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# Achieving Music Literacy

BY DAVE SAMUELS

**F**rom the very beginning of my music education I was told that music was a language. I remember the great series of lectures that Leonard Bernstein gave at Harvard University discussing the commonality between the languages of words and music.

Indeed, music contains all the basic elements of language. There is a musical syntax: the connection between melody, harmony, rhythm, and dynamics. There is even a grammar in music. Certain chords resolve to other chords in a mostly orderly fashion based on a tradition that is overlaid with “style.” And there is also a standard written form for music.

With language, we read a line of text in a book, newspaper, or magazine and the dots (letters) create a three-dimensional event comprising sound, meaning, and emotion. We do the same thing with music. We look at the dots (notes) on a page and create from them a three-dimensional event through sound, articulation, and expression. That is what’s supposed to happen in

theory, but there is a big difference between how we read and understand a sentence versus how we read and interpret a phrase of music.

We have no problem reading a sentence and understanding the meaning of the words as well as the grammar, spelling, and pronunciation, but when it comes to music, a lot of us read the notes without really understanding the musical grammar (harmony), spelling (melody), or even the pronunciation (articulation).

Why don’t we understand these things? Because we have never learned to be musically literate.

Our understanding of written language is completely connected to our understanding of how to read and write. In fact, the definition of “literacy” is the ability to read and write. Why don’t we apply the same definition to music education? Somehow, we have separated learning to read music from learning to write music; the domain for writing music has been left almost exclusively to composers and arrangers.

When you were in first grade, did the teacher come into the classroom and say, “Today, boys and girls, only those children who are going to be authors are going to learn how to write. Everyone else will be excluded.” The absurdity of that scenario is obvious, but it reflects the shortsightedness of music education today.

We learn to write in order to better communicate. You can’t write a typical sentence without first understanding proper syntax, spelling, comprehension, and good handwriting. The same is true with music. You can’t write a tonal melodic line without first understanding harmony, rhythm, form, and good manuscript.

How difficult is it to learn how to write music? It’s no more difficult than learning how to write. Everyone reading this article knows how to write, although few are great authors. Anyone can learn to write music without necessarily becoming a great composer. Learning to write music is basic and essential for every musician whose goal is to communicate through the language of music.

Since most mallet percussionists are oriented towards classical music, let’s look at the “Sarabande—Double” from “Partita No. 1 for Unaccompanied Violin” by J.S. Bach. Here are the first five bars of that piece.



1



MICHAEL PARENTINO

The first step in our process of understanding the musical language is to analyze the harmony and melody. (R = root)

2

Notice how Bach establishes the chord quality by starting with the third in most three-note groups. This is an example of why it's not a good habit to always practice scales starting on the root. Practicing this way creates a mindset that the tonality of a scale is determined by the root. What actually determines tonality is the third of the scale.

Another melodic relationship to look at is the movement of the flat 7 to the third in both the Em7 to A7 (the D of the Em7 chord resolving to the C# of the A7—a ii7 to V7 chord progres-

sion), and the flat 7 of the A7 resolving to the third of the D chord (a V7 to I chord progression). This movement also happens between the C#7 going to the F#7 (a V/V to V chord progression) and between the F#7 chord and the Bm chord (a V7 to i chord progression).

Now play the fourth measure and change the flat 13 (D) to a natural 13 (D#).

3

Where will it resolve now, to B-minor or B-major? Let your ears tell you. It's B-major. The thirteenth of the dominant chord (F#7) becomes the third of the chord of resolution in either B-major or B-minor. The melody over the F#7 chord, in the original piece, uses a D-natural because it is going to resolve to B-minor. So, the melody of the dominant chord is tailored to reflect whether the V chord is going to resolve to major or minor. If the V chord is resolving to a major I chord, then the thirteenth is natural. If the V chord is going to resolve to a minor i chord, then the thirteenth is lowered.

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Next, take the following four examples and either record the accompaniment part first or get together with another player. Each example deals with a different melodic concern. The following example focuses on playing the third of each chord.

4

Bm Em A7 D

G Em C#7 F#7 Bm

The next example starts on the third of each chord and then moves up diatonically to the fifth, resolving to the third of the next chord.

5

Bm Em A7 D

G Em C#7 F#7 Bm

The following example starts on the third and then moves diatonically down to the seventh, resolving to the third of the next chord (the exceptions here are the G and Em chords).

6

Bm Em A7 D

G Em C#7 F#7 Bm

The final example demonstrates that the music of Bach is fundamental to the current tradition of tonal music. The same progression in Bach's "Partita #1" is also present in "All the Things You Are," a piece written by Oscar Hammerstein some 300 years after Bach.

7

Bm Em A7 D

G C#7 F#

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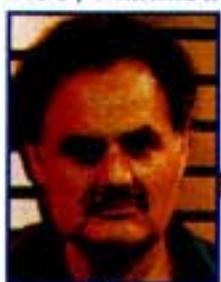
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Some suggestions for what you can do with these examples is to memorize the melodies and chord progressions. Then try transposing them. Start writing your own melodies over this same progression. Start creating your own melodies while playing over these same progressions. It's called improvisation or spontaneous composition. Don't be intimidated. We improvise with language all the time, and everyone can learn to do it with music. It helps to develop your imagination, it's creative, it's fun, and most importantly, it will help you to develop a better command in your quest to express yourself through the music you play.

The benefits of becoming musically literate are vast. You have a better understanding as well as a better appreciation of music. Once you are able to understand and communicate through the language of music, your ability to perform and express yourself will improve.

There will also be some unexpected rewards. You might find that you enjoy composing, arranging, conducting, improvising, producing, publishing, or teaching. All of these activities require an understanding of the language of music. The kind of analysis and practical application explored in this article is the first step in achieving musical literacy.

Dave Samuels, an award-winning and 5-time Grammy nominee, has performed and recorded as a vibraphonist and marimbist with a broad scope of artists including Gerry Mulligan, Oscar Peterson, Stan Getz, The Yellowjackets, Pat Metheny, Bruce

Hornsby, Frank Zappa, Spyro Gyra, Poncho Sanchez, Paquito D'Rivera, Double Image, and The Caribbean Jazz Project. His solo recordings include *Living Colors* (MCA), *Ten Degrees North* (MCA), *Natural Selection* (GRP), *Del Sol* (GRP), and *Tjaderized—A Tribute to Cal Tjader* (Verve). With the Caribbean Jazz Project he has recorded *Caribbean Jazz Project* (Heads Up), *Island Stories* (Heads Up), and *New Horizons* (Concord), and with Double Image he appears on *Double Image* (Enja), *Dawn* (ECM), *In Lands I Never Saw* (Celestial Harmonies), *Open Hand* (DMP), and *Duotones* (Double Image). PN

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