

## Interview to Ignacio , by Joana Riera

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*About playing by ear, the perspective of an amateur musician*

### 1 How did you develop your ability to play by ear? Could you briefly share your experience?

My experience: I don't have a clear memory of how my ear developed over time. Basically, I started playing guitar by learning songs—just playing the chords. At some point, I also learned to pick out a melody or solo. I knew about the concept of playing a song by ear—simply playing it on an instrument by listening to it—and I started by figuring out a melody using single notes. I would do this through trial and error. Once I got tired of single-note melodies, I began to wonder what chords fit underneath each melody note in the songs I liked. I'd start with a melody line and experiment with different chords to see which ones worked. It was a playful process of trial and error.

### 2 What exercises or strategies have been most effective for improving this skill? What steps did you follow to develop it?

I think I already touched on this in the previous question. Figuring out a melody is the first step—being able to identify how a melody moves, whether a note is higher or lower. Start by recognizing whether it goes up or down, and then practice pinpointing the exact pitch. Practicing scales is important for this because when you become familiar with a scale, you develop intuition; you start to understand intervals and leaps. Eventually, you can conceptualize these collections of notes in terms of tonality, although that concept is a bit more complex. Once you understand tonality, the range of possible notes narrows (for example, an E-flat isn't very common in a C major scale).

### 3 Is there any specific material (music, themes, repertoire) that you consider essential during the early stages?

I don't think there's any specific key material. I believe everyone can start with whatever they feel like playing at the moment, although it's advisable to begin with simple songs. Personally, I like working with lullabies because they usually have simple melodies, or Christmas carols, as they are deeply ingrained in our minds. The key is to start with material you are very familiar with because it helps you recognize whether you're making mistakes, whether what you're playing matches your internal musical memory. As you refine this ability, you can start transforming it. It becomes not just, "Is what I'm playing what I know?" but also, "Is what I'm playing what I'm hearing?"

### 4 What musical theory knowledge do you apply when playing by ear? Do you consider it useful to know these concepts?

I usually apply the concept of tonality, which is incredibly important at the beginning, especially for songs that stay in the same key. I also find harmony concepts crucial because they help you understand how the music you're listening to is constructed. For instance, if you know and have internalized the concept of a perfect cadence, it's hard not to recognize it when you hear it—it fulfills your auditory expectations. As you learn specific harmony concepts or movements in the music you enjoy (whether classical or modern), you begin to recognize recurring patterns. These patterns

become your “code”—you have these structures ingrained and can recognize them. Over time, as you familiarize yourself with these patterns, you expand your knowledge and gain new skills. For example, in the case of a lullaby, you might begin to understand when I-IV-V occurs and how the melody aligns with each chord. That’s a great guide. Another example is understanding that in modern music, if the V chord has a seventh, the resolution becomes much more dramatic. Once you understand this, you can replicate it easily and without confusion. This process can lead to more complex tasks, such as identifying ninths, elevenths, thirteenth, etc.

I also believe scale practice is essential to understand the set of available notes, which simplifies the process. Additionally, it’s crucial to understand the relationship between melody and harmony.

**5 From a teaching perspective, what reflections or suggestions would you offer for integrating “playing by ear” into piano lessons?**

In my opinion—without claiming any authority—it’s an exercise that should be introduced very early on. I believe it’s more beneficial for students to acquire the ability to play by ear at the beginning rather than focusing on more theoretical skills, as it develops musical intuition. While theory might be highly relevant later, the priority for beginners should be understanding that music is something for the ears, played for pure auditory pleasure. This is why the experience should be connected to listening from the very first moment. Additionally, attempting to play by ear early on aligns more with the concept of play, without the seriousness of formal training.

My experience with a music school was that you had to take four years of solfège before playing an instrument. I believe children should start playing right away—experimenting, making sounds, listening to what they’re playing, and comparing what they hear to what they want it to sound like. I think the definition of a musician is someone who can reproduce the sounds they want, in the way they want. So, as a reflection or suggestion, I’d propose developing exercises that ensure the development of the ear. However, I’m not the best person to provide instructions on this topic.