

# Third Stream Ear Training at the Queensland Conservatorium

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## ABSTRACT

*Aural training for improvisers is a specialized area of musicianship. It requires development of conventional skills, as well as a high level of aural awareness which permits real-time reactions to a variety of musical stimuli and contexts. The Third Stream Ear Training Method, developed by American pianist/educator Ran Blake at the New England Conservatory, Boston, is the foundation of jazz aural training courses at the Queensland Conservatorium, Brisbane. The method involves the memorization and vocal performance of melodies from a wide range of cultures without recourse to scores. This results in not only the learning of basic pitches and rhythms, but also the internalization of nuances of style and genre which result in a sophisticated and informed musicianship. The Method was modified to suit the academic environment and needs of the jazz students in Brisbane. An overview of the classroom methods employed over 3 semesters of jazz aural skills classes was offered, with some specific examples of exercises which have proven useful in developing an aural understanding of basic harmonic and melodic principles for improvisation.*

## INTRODUCTION

The author has been teaching Aural Skills in the jazz strand at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Brisbane, since 1999. The core curriculum over three semesters is based on the Third Stream Ear Training Method, developed by American pianist-composer-educator Ran Blake over his many years teaching at the New England Conservatory in Boston. Blake, a brilliantly eclectic musician and respected educator, developed his method in response to the serious aural deficits which he observed in his students of improvisation. He has only recently retired as head of the Third Stream department, now called Contemporary Improvisation, where generations of musicians have had their ears awakened under his guidance.

This paper outlined Ran Blake's aural training philosophy and method, described how it is employed in courses at the Queensland Conservatorium, and how it has been modified to meet both the needs of the jazz students, and the realities of the teaching situation at the Conservatorium. The need for jazz aural skills courses that include development of conventional skills such as sight-singing and dictation, in addition to training specific to improvisers was discussed. Lastly, exercises and techniques used in tutorials to equip students to practice on their own was described, because in the end,

individual practice is the only way to develop highly functional ears.

## THIRD STREAM EAR TRAINING: PHILOSOPHY

The term "Third Stream" was created by Gunther Schuller, composer/conductor/musicologist, in 1957 to describe music with which he was passionately involved: a classical and jazz hybrid which combined "...the improvisational spontaneity and rhythmic vitality of jazz with the compositional procedures and techniques acquired in Western...musical development" (Schuller, quoted in Blake, 1976, p. 30). Under Schuller's directorship at New England Conservatory (NEC), the Third Stream department was established in 1972. At that point the working definition of Third Stream was expanded to include music from traditions other than classical and jazz. While the Third Stream concept and the music which embodied it were not particularly well received in either the classical or jazz worlds of the late 1950s, nowadays we hear a blurring of boundaries between musical genres to an extent which was unimagined 50 years ago. In particular, due to "its tendency toward inclusion and assimilation," hybrid forms of jazz have appeared around the world as it "assimilate[s] elements from such diverse traditions as European impressionism; Indian, Latin American, and African musics; and numerous American commercial styles" (Dobbins, 1980, p. 36). One could add to that list European and Asian folk musics, electronic and software-based interactions and effects, and so on as the music continues to evolve. Schuller and Blake already saw the direction in which improvised music was heading, and they contributed to its hybridization.

Blake (1988) observed that his students were ill-prepared to study jazz improvisation or repertoire from other oral/aural cultures due to their limited aural training prior to entering tertiary study. He continued to lament the fact that aural musicianship has been abandoned almost entirely in the west in favor of learning music through reading scores. He outlined his position clearly in his essay *The Primacy of the Ear* (circa 1988):

The most important premise is one that is so obvious that it gets laughs wherever I go. Music is an...AURAL ART. So many educators may nod their heads in approval...but the following day classes are held as usual with visual aids, the royalty of the learning pyramid....students...who study European concert music exercise their ears the least and are the most aurally deprived. (p. 1-2)

Aural training lies at the center of Third Stream pedagogy. As jazz educator Bill Dobbins (1980) remarked, “[i]magine the absurdity of attempting to learn the style of Louis Armstrong from a printed page. Jazz musicians always have learned the most expressive elements of their skills through meticulous imitation of established masters of the tradition” (p. 41). The Third Stream Method seeks to equip students to undertake an in-depth aural study of repertoire relevant to the development of their personal musical identities. It encourages the internalization of nuances of style and genre, which result in a sophisticated and informed musicianship.

### **THIRD STREAM EAR TRAINING: METHOD**

In a 1976 article, Blake stated that first year students were required to memorize “at least thirty melodies, many of them taken from the Afro-American heritage,” (p. 32) which they were to sing or whistle, unaccompanied, prior to performing them on their instruments. Then bass lines accompanying various of these melodies were committed to memory, many of which “[had] to be located and deciphered from within the context of the entire work” (p. 33). It was only after this rigorous (re-)activation of students’ aural capacities that the study of intervals, and simple and complex chords could begin.

In the mid-1990s when the author studied at NEC, Third Stream repertoire included, among others, Aretha Franklin, Sarah Vaughan and Billie Holiday, Chopin, the rock groups Cream and the Police, James Brown, Brazilian crooner Joao Gilberto, Jewish and Haitian traditional songs, a raga, and a Spanish Sephardic melody. Undergraduate students were expected to sample them all, whereas Masters students were encouraged to select repertoire relevant to their particular interests and direction from the supplied tapes and elsewhere. Blake’s *The Primacy of the Ear* (circa 1988) advised both “active” and “passive” listening, singing with the recording, recording oneself and listening back, and importantly, working in small amounts every day rather than “cramming”.

Blake (1981) described reducing the amount of content covered as he evaluated the effectiveness of his methods. His current courses involve both vocal and instrumental performance of melodies each week, with class time devoted exclusively to these activities (McFadden, 2009). When Blake developed his approach to aural training in the 1970s, there were virtually no aural training methods available for the jazz/contemporary musician, and little research into this specialized area. Blake was a pioneer in the field, basing his ideas on his own observations and experiences as a musician and educator. However a recent paper by music educator Patricia Campbell (2005) describes the benefits of “deep listening,” a process very similar to Blake’s Third Stream Method. She suggests that “...young people can find their own musical voice as they listen...” (p. 30), and that they are “...led by their ears into a refined musicianship that is the basis of their growth as performers, composers and analytical thinkers” (p. 30), and of course improvisers. She proposes a three-

phase pedagogy involving “Attentive Listening” focusing on “specific musical elements and events; “Engaged Listening” as students participate through singing along or tapping a rhythm; and finally “Enactive Listening” which is “...intense listening to every musical nuance of a recorded selection...for the purpose of re-creating the music in performance in as stylistically accurate a way as possible.” (p. 32). Clearly these ideas correspond very closely with Blake’s instructions regarding passive and active listening, and working closely with recordings in order to internalize both melodies and stylistic nuances. Campbell’s studies in world folk music have no doubt led her to similar conclusions to Blake’s. It is encouraging to see such ideas finding their way into mainstream music pedagogy, rather than remaining exclusive to the improvisational world.

### **THIRD STREAM EAR TRAINING: QUEENSLAND CONSERVATORIUM**

The Third Stream Ear Training Method was introduced at the Queensland Conservatorium in 1996. Since then, memorization and performance of selected melodies has been the most important task in the jazz aural skills courses, constituting a large percentage of the grade for each semester. The other important task is recognition of and ability to sing chords and modes related to contemporary improvisational practice. These fundamentals progress in difficulty from major and minor scales and triads in the first semester, to 4- and 5-note “jazz” chords, altered extensions and modes of the melodic minor in the third semester.

However, while respecting the Third Stream philosophy and employing its methods, it had to be adapted for the courses at the Queensland Conservatorium. The reasons for this are outlined below, as are the adaptations, which have resulted from my attempts to reconcile Third Stream pedagogy with the reality of my teaching situation.

1. Ran Blake conducts Third Stream Ear Training seminars over six or eight semesters with his undergraduate students, while the jazz students at the Queensland Conservatorium have only three. We do not have the luxury of devoting an entire year or even a semester exclusively to the memorization and performance of melodies. Therefore, students are required to learn intervals, chords, and modes simultaneously with their melody memorization tasks.

2. Third Stream seminars are no larger than 10 people, while the aural skills courses have between 25 and 40 students. With such large groups it is impossible to have each student sing and/or perform melodies within the group each week. Therefore, each student sings in a weekly private appointment, which allows for personal attention to their individual difficulties and progress; class time is devoted to other activities, as described.

3. In addition to specialized aural training for improvisation, jazz students need to develop conventional skills such as sight-reading melodies and rhythms, and dictation/transcription. Blake’s classroom work does not include audiation from notation, (a skill developed elsewhere in the NEC curriculum); but sight-singing of melodies and rhythms is included in each week’s activities, and dictation every fortnight, since there is no

other course which focuses on these skills in the jazz program.

4. While one of the aims of Third Stream education is to expand students' musical horizons through study of repertoire from a broad selection of genres, many jazz students in Brisbane have had very limited exposure to jazz before starting their tertiary studies. Therefore the repertoire selected for memorization is from the jazz world in order to deepen their knowledge of the music at the center of their studies. The melody and the chords/modes studied in any given week are coordinated as closely as possible (e.g.  $\text{mi}7$  &  $\text{mi}9$  chords, dorian mode, and a melody in dorian mode); as well as with repertoire studied elsewhere in the program (i.e. in private lessons, ensemble, or theory class) with the hope to encourage in-depth knowledge of certain repertoire rather than a limited and vague acquaintance with too broad a field.

### AURAL SKILLS (JAZZ) 1, 2, & 3

The Third Stream Ear Training Method combines the study of music at the micro-level (intervals, chords, modes, rhythmic subdivisions) and the macro-level (how these things fit together in actual music, form, genre, time feel, dynamics, textures, phrasing, tone and timbre). Classroom work is devoted at all three levels to both these aims, with constant encouragement of the students to use their ears and start asking themselves questions about what they hear.

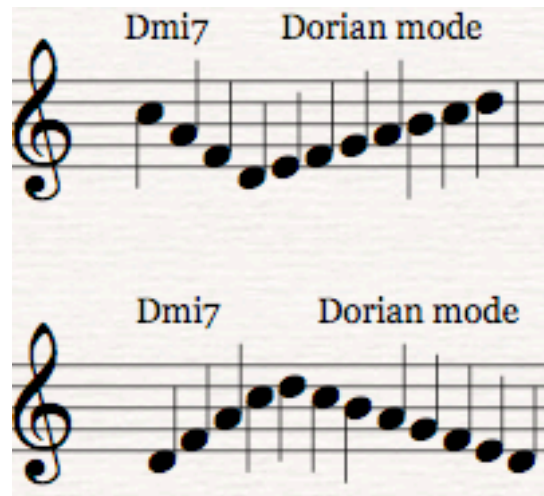
In level 1, methods are introduced that are the foundation for work in levels 2 and 3. For example, for each melody to be memorized, students are guided through an aural analysis, asking questions, which will help them to identify: Meter/Tempo, Tonality/Modality, Form (AABA, ABA, ABAC, etc.), Instrumentation, Style/Genre/Mood, etc.). This encourages them to listen carefully and analytically to the melodies, while giving them "facts" which help them remember which melody is which in an exam: *Don't Explain* (Billie Holiday) - 4/4, minor key, piano and voice, slow ballad, AABA. In levels 2 & 3 students do this analysis on their own as part of the melody memorization process.

For drilling intervals, chords and modes, the circle of fifths is used moving in a flat direction. For example, the class sings an ascending second inversion minor triad from C, then F, then B $\flat$ , etc. Observations suggest that students find descending intervals, chords, and modes more difficult than ascending, which corresponds with findings in a study by Delzell, Rohwer, and Ballard (1999) into students' ability to play by ear. Equal classroom time is spent on descending figures in order to address this weakness.

In levels 2 and 3, the circle of fifths remains an important tool for repetition. Students also audiate figures from pitches organized in other patterns such as ascending/descending tones/semi-tones, and from random pitches. Levels 2 and 3 deal more specifically with chords and modes for improvisation. Contemporary jazz theory is based on a "chord-scale" concept whereby a chord symbol (e.g.  $\text{Dmi}7$ ) is associated with a particular mode (e.g. Dorian) (see Figure 1). The students repeat exercises, which illustrate how the chord implies the

mode, while the characteristic sound of the mode is defined by the chord.

Time is also devoted to harmonic analysis of recordings, beginning with rock and pop songs and gradually including more complex jazz-based harmony; and singing root and guide tone movement through common harmonic progressions.



**Figure 1.** Descending and ascending  $\text{Dmi}7$  arpeggios and dorian scales.

### CONCLUSION

The Third Stream Ear Training Method offers a foundation for the development of skills essential to the improvising musician. It addresses the neglect from which aural training continues to suffer in western music pedagogy, and which ill-prepares students to undertake tertiary studies in improvisation. This method involves the study of music at both the micro- and macro-levels, leading to a deep understanding of both the structural elements of the music, as well as more intangible characteristics which define a genre or an individual's style, and which distinguish an extraordinary performance from an average one. The method in its integral form is perhaps specific to the environment of the New England Conservatory; but the philosophy and practical tasks, which define the method are easily and profitably transplanted to other educational environments. Recent interest in pedagogical methods similar to those employed by Ran Blake over the past three decades indicates that these ideas are spreading to the mainstream music education.

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