

Real-Time Hearing

By Phillip Smith

Have you ever been in a recording session, confident that your playing is going to sound great, only to hear upon playback that it sounds nothing like you had expected? Was the playback so bad that it weakened your confidence, perhaps even to the point that you questioned everything you did afterward?

This is a common scenario for musicians. But why and how can you prevent it from happening? In this article, I want to explain my concept of real-time hearing, how you can perfect it, and the problems that may be preventing you from employing it.

Real-time hearing is the ability to accurately hear a complete performance *while it is being played*. Often, musicians can not hear their performance correctly until they are listening back to what they just recorded. Essentially, once their performance is completed, their critical listening reappears because they can fully dedicate their listening to the playback. These musicians have one or more obstacles blocking them from true *real-time* hearing. Another common example of this occurs when students believe they have prepared something to perfection, but everything falls apart when they get in front of their teacher.

For most people, accurate real-time hearing is a skill acquired through practice and experience. However, I believe

many studio greats have an innate ability to do this, which may have required minimal effort to achieve. Still, like any other talent, even the most exceptional musicians will have off days. But I hypothesize that their listening accuracy is significantly better than that of the average musician. So, if you are not one of the naturally gifted, how can you get better? Ultimately, you must work with techniques that help you devote your concentration to hearing how your performance will integrate into the music *while you are playing*, and not allow exterior interference to ruin the finished product.

MUSICAL BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

Lack of Proficiency

The first and most common problem is a lack of proficiency with your instrument. If you are not comfortable with the various techniques needed to play with authority, it's guaranteed that your attention will be focused simply on surviving the performance rather than making an artistic statement that elevates the music. For drummers, everything from independence, hand technique, foot technique, posture, and stylistic authenticity factors into the equation. Mastery of these musical elements will help inform your experience of what works – and what doesn't – in different musical situations, and allow you to focus on the bigger picture.

Reading

Reading musical notation should never detract from your playing. Most musicians have heard the old joke:

“Do you read music?”

“Yes, but not enough to hurt my playing.”

Even though this makes a mockery of the concept, there are those who still believe it to be true. If you have ample technique on your instrument but reading hampers your playing, you need to become a better reader. If you still believe that reading music while playing is detrimental to your performance, remember this: children speak a language well before they learn how to read it. Subsequently, learning to read the language doesn't impair their ability to speak. When you hear great recorded performances it's impossible to tell if the musicians are reading music. However, you can bet that all orchestral recordings, as well as many popular music recordings, feature musicians who are reading notation. All professional musicians who make a living playing with numerous acts, or who spend time in recording studios, need to be proficient readers to perform large amounts of intricate music accurately and expediently. Not only will it make them more hireable, but they will also be able to read comfortably while giving consistently great performances.

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Metronomes and Backing Tracks

Playing with a metronome or backing tracks is something all musicians must be comfortable with. At one time, this domain was primarily applicable to studio musicians. But with the proliferation of technology, playing with clicks and backing tracks is now as common for live performances as it is in the studio. It is important to note that an entire article could be written on different techniques for practicing and performing with a metronome. Regardless of how it is done, it is imperative that playing with a click or other pre-recorded track doesn't interfere with your performance. The telltale sign of being uncomfortable with a metronome is hearing overcorrections in the finished performance. This occurs when players hear themselves either rushing or dragging, and correct the problem too quickly, creating a "hump" in the time feel that wouldn't be present if there were no click track.

Everyone will have a tendency to drift at certain tempos, but the key to making a correction sound organic is gradually getting back in time with the click over a period of beats, if not measures. I believe that true proficiency with an external time reference is gained when musicians can avert their hearing to concentrate primarily on their performance, while using the click or backing track as a peripheral governor. Consistent experimentation with these tools and careful monitoring of the results are the keys to improving your real-time hearing.

EXTRAMUSICAL BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

Unfamiliar Surroundings

Creative people are often sensitive to different situations that other people can

brush off with no problem. For many musicians, unfamiliar (and perceived hostile) surroundings can severely detract from a performance. If you are new to the recording studio, just that factor alone can prevent you from performing at your peak ability. Likewise, being asked to perform outdoors during inclement weather can present a similar problem. Another common issue is having to perform on substandard backline equipment. When situations like these arise, being able to go with the flow only comes with experience, especially for overly sensitive musicians.

How can you gain this experience without experiencing shock when something unexpected happens during a paid gig? You can try to intentionally replicate these scenarios before you encounter them in a professional setting. For example, try to practice your instrument in varied locations. Move to different rooms, buildings, and non-traditional locations. Similarly, request to have ensemble rehearsals in different places, or at least suggest setting up in different configurations. Try to practice with different equipment, so that you don't get completely locked into how one instrument sounds and feels. Record yourself, and get past the novelty of hearing what you sound like on playback. By teaching yourself to expect the unexpected and accept even the worst-case scenarios, you can clear a major obstacle that can detract from your performance.

Subbing

Sometime in your career, you'll be asked to substitute in an already established ensemble. There can be numerous distractions that prevent you from your optimal performance. But for this exam-

ple, I'm going to focus on the musicians themselves as the distraction. Don't get me wrong – I've had some wonderful experiences subbing with bands. However, I've also had times when well-meaning bandmates cause more problems than they solve. These issues can include too little (or too much) on-stage direction, unprofessional behavior, and unskillful playing. In these scenarios you have to prepare for the gig as much as possible, and then focus on executing to your best ability. Rely on your listening to not only hear what's happening, but also to anticipate what might be coming. That in itself will inform how your playing should integrate into an already established band. Even if you were a last-minute hire, the band needs to trust you to do what you do best. So lean into that trust, have confidence in yourself, and play to your maximum capability.

Health and Well-Being

Taking personal responsibility for your health and well-being is of paramount importance to optimal performance. Factors such as substance abuse, poor diet, inadequate sleep, relationship issues, and other personal problems need to be dealt with outside of the professional realm. Performing is often challenging enough; no one in an ensemble wants to deal with your personal problems. They have their own issues to deal with and don't want to be affected by someone else's predicaments. It can be difficult enough to keep your mind focused on the performance when everything in your personal life is going well. Intangibles like boredom, hunger, and other routine things you have to do after the gig can easily rob you of your ability to be present. These distractions not only make you lose focus,

but they breed indecision, and indecision often leads to inappropriate musical choices during a performance.

One of the worst feelings is getting lost in thought while playing and then getting surprised by changes in the music. The result of an aimlessly wandering mind is temporarily losing your ability to monitor what you are doing. The consequences are things like playing through a rest, missing a band cue, tempo problems, or missing the start or end of a song. When you add to the list of everyday life issues a host of other serious problems, which are often self-inflicted, you have a recipe for career disaster.

CONCLUSIONS

Practice your real-time hearing by being aware of these problems, using these solutions, and recording your results. Review the recordings carefully to see how you have progressed and what could use more improvement. Perfecting your real-time hearing will certainly make your recording sessions better. Over time you will also bring that sense of real-time accuracy to live performances. Confidence in your real-time hearing should improve every aspect of your playing. Your peers should notice and want to work with you more often, and, of course, all professional musicians want to make a good living doing what they've dedicated their lives to. It is a bonus when you can do so and not have to struggle to play the music that you like. By developing your real-time hearing, you will consistently play appropriately and articulately, which will make you a highly sought-after musician in an increasingly competitive field.

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