

### 1. What is active listening?

Active listening is simply listening to music as a primary activity, as opposed to passive listening where music is done as a background or concurrently with another activity (jogging, cleaning, homework, gardening for example). It is listening with an intent, using all your focus on the music you are listening to.

It can be very difficult to listen to music “as a whole” when you are very focused on it. That is normal. Our minds are naturally drawn to the highest and lowest pitches, to lyrics, to anything louder, anything that is prominent, and anything that is discordant. It is okay to focus on one part of the music, it is usually something you **want** to do when listening actively.

### 2. Why active listening?

Active listening can help you learn music, transcribe music, practice, be critical of music (useful once you’ve recorded yourself practice, or if you are mixing/mastering a recording, or trying to help a student or colleague).

### 3. What to listen to?

Here are a few ideas of what you can focus your listening:

#### **Melody**

- contour
- instrument(s)
- articulations

#### **Harmony**

- chords
- keys
- dissonances
- resolutions
- tuning

#### **Rhythm(s)**

- homorhythmic vs. heterorhythmic
- syncopation
- ”togetherness”

#### **Dynamics**

- Varied? Stagnant?
- Range

#### **Tempo**

- Steady?
- Variations
- Accurate?

#### **Meter**

- Steady?
- Changing?
- Simple, Compound, Complex?

#### **Instruments**

- Easy to recognize?
- Orchestration
- Precise role?

#### **Form**

- Repetition
- Structure
- Climax

#### **Emotions/Mood**

- What does this make you feel?
- Does it change throughout the piece?

#### **Language/Lyrics**

- Does it match the music?
- Is it easy to understand?
- Is the language chosen for a certain reason?
- Diction/Accent
- Is everyone singing the same thing at the same time?

#### **Interpretation**

- Different interpretations
- How similar? How divergent?

#### 4. How to?

Here's a few tricks to make the best of active listening:

##### -Listen in layers

Listen to the various layers that play at the same time: bass line, harmony, melody, sound effects, countermelody. Listen to the piece multiple times, focusing on different layers each time. Then listen again to hear the interplay between them: call-and-response, dissonance, assonance.

##### -Listen in "chunks"

Listen to a specific part of a piece, and that part alone. One whole section, one phrase, one measure! Listen over and over, try to find the intricacies. You'll become familiar with each part of the piece that way.

##### -Listen subjectively/objectively

Listen to hear what's happening, objectively, or descriptively. Then listen subjectively: do I like this? Why don't I like this? Can I pinpoint what I like and dislike?

##### -Vary your listening practices:

- Slow your music down (Youtube has a built-in function!)

- Repeat various sections

- Cover your ears (You'll hear only what the producer wanted as important)

- Draw a map of the piece! This is a great way to learn the form of the piece.

#### 5. Make sure you are not distracted:

- Avoid music videos

- Avoid reading the lyrics

- Avoid reading the score

- Avoid other sound sources. Noise-cancelling headphones are great for this!

Once you are familiar enough with the music, lyrics or sheet music can be useful. Maybe your eyes will notice something your ears have not.

#### 6. Use what you have learned!

Sections that repeat often have the same music, or similar. Don't practice the same thing twice! Maybe the music is the same, but in a different key. How does that affect you? As a ringer, it's probably quite different. Your part in the mix is not the same anymore. Maybe you were the melody before, but now you're harmonic "filler". Maybe your ringing will now match the emotions the composer intended better. Maybe that annoying rhythm you could not count is now etched in your brain and you can't get it wrong!