



# THE ULTIMATE *Ear Training* BLUEPRINT

*4 Easy Steps for Training Your Ears*

**By Brent Vaartstra**

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# Welcome to The Ultimate Ear Training Blue Print!

First and foremost I just want to say thanks for downloading this guide. My goal in creating this is to give you a clear view of what it is you should work on with ear training. I want to help you develop the ears you need to become the best musician you can be.

In case you don't know me, my name is Brent Vaartstra. I'm a musician, author, entrepreneur, and I run an internationally followed blog and podcast called [learnjazzstandards.com](http://learnjazzstandards.com).

For years I've been getting emails from my subscribers asking me an assortment of related questions:

*How do I learn songs by ear?*

*How do I learn solos by ear?*

*How do I become a better improviser?*

*How do I play the music that I hear in my head?*



When it comes down to it, all of these questions can be summed up with the desire to know **how to play what you hear**.

So in receiving these sorts of questions on almost a daily basis, I've consulted colleagues, asking them how they learned to develop this skill. I've looked back into my college days and the ear training courses I've taken.

Throughout my research, I have become convinced that the **fundamentals of ear training are pivotal for playing what you hear**. There are many things you can do to develop your ears, but when you boil it down, the fundamentals of ear training are the kind of infrastructure we need for a strong foundation.

# Why Is Ear Training Important?

I asked my Facebook followers to rate on a scale of 1-10 how important they thought ear training was for musicians. Here are some of the responses:

Learn Jazz Standards.com  
Published by Buffer [?] · July 11 at 12:01pm

Ear Training. On a scale of 1-10, how important do you think ear training is for an improviser?

3,764 people reached      Boost Post

Like    Comment    Share

Ab Kroon, Brandon Hermanto and 39 others      Top Comments

Write a comment...     

Karl Alan Melanson 10+ Crucial!  
Like · Reply · Message · 1 · July 11 at 3:02pm

Kevin Lockwood Minimum of 10  
Like · Reply · Message · 1 · July 11 at 12:21pm

Marcos A Cruz Santos 1,867,989  
Like · Reply · Message · 1 · July 11 at 12:41pm

Anthony Defeo-Gelman 87,659  
Like · Reply · Message · 1 · July 11 at 1:06pm

Irma Silvano 11  
Like · Reply · Message · 4 · July 11 at 12:07pm

Joachim Mahoudeaux 100  
Like · Reply · Message · 2 · July 11 at 2:16pm

Juan C Gonzalez Munguia 10

So it's unanimous. Ear training is so important that 1-10 apparently isn't a good enough scale to rate it on!

Let me reinforce this again- the fundamentals of ear training are critical if you want to be able to play what you hear.

No matter what style of music you play, whether you play rock, pop, latin, folk, hip-hop, or jazz like me, we all want to play the music we hear in our heads.

We want to be able to hear songs and immediately know what the chords are- no sheet music needed.

We want to be able to hear a solo or lick we like off of a recording and translate it to our instrument almost instantaneously.

We want to be able to hear a chord and know whether there is a #9, b13, or 11<sup>th</sup> in it.

## Having great ears= musical freedom.

That's what this is all about: having the freedom to express anything you want to musically. Having great ears separates the amateurs from the experts.

This is where ear training comes in. Because this doesn't just happen automatically as you probably already know. It takes practice! We need to train our ears towards the musical freedom we deserve.

# 4 Steps for Developing Killer Ears



The question I get time and time again is, *how do I go about doing this? What exactly do I need to be working on?*

It's not a question of whether you should be doing ear training or not. It's a question of how to do it in an organized way that will actually produce results.

What has worked for me and many others is breaking ear training down into important categories. Want to get on solid footing and propel your ears to the next level? Follow the **4 Steps for How to Play What You Hear.**

These four steps build off of each other. If you have the first step down, the second step will be that much easier. Let's jump in.

# Step #1: Master Intervals

## What's an interval?

The distance between two notes.

The most fundamental element of ear training is being able to distinguish whether a note is higher or lower in pitch from a given reference note.

## What's a reference note?

A reference note is the first note played in a series of notes (the bass note as it pertains to chords).

Here's an example of a major 6<sup>th</sup> ascending interval notated out (C to A).



Here's an example of a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> descending (C to A).



Intervals are a great place to start because they help us identify whether a note is higher or lower in pitch, and by how much.

Intervals are important to learn for these three reasons:

- 1. They are the building blocks for hearing chords.** If you first know intervals (2 notes) you can start hearing chords (3+ notes).
- 2. Recognizing intervals can help you identify notes on your instrument faster.**
- 3. Singing intervals helps ensure that you have internalized the sounds and can reproduce them.**

I'll get to why singing in ear training is important in a second. But first, what are all of the intervals you need to learn? Use this as a checklist. Here they are.

### Intervals Checklist

- |                         |                           |                           |                         |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| • Unison                | • Major 3 <sup>rd</sup>   | • Perfect 5 <sup>th</sup> | • Minor 7 <sup>th</sup> |
| • Minor 2 <sup>nd</sup> | • Perfect 4 <sup>th</sup> | • Minor 6 <sup>th</sup>   | • Major 7 <sup>th</sup> |
| • Major 2 <sup>nd</sup> | • Tritone                 | • Major 6 <sup>th</sup>   | • Octave                |
| • Minor 3 <sup>rd</sup> |                           |                           |                         |

If you count these up, that's a total of 13 intervals to learn. But there's more than that. You need to learn what these intervals sound like ascending and descending, so that's a total of 26.

### Practice Tips

- Start with just 3 intervals. Have a friend play those intervals on their instrument ascending and descending and quiz you on them. If you can't find a friend, try recording them.
- Start with just 3 intervals. Play any note on your instrument and sing those intervals ascending and descending. Change up the reference note continually while practicing.

# Why Singing Is Important In Ear Training



What many ear training apps and courses fail to do is incorporate singing. Now, if you consider yourself a bad singer, don't worry! Humming or whistling achieves the same thing. Any noise, really. The point is you are the one producing it.

Recognition is great. You hear an interval or chord and can identify it by name. But it's an entirely different level to hear a reference note and be able to sing the interval or chord required.

As I said earlier, being able to sing proves that you can reproduce the pitch for yourself. It takes the ear training to the next level.

## Step #2: Hear Chords

Once you have intervals down, you can move on to chords. Start with triads (Root-3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>) and then move on to 7<sup>th</sup> chords (Root-3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>).

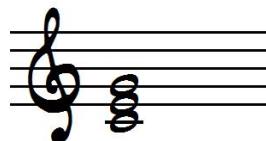
**There are 4 qualities of triads:** major, minor, augmented, and diminished.

**There are 5 qualities of basic 7<sup>th</sup> chords:** major 7, dominant 7, minor 7, half diminished and diminished 7.

Why should you learn to hear chords? Here are some important reasons:

- 1. It's crucial for learning songs by ear.**
- 2. It will help you hear the important notes to use when you improvise.**
- 3. Essential for hearing chord progressions.**

The idea is to take your knowledge of intervals and apply them to chords. For example let's look at a C major triad.



### Formula: Root- major 3<sup>rd</sup>- perfect 5<sup>th</sup>

So the root to the major 3<sup>rd</sup> is a major 3<sup>rd</sup> interval. If you know what that sounds like you can recognize those first two notes and sing them.

The root to the perfect 5<sup>th</sup> is a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> interval.

You can even distinguish the relationship between the major 3<sup>rd</sup> and the perfect 5<sup>th</sup>. That relationship is a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> interval.



When training to hear chords, these are the three things you want to be able to do:

- 1. Recognize the chord.** Hear it being played and know it by name.
- 2. Sing the arpeggio.** Hear a reference note and sing the arpeggio up.
- 3. Sing the chord tones.** Hear a chord played and be able to sing the Root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, or 7<sup>th</sup>.

This ensures that you can truly hear all of the different chord qualities and types.

### Practice Tips

- Start with just 2 chord qualities. Have a friend play (or record for yourself) those chords and quiz you on them.
- Start with just 2 chord qualities. Play any note on your instrument and sing the ascending arpeggios. Change up the reference note continually while practicing.
- Start with just 2 chord qualities. Have a friend play (or record for yourself) a chord and prompt you to sing the root, 3rd, 5th, or 7th of the chord you are hearing.

## Step #3: Hear Chord Progressions

The next logical step is to hear and recognize chord progressions. If you can hear intervals, you can hear chords. If you can hear chords, then you can hear chord progressions.

Before training your ears to hear chord progressions, it's important that you understand how to build them. If you don't understand the Roman Numeral numbering system for chord progressions, I suggest checking out a lesson called [How to Harmonize a Major Scale With 7th Chords](#).

But a good chart to help you understand how this works is the **Major Diatonic Series of 7<sup>th</sup> Chords**.

MAJOR DIATONIC SERIES OF 7TH CHORDS						
C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Maj7	Min7	Min7	Maj7	Dom7	Min7	Halfdim
Cmaj7	Dmin7	Emin7	Fmaj7	G7	Amin7	Bmin7(b5)
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii(b5)

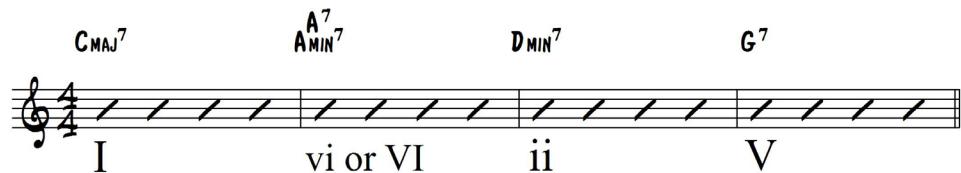
The top line shows the notes in a C major scale.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> line shows the 7<sup>th</sup> chord quality.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> line shows the full chord name.

The last line shows the Roman Numeral numbering. Upper case is major or dominant and lower case is minor.

Understanding this is important. You'll want to know what a I-vi-ii-V chord progression is:



If you understand this, you will know what you are hearing and be able to identify chord progressions by their Roman Numerals.

Why should you learn to hear chord progressions? Here are three reasons:

1. **They are the platform for improvisation.** What do we improvise over? Chord progressions.
2. **They are another step further into critical listening and building your ears.**
3. **Hearing them is essential for learning to play songs by ear.**

So which chord progressions should you memorize? There are so many of them, but here are some basic ones to start working on:

### ***Basic pop and rock progressions with triads:***

I-vi-IV-V (Cmaj-Amin-Fmaj-Gmaj)

I-V-vi-IV (Cmaj-Gmaj-Amin-Fmaj)

vi-ii-V-I (Amin-Dmin-Gmaj-Cmaj)

vi-IV-I-V (Amin-Fmaj-Cmaj-Gmaj)

### ***Basic jazz chord progressions with 7<sup>th</sup> chords:***

Major ii-V-I (Dmin7-G7-Cmaj7)

Minor ii-V-I (Dmin7b5-G7b9-Cmin7)

Major I-vi-ii-V (Cmaj7-Amin7-Dmin7-G7)

Minor i-vi-ii-V (Cmin7-Amin7b5-Dmin7b5-G7b9)

V7-IV7-I7 (G7-F7-C7)

### ***Practice Tips***

- Start with 3 chord progressions. Have a friend who plays piano or guitar play these progressions and quiz you. You can also record them yourself.
- Listen to songs that have specific chord progressions you want to learn. Memorize the roman numerals to the progressions you are hearing. Pop songs with only a few chord progressions are a great place to start.

# Step #4: Translate What You Hear to Your Instrument

So far steps 1-3 have had nothing to do with playing your instrument, except maybe for practicing recognition and singing. But step 4 is all about developing the relationship between what you are hearing in your head and your instrument.

It doesn't matter what instrument you play, saxophone, piano, guitar, bass, voice, or violin, [insert yours]; you want to be able to connect your ear to your instrument.

## How do you do this?

There are many ways to go about it. Let me name a few:

- Learn licks and lines from recordings by ear.
- Learn entire solos by ear.
- Learn songs by ear.
- Try to play popular folk songs and nursery rhythms by ear.
- Practice melodic dictation.

All of these are great practices for developing the relationship between your ear and your instrument. But I want to focus on melodic dictation for a second.

### *What's melodic dictation?*

Melodic dictation is a practice of hearing short melodies being played and trying to mimic them verbatim as quickly as possible. It's sort of like the hearing version of sight reading.

Let me go over some ways you can practice melodic dictation in the practice tips.

## *Practice Tips*

- Get together with a friend and have him or her play short melodies for you. Try to play them back as quickly as possible, with only hearing the melodies a few times each.
- Listen to a song and learn parts of it one phrase at a time. Don't try to memorize it. Just learn the phrase as quickly as possible and move on.

# Putting the 4 Steps to Action



Now, obviously, all of this stuff is easier said than done. It takes real training to accomplish the 4 steps and level-up our ears.

Be sure to follow along with free video training series that accompanies this blueprint, and I'll be giving you much more information and detail on how to accomplish these things.

If you want to really put these 4 steps into action, our ear training course *How to Play What You Hear* walks you through this process step-by-step, with plenty of quizzes, training materials, and video lectures to help you succeed. You can check it out at [howtoplaywhatyouhear.com](http://howtoplaywhatyouhear.com).

Best of luck on your ear training. You've got this!