penny whistle – anything in the key of D or G that only needs one note to be played at a time. There are just seven letters to worry about. D and d, for example, are the same note, only an octave apart. The fingering is the same – you just have to blow harder.

I soon had a whole notepad filled with the letter notes for familiar and unfamiliar tunes. It took little practise to play a tune that I already knew well, but it was often impossible to make sense of a new one without first hearing it. Letter notes correspond roughly to syllables, but give no indication of rhythm or pacing, unless you happen to know lyrics that go with it. Sometimes I would mistake what I was reading, and try to play one tune to the rhythm of another. The effect was – interesting.

Letter notes are like those ancient forms of writing that have no spaces, no uppercase, no punctuation, no vowels even. They were not designed to be read sight unseen, but as an aid to memory. Unless you know what they represent, deciphering them is a slow process, like picking a lock tumbler by tumbler, note by note. No wonder that, even in the fifth century, after a thousand years of classical Greek and Latin learning, Saint Augustine was astonished to find someone who could not only read silently, but do it *without moving his lips*.

My lips do not move when I play a tune from memory; but sometimes my throat does, as I sound the names of the notes in my head. With practice you begin to remember with your fingers and your breath as well as your mind, and then you 'hear' the sounds of the notes instead of their names. At present this takes so much effort that when I 'get' a tune in my head I know I have remembered it right, but it is probably not the tune I was first thinking of and i am unable to tell which it is.

The ideal, of course, is to be able to write the letter notes for a tune you

have only heard, so that you can study it and pass it on, or improvise a new tune around it. Fortunately there a key to help.

How can you tell a tune in the key of D major from a tune in the key of G major? Both use the same notes, except for the fingering of C; in D it is sharp and in G it is natural. But a tune like *Amazing Grace* can avoid C altogether and still be undoubtedly in G. If you look at the letters you will see that a tune in D has a lot of F and A notes where a tune in G has more Bs and Ds. These are the major third, two note above the key note; and the fifth, two notes higher still.

The first stressed note of a tune will almost invariably be one of these three notes and, like all good speeches, the last stressed note will be the keynote. Once you know which key you are in, you can be sure that a jump to one of these notes will sound good. You know which notes the tune will contain, unless it throws in an 'accidental' for contrast, like the single C sharp in *Abide With Me* (Lord with me A-bide).

There are other literary parallels too. There are motifs, like the repeated AGFEd is the *Star Wars* theme, and 'rhymes' where a passage ends on a different but related note – or is inverted, going up where before it went down. A tune generally establishes its key quickly, and therefore sets up an expectation that it will resolve to the key note. What makes it interesting is how it gets there. Halfway through there often comes the bridge – what I call the "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" – where it changes most spectacularly from what has gone before, before order is finally restored.

I may never be musical, but for now, while there is no one to complain, I shall continue to have fun learning to play by ear.

**Jenny Brien**