

CHAPTER TEN: EAR TRAINING

The topic of ear training in a bass book might seem a little out of place, but I believe its inclusion is justified. Quite frankly the instrument, like the guitar, is so visual that for some players finger patterns overtake the ears during the formative years of development. It is absolutely necessary to be able to internally hear what you play. Vocalizing is used a lot in ear training because the voice connects with the ear in the most direct manner, and represents what you are hearing most clearly. So don't be shy - sing!

Finger patterns are great, and a necessary part of learning to play bass. You won't forget them if you slow down and let your ears catch up with what you are playing for a while. The result will give you a greater feeling of satisfaction because you'll **know** and **hear** what you're playing! For those bassists looking for ways to build ear training into their daily routines, I include some ideas that have proven useful for myself and many of my students.

PRACTICE PLAN: EAR TRAINING

1. Sing it first

Try to predict the note/s you are about to play. If necessary play the first note and then sing the rest of the phrase. Sing slow enough to be accurate. For longer phrases, pick out some of the notes simultaneously on the bass. Try using a tuner to check your voice's intonation on a few long notes.

2. Sing your solos

Singing and playing the same improvised line can be good ear-training and also can sound good. A play-a-long accompaniment is useful for this. Try just singing, just playing and then both at once. Does your pitch choice change when you sing? Is your phrasing more natural when you have to sing? Do your lines "breathe" more when you have to?

3. Practice chord-scales

Select a tune and follow along the chord progression slowly. Hold down a root-and-fifth on the bass, and possibly a 7th, 10th or other colour tone for each chord and sing the appropriate chord-scale up and down over this drone. Sing slowly so you don't "gloss over" any pitches. Refer to Chapter 7 for advice on chord-scale choice.

4. Notice the notes

Making pitch letter-name and degree-number associations to the notes you play makes for more meaningful and well-planned bass lines and solos. Though it slows you down a lot, careful practice will ensure the process becomes automatic when your theory becomes internalized

and your ears develop. Speak the letter-name of each pitch in an exercise, or label them numerically. *Solfège* can be useful for this process also, and would involve a pitched (rather than spoken) voice.

5. Self duets

Singing and playing two independent lines is a great challenge. Play a bass line for a tune you know very well and try singing the melody, or improvising a solo over the top. Notice how it changes what you play! Now reverse the roles and play the top line and sing the bass line. Is this more difficult? Try reading some two-part contrapuntal music, such as Bach or Telemann. You could even get together with a friend guitarist or bassist and try doing all four parts of the Bach Chorales together!

6. Tune up

Instead of using an electronic tuner for all of your strings, just tune one and then plug into your amplifier. Play the correctly tuned string and then each of the others, as open strings one at a time, comparing them all back to the tuned one. Tune each as guided by your ear and then check them on the tuner for accuracy. Depending how many strings are on your bass, and which string you tuned up first, you'll be tuning intervals of ascending and descending fourths, minor sevenths, minor tenths, and possibly minor 13ths and minor 16ths!

You could also try using your ears before your eyes when setting up your bass. Compare 12th-fret harmonics with fretted notes as described in Chapter 14, "Setting up your bass".

7. Transcribe

Transcribing is a personal process that you have to establish for yourself. It takes years of patient practice to develop to a point where you can transcribe a reasonable portion of what you can actually play! It is a worthy challenge, though, as it gives you deep insight into music, compositional and improvisational ideas, and of course it develops your ears.

Steps for successful transcription.

A) Choose a recording. If you are new to transcribing, choose a recording which contains clear and slow or moderately-paced playing. It can be something you like, or something you would like to understand better and be able to play, or it could just be a piece that would suit a transcription purely for the exercise. Bass lines are not the only things you can benefit from transcribing. Consider also melody lines, harmony parts, improvised solos, chord progressions, and individual parts of a drum kit (e.g. the ride cymbal.)