Interview to Dani Sueiro, by Joana Riera

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About playing by ear, the perspective of a jazz musician

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

2️⃣ ***What exercises or strategies have been most effective for improving this skill? What would you say are the key steps to developing it?***

I believe there is no single path to learning how to play by ear. It's not a linear process where you continuously progress upwards. Instead, it's more accurate to think of it as approaching the problem from multiple angles simultaneously, with those paths gradually converging toward the goal—though never quite reaching it completely.

When playing the piano, various types of memory and different ways of imagining music come into play, all interacting in the process we call playing by ear.

One key factor is pure auditory memory—the ability to imagine and retain accurately pitched sound. This is closely linked to being able to reproduce those sounds with your voice, though they are not necessarily the same skill. This has nothing to do with knowing solfège, naming notes, or having relative pitch in the sense of automatically identifying melodic or harmonic functions. In my opinion, this is the most crucial ability, and it explains why people without formal music education can still be exceptional improvisers or instrumentalists.

On a higher level, relative pitch (or absolute pitch) comes into play—the ability to recognize functions and assign names to sounds. This is a skill that can be trained and certainly helps when playing by ear. However, in my experience, unless it is highly developed or comes naturally, it tends to be too slow and analytical to be truly helpful. Knowing how to syntactically analyze phrases helps in understanding musical language, but it does not necessarily enable fluent musical expression.

Another key aspect is harmonic knowledge, which, for me, means having harmonic structures so deeply internalized that you recognize them instantly, without needing to analyze them consciously. Harmonic knowledge is only useful for improvisation when it is so ingrained that you don't think about it—it's like walking around your house, where the environment is so familiar that you don't have to plan every step. Harmony is the playing field.

Additionally, there's the physical aspect—how these harmonic structures and the sounds in your mind feel on your instrument. This includes proprioceptive sensations but also two types of visual elements:

1. The way certain keys "light up" in your mind when you think of a key, like B ♭ major.
2. How your hand feels and looks when playing in that key or scale.

In my opinion, all these elements are essential for what I consider "playing by ear", and surprisingly, relative pitch is perhaps the least important. I feel that true improvisation is even more instinctive and subconscious than all of this. Many times, when I'm trying to pick something out by ear from a recording, or even when accompanying musicians live, I hear something and instinctively imitate it—my hand magically lands on the right key or chord. If I stopped consciously analyzing it using relative pitch, I would probably fail.

That said, I don't think this vague, intuitive skill can be trained directly. Instead, working on other aspects indirectly improves one's ability to improvise and play by ear. Some exercises that help develop this skill include:

1) Training auditory memory by listening to a short musical phrase, taking a few seconds to imagine it, and then singing it back—not using note names, numbers, functions, or movable-do solfège, but simply humming with any syllables you like. (Without the instrument).
2) Internalizing harmonic structures through exercises: scales, key centers, three-note, four-note, and five-note chords, pentatonic scales, etc. The goal is not merely to memorize material but to develop an underlying intuitive harmonic understanding. There is also a strong visual component—recognizing how these structures appear on the piano. When you know these structures deeply, it's as if the correct keys "light up" when improvising over a changing chord progression.
3) Once you have some control over (1) auditory memory and (2) harmonic structures, start associating sound with location on the piano and harmonic context. There are many ways to work on this, all valid and necessary.

    - Take a harmonic structure, like a scale or chord, and "improvise" within it—not necessarily in a performance-ready way, but as an exploratory exercise. This helps train the brain, ear, and hands to work together.

    - Transposition exercises: Take simple melodies or phrases and play them in multiple (or all) keys.

    - Transcribing solos or melodies from recordings helps connect all these areas.

4) Simply play with no specific goal.
5) Simply play with others— in rehearsals, for fun, or in live performances. This might seem vague and unstructured, but over the years, you realize it is absolutely necessary for skill development, even if, as a beginner, it feels frustrating or inefficient for immediate results.

<u>A Broader Perspective on Learning to Improvise</u>

This principle should guide any exercise or study plan for improving improvisation: Music exists in different forms, and each musical idea has multiple representations.

For any given passage, piece, or fragment of music, we can think of a triangle of representations:

🔺 Sound – The actual auditory experience, which can vary across instruments and interpretations.

🔺 Notation & Analysis – The written score, note names, harmonic concepts, etc.

🔺 Visualization & Physical Sensation – How it feels on an instrument, including the tactile and visual elements (e.g., how a B ♭ major chord looks and feels on the piano).

To improve improvisation and playing by ear, notation and analysis should be minimized. The goal is to transition as quickly as possible from sound to physical sensation/visualization.

- Notation is entirely optional.
- Theory is only useful if fully internalized—if you have to stop and think, you're already too late. Improvisation is an instinctive activity, and overly complex theoretical schemes are useless "in combat."
- This is a slow and indirect process—the exercises you do today won't necessarily improve your improvisation tomorrow or next week, but over months and years, they build instinctive knowledge and intuitive responses.

Learning improvisation operates at two speeds:

1-Indirect exercises (the long-term development of knowledge and skills).

2-Real-time improvisation (playing with whatever instincts and resources you currently have).

In a way, I think improvisation is very similar to combat sports like boxing.

In the moment of battle, only what is deeply ingrained counts. There is no time to think—only to react. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't train for 5-10 years to build those instincts.

The key? Train your ear, your harmonic intuition, and your instrument skills separately, knowing that over time, they will naturally converge and enhance your ability to play by ear and improvise effortlessly.

3️⃣ ***Is there any specific material (music, themes, repertoire) that you consider key in the first steps?***

I don't believe in pure improvisation as an abstract concept; a person cannot create a new musical language out of nothing and improvise from scratch. I don't see improvisation as a blank canvas where you can simply mix colors like a robot and have access to infinite combinations of colored pixels.

Human creativity doesn't work that way—it's not just about giving someone a blank canvas and a set of parameters to manipulate. There are 27 letters in the alphabet. If we were to make random combinations of letters and spaces across an entire page, there would be billions upon billions of possible combinations—so many that they wouldn't fit in the universe. The vast majority of those pages would be filled with random, meaningless letters. Some might contain the occasional recognizable word, but the rest would remain gibberish. A few pages might contain only real words,

yet they wouldn't form coherent sentences. An even smaller number would make complete grammatical sense. And among those, many would still be empty of real meaning, filled with excessive words but lacking true substance. An even smaller fraction would hold a message worth reading, and perhaps only a handful would be poetry, true art. Maybe just one would be a timeless poem, passed down for generations.

With this, I mean that musical improvisation cannot simply be about placing one of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale after another. Music cannot exist without considering what came before—without considering history. The great musical minds of the past have already done the painstaking work of filtering, grain by grain, the entire beach of sound possibilities, selecting only the fragments that somehow make sense to our human aesthetic perception. At the same time, they have expanded our sense of aesthetics, introducing new combinations that we now accept thanks to their musical authority.

To answer your question, I don't know if there is a universal material that serves as a starting point for improvisation across all styles because I don't believe such a thing as universal improvisation exists. We always begin from a pre-existing style, studying the music of those who came before us, and that stylistic choice determines our starting point. Thus, we can define starting points for studying Baroque improvisation, Classical improvisation (Mozart, Beethoven), bebop, or any other style one wishes to explore.

That being said, for studying jazz, it is always advisable to start with a 12-bar blues, such as C Jam Blues or Bag's Groove, or with very simple standards like Mack the Knife, Autumn Leaves, There Is No Greater Love, or What Is This Thing Called Love. These provide enough material to explain all the basics while remaining accessible for someone with basic knowledge of piano and harmony.

I also think that from the very beginning, transcribing solos or fragments of solos is a highly effective and accessible approach. Many Miles Davis solos are very musical, simple, and approachable, such as his solos in Bye Bye Blackbird or Blues by Five. This way, from the very start, you're developing auditory memory alongside the specific musical language of jazz, maintaining a connection to its history and predecessors.

4️⃣ ***From a teaching perspective, what reflections or suggestions would you offer for integrating "playing by ear" into piano lessons?***

At its most basic level, I would always start by developing what I call pure auditory memory.

It's useful to begin with well-known melodies that the student already has in their head—something as simple as Happy Birthday. After doing some basic harmony work on the piano (studying all major keys and their scales), an exercise that immediately strengthens the ear-instrument connection is to take a random starting note on the piano and transpose that melody from there.

A more advanced exercise would be to first learn an unfamiliar melody or fragment by ear. For example, you could extract a short phrase from a Miles Davis solo, learn to sing it after listening to

the recording, and once it's memorized aurally (perhaps in the next lesson, to ensure it's fully internalized), attempt to transpose it, just as with Happy Birthday.

For classical repertoire, I think it's quite useful to imitate the way jazz musicians study—not only working from the sheet music but also using recordings from the very beginning. The process could go like this:

1-Work on a small fragment by listening and imitating it with the voice.

2-Then, transfer it to the piano.

The key is that this imitation process should not be analytical:

- You listen to a phrase and try to reproduce it as faithfully as possible,
- Without analyzing notation, dynamics (forte, piano, crescendo), accents, or articulation (legato, staccato).
- Just imitate the sound as you hear it.

I know many people in the classical world oppose this approach, arguing that students shouldn't listen to recordings until they have fully learned the piece, to avoid being influenced by specific interpretations. I understand the concern, but the goal here is to develop the ear—refining one's personal interpretation can come later.

I believe classical music loses a lot by rejecting this sound-based learning approach. After all, a teacher, at best, is only present for one hour per week. However, students can use recordings throughout their practice, constantly reinforcing a sonic model of how the piece should sound. This shifts the learning process from intellectual effort (interpreting a score) to pure imitation of sound.

Additionally, I find it valuable to learn to sing simple jazz standards while accompanying oneself with basic chords—without complex rhythmic embellishments. If this skill is later transferred to classical music, it can greatly enhance memory retention for melodies, inner voices, or bass lines, bringing the process much closer to what we define as playing by ear.