



English
Folk
DANCE & SONG SOCIETY



Orchestras
for All

Music Leadership Training: Learning By Ear

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Section 1: Welcome to Music Leadership Training: Learning by Ear

Welcome!

Welcome to Learning By Ear, Orchestras for All's online training module, created in collaboration with Emily Askew and the English Folk Dance and Song Society's [London Youth Folk Ensemble](#).

What is Orchestras for All?

Orchestras for All breaks down barriers to music-making for 11-18 year-olds. Through their UK-wide programmes, the [National Orchestra for All](#) and the [Modulo Programme](#), they have learnt a lot about how music-making can be inclusive, high quality and joyful for all involved, regardless of instrument or skill level. Orchestras for All provides a number of Music Leadership Training modules, designed to help you develop your inclusive ensemble leadership skills. Visit orchestrasforall.org/music-leadership-training to find out more.

How does the Learning By Ear module work?

This module takes you on a step-by-step learning journey. There are three elements to the modules:

Watch

You will be invited to watch and join in with short films led by young musicians and the music leader, who will model and practise different techniques and approaches to ensemble leadership.

Practise

Sometimes, there is also a task that will help you to practise and internalise the approaches modelled in the film.

Reflect

After each activity, a reflective question or task is posed.

Evaluation

At the end of each module is a short evaluation to help you reflect on what you have learnt during the module.

What do you think?

Orchestras for All and the English Folk Dance and Song Society would love to hear from you about how you have found the course and if you have ideas about how to improve or develop its content.

Drop them a line: info@orchestrasforall.org / education@efdss.org

About Orchestras for All

This module has been created by Orchestras for All, a registered charity (1150438) breaking down barriers to music-making for young people aged 11-18. It is important to protect the content of this module and the hard work of those who have contributed to the material. [As such, by using this online module, you agree to the terms and conditions.](#)

Section 2: Introduction

This module will take around three hours to complete.

Learning a piece of music by ear is an ancient practice, and at the core of how humans have always shared music.

To a musician who plays primarily through notation, this way of learning music can be an intimidating challenge; whilst also incredibly freeing for musicians who haven't learnt through written notation.

Aural learning is a great way to sharpen everyone's musicianship skills and can unite a group who have come from a wide range of musical backgrounds: essential in developing an inclusive ensemble community.

This module focuses on the development of a performance through aural learning techniques; however, you can also use the activities and approaches as 'mix-and-match' with notation or composition activities to make your rehearsal more inclusive and engaging for the full ensemble.

About the contributors

For the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), aural learning is at the heart of ensemble performance. In this module, they will take you through an ensemble aural learning process, from hearing the initial tune, to constructing a full performance. The musicians are from the London Youth Folk Ensemble (LYFE), led by folk music educator, Emily Askew.

Emily Askew is a versatile musician, performing music from medieval times to present day, early, contemporary and folk music. As well as performing professionally, Emily has a wealth of experience as a music teacher and workshop leader in a wide range of educational contexts. She is a principal study recorder teacher for Trinity College of Music and has worked for several London music services in both primary and secondary sectors, as well as music festivals and courses including Dartington Summer School, Aldeburgh Young Musicians and Globe Theatre Education.

[London Youth Folk Ensemble](#) was created by EFDSS in 2013 to give young passionate folk musicians the opportunity to play and perform folk music together regularly at Cecil Sharp House. It's non-auditioned, and welcomes all instruments and skill levels.

What you will learn

In this module you will learn how to:

- Make the aural learning process inclusive of musicians at any stage of musical learning
- Teach an accompaniment and melody without using notation
- Break melodic or rhythmic sections into segments to support everyone to develop their aural musicianship
- Develop musical colour and structure
- Involve your ensemble in the creative process of constructing a performance using aural learning techniques

What you will need

- Speakers or headphones
- Webcam, video camera or phone camera
- Internet access
- A melody instrument

In order to get the most out of this module, we suggest you actively join in with the activities Emily sets LYFE. Pause the videos to give yourself time to work out notes and rhythms and try out ideas for yourself.

Section 3: Including Everyone in Aural Learning

The ensemble featured in this module, London Youth Folk Ensemble (LYFE), are used to working in an aural context.

The activities and process featured in this module could be intimidating to less experienced or less confident musicians so it's important to move at a pace your ensemble are comfortable with. If led effectively, working without music gives space for all musicians to explore and develop their natural musicality.

To gain a full understanding of leading an ensemble aurally, it's important to participate in the activities in time with the ensemble. However, to help you apply what you learn, in your reflections after each video, we ask you to adapt the activities for a different 'imaginary' ensemble.

Sharp Academy Orchestra

Imagine you are the music teacher at Sharp Academy, a non-selective school serving a community where the students are from a wide range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. In the last couple of years, with support from senior leadership and a small team of instrumental teachers, you have established a successful academy orchestra. The orchestra incorporates players and instruments of a wide range of skill levels, and performs in assemblies and end-of-term concerts.

However, the ensemble sound is lacking musical unity and cohesion, lots of players feel alienated by notation-focused rehearsals, and you're struggling to retain student commitment. You have decided to do something different this term: create a performance using just aural learning techniques.

Below are some of the players who you think will particularly benefit from taking a fresh approach to orchestral rehearsals:

Ali - high violin skill level, developing ensemble skills

Ali is 14 and has been playing violin for three years. She is proving a natural and hardworking musician: she quickly achieved a Grade 2 distinction and is already learning Grade 4 pieces. Her technique and musicianship are progressing well; her tuning and understanding of notation are excellent. However, you have noticed that in orchestra rehearsals she is often oblivious to what others are playing, and struggles to stay with a tempo. You think an aural ensemble approach will improve her skills in these areas.

Seb - self-taught guitarist, developing notation skills

Seb is 15 and has been playing guitar for four years. He is mostly self-taught, but since starting BTEC music, has begun having one-to-one lessons and learning notation. He plays in a rock band with some friends. You are keen to encourage him to develop his ensemble awareness and musicianship, contribute his skills to the academy community, and broaden his musical influences.

Grace - natural rhythm, early-stage percussionist, early-stage notation skills

Grace is 12 and although she has never had instrument lessons, you noticed in her weekly Year 7 music lesson that she has a natural sense of rhythm. She is dyslexic and finds following written symbols very challenging, even with one-to-one learning support. Now in Year 8, she has tried out playing in the orchestra percussion section, mentored by an older student, but so far her lack of confidence in reading notation has proved a barrier to her enjoying participating. At times, she can be disruptive during rehearsals. You feel that an aurally-focused project will build Grace's overall confidence, enable her to play a central role in the ensemble that makes the most of her musical gifts and free her to develop her general musicianship.

Zac - early-stage clarinettist

Zac is 11 and has just started learning clarinet. He is enthusiastic and keen to succeed. He has made a good start to learning notation; however, his early-stage skill level limits the parts he can currently play in the orchestra. In rehearsals, he is desperate to play next to his friend, Ash, who has been learning the clarinet much longer and plays a trickier part. You feel an aural-learning project will enable him to focus on using his clarinet skills creatively, develop his musicianship to help progress his clarinet skills much faster, and increase his enjoyment of the orchestra, enabling him to play alongside Ash.

At different points in the following pages, we will ask you to reflect on how you would adapt the featured activities to include these young people.

Strategies for Adapting and Including

To help you plan how to include musicians like Ali, Seb, Grace and Zac, below are some suggested activities that could help you to adapt or 'zoom in' on activities in this module. At all points, think creatively, and plan your own ideas to try as well.

Discussing ideas

- Give players time to discuss or try out their ideas in pairs or threes before sharing with the larger group
- Provide a toolkit of musical vocabulary (structural/dynamic), displayed on a wall, and turn discussions into a game of bingo: who can correctly use the most musical words when sharing their ideas?
- However, encourage players to describe their ideas however they can, even if they're unsure of the musical language.

Learning the notes

- Simplify the notes or rhythm of a melody; for example, removing quick note transitions or pitch jumps
- Make up words or rhymes to help memorise rhythms
- Draw (or 'air draw') shapes to help visualise the pattern of melodies

Developing ideas and ensemble sound

- Provide a toolkit of musical fragments as starting points: eg. 3-4 notes from a scale; a rhythm ostinato or a chord sequence. Allow ensemble to experiment with these in pairs or threes
- Use a click track or rhythm backing track as the pulse when first learning a piece.
- Ensure everyone has been assigned a clear musical role and understands the importance of that role (e.g. melody/harmony/accompaniment/rhythm section)
- Write on a white board the overall structure for music being developed

Section 4: Introducing the Music

Introduce the tune

Watch 1

The great thing about teaching music aurally is that your ensemble have to listen actively in order to collect clues about musical context and understand its shape for themselves with more depth.

Here's Emily, introducing her tune to LYFE.



Watch Video 1

Reflect

What does Emily ask her ensemble to consider while listening to the tune, and why?

Watch 2

Have a listen to the tune.

The first thing to do when teaching music aurally is to make sure that the basic shape and structure of the music is embedded in your ensemble members' minds.

So, before you begin to teach it, make sure your ensemble have had time to hear it several times through. Give them the chance to sing it through unaccompanied as this will help them to internalise and recall it independently.



[Watch Video 2](#)

Practise

Listen to the tune again. What steps would you take to help young musicians learn this tune without notation?

Introduce the musical context

Watch 3

By actively listening to the music, your ensemble should have picked up some clues about its context and structure. Allow space for them to discuss this. While it's a good idea to ask questions that gently lead towards useful musical and contextual facts, allow your group to discuss freely, even if some ideas are different to the true source of the music.



Watch Video 3

Reflect

What questions does Emily ask LYFE in order to help them to reflect more deeply on the musical context?

Introduce the musical structure

Watch 4

Thinking carefully about structure, watch Emily performing the tune again:



Watch Video 2

Practise

Write down the structure for this tune

Watch 5

Here's Emily and LYFE discussing the tune's structure:



Watch Video 4

Reflect

LYFE are quite experienced with learning tunes aurally, so quickly worked out the structure. However, an understanding of a melody's structure is crucial to musicians of any experience, and can be achieved effectively with the right support.

How would you break down the music and scaffold your questions to help a less experienced group with this activity?

Make a list of questions you would use to help Sharp Orchestra to work out the structure of this piece of music

Introduce the tonal context

Watch 6

To help your ensemble internalise the sound world and, practically speaking, form a clear understanding of the notes that will be used, play through the scale or mode that the music is based, highlighting accidentals.

[Watch Video 5](#)

Now watch Emily play through the mode that will form the basis of LYFE's performance:



[Watch Video 6](#)

Practise

Watch again and play through the mode with the group.

Reflect

What do you notice about how Emily sets up and scaffolds the mode play activity to help the group play accurately?

Imagine you are introducing Sharp Academy Orchestra to this scale. What challenges would be faced by **Seb** and **Grace** at this stage?

How would you mitigate these challenges for them?

You can refresh your memory of the needs of Seb and Grace [here](#).

Section 5: Teaching the Accompaniment

Teaching the accompaniment first is a useful way to help your ensemble further internalise the sound world of the piece, and also ensures that members who are at an earlier stage skill level and may struggle with a more complicated melody feel included and able to engage from the outset.

Watch

Emily begins by modelling the bassline of the piece:



Watch Video 7

Reflect

How does Emily guide LYFE through the bassline?

Practise

Try learning the bassline along with the LYFE ensemble. First, clap the rhythm:



Watch Video 8

Reflect

How does Emily split up clapping the rhythm to help the group learn it?

Practise

Next, transfer the A section onto your instrument.



Watch Video 9

Reflect

Why does Emily ask LYFE questions about the shape of the note pattern before playing?

Practise

Once you're comfortable with the A section, move onto the B section.



Watch Video 10

Reflect

How does Emily reintroduce this section and bring back the A section?

Practise

Finally, put together the full bassline pattern.



Watch Video 11

Reflect

How does Emily develop this activity as the ensemble are playing?

Imagine you are introducing Sharp Academy Orchestra to this bassline.

How would you adapt this activity to help Ali and Zac access it?

Make a list of your top five tips for teaching a bassline aurally.

You can refresh your memory of the needs of Ali and Zac [here](#).

Section 6: Teaching the Melody

Now it's time to learn the main melody. Use your melody instrument to learn along with LYFE.

Practise Part A1

Join in with LYFE as they get to grips with the melody:



Watch Video 12

Reflect

How does Emily help LYFE to learn the first section of the melody?

Practise Part A2

Next, they learn the second half of the Part A melody line. Follow along with them on your own instrument.



Watch Video 13

Reflect

Why did Emily divide up the melody in this way?

Practise Part A

Now, try putting together the full Part A melody with LYFE:



Watch Video 14

Reflect

How does Emily distinguish between the two A parts' musical shape?

Practise Part B1

Next, the group move onto Part B of the melody. Have a go at playing this - pause the video to give yourself time to pick up the melody if need be:



Watch Video 15

Reflect

How does Emily introduce this part?

Practise Part B2

Now practise playing the full Part B melody along with LYFE:



Watch Video 16

Reflect

How could you support Zac from Sharp Academy to pick up this melody aurally without using notation?

Practise Parts A & B

Finally, put the full A and B melody parts together. Emily starts with the B section before going back to the A section.

As before, feel free to pause the video to give yourself time to get the notes:

[Watch Video 17](#)

Reflect

What cues does Emily provide to help LYFE bring together the two parts of the melody?

The role of the drummer is important in this activity. How could you support **Grace** from Sharp Academy to play the same role?

How could you keep a pulse going if you didn't have a player to play this role?

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here.](#)

Section 7: Combining Melody and Accompaniment

Watch

Next, LYFE recap the bassline and then combine the bassline and melody for the first time:



Watch Video 18

Reflect

How does Emily help LYFE to revise the bassline?

Watch

The group then practices the full piece with both the melody and bassline:



Watch Video 19

Reflect

How does Emily help LYFE to combine the bassline and melody?

What roles would you give to Ali, Seb, Grace and Zac at this point in the activity (e.g. melody/simplified melody/accompaniment/rhythm)?

Why would you assign the roles in this way?

What support would they need to play these roles confidently?

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

Section 8: Developing the Accompaniment

Introducing a drone

A drone note will immediately turn a tune into an arrangement, and is easy to do! It involves even the most early stage player in a performance.

Here's Emily introducing a drone to LYFE's tune:

[Watch Video 20](#)

Reflect

What are the most important things to remember when introducing a drone?

What would you do next to develop the drone?

How would you involve Zac and Seb from Sharp Academy in this activity?

Developing a drone

Watch LYFE discuss how they will develop their drone. Pay careful attention to how Emily facilitates and supports this discussion:

[Watch Video 21](#)

Write down three ways that LYFE discuss developing their drone accompaniment

How does Emily help to signpost and structure LYFE's ideas?

How might you scaffold this discussion for **Sharp Academy**, considering players less confident in articulating or sharing their musical ideas?

Now watch LYFE put these ideas together:



Watch Video 22

What feedback would you give to the ensemble at the end of this performance to help them develop their accompaniment?

How does Emily support the ensemble during the play-through of the accompaniment?

Trying a different idea

When teaching an aurally learnt accompaniment, it's a good idea to come armed with a few different ideas that will suit different skill levels.

Here, Emily tries out a different drone accompaniment with LYFE:

[Watch Video 23](#)

How has Emily changed the accompaniment this time?

Watch LYFE develop the accompaniment further. Notice how, as well as developing the music harmonically, they develop the structure:

Watch Video 24

How do LYFE develop the accompaniment?

How do LYFE develop the structure, and how does Emily support this?

How would you support Sharp Academy Orchestra, who may be less confident sharing their ideas, to develop the structure of the performance? You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

Section 9: Developing Harmonic Colour

Developing the texture

LYFE have instinctively been experimenting with the texture and colour of the piece at the same time as they have learnt the melodic and harmonic material.

Now that they are confident with the melody and accompaniment, they begin to focus on the colour of the piece:

[Watch Video 25](#)

What ideas about structure and harmonic development do LYFE share?

What feedback would you give the LYFE members on these ideas?

How could you support Sharp Academy students such as **Seb** or **Grace** to articulate their musical ideas?

Trying out textural ideas

It's really important to allow your ensemble space to try out ideas, whether or not they are included in a final piece. It helps them to clarify their thoughts, and sparks ideas from others in the ensemble.

It can be scary, for both leader and ensemble member to let loose in this way, but with thoughtful scaffolding from the leader, it can be a really effective way to ensure ensemble ownership of a piece of music.

Watch LYFE trying out some ideas:



Watch Video 26

Note down three examples of how Emily encourages and supports the ensemble to share their ideas

Some groups may need more support to work in this way: if your ensemble are nervous, make time to allow them to try out ideas in a 'safer' space of pairs, working round to give feedback on this level, before asking one or two more strong and confident ideas to demonstrate to the whole group.

Developing ideas independently

They continue to develop their ideas, this time with less input from Emily.

Watch the discussion here of how time signature and rhythm can be changed to add interest to the piece:



[Watch Video 27](#)

How to the LYFE members help each other to develop and clarify their ideas?

How could you scaffold peer-supported discussions for Sharp Academy Orchestra?

Trying out developed ideas

Now they begin to put together their ideas:

Watch Video 28

How do the LYFE members agree on what to try? How does Emily help them with this process?

In a Sharp Academy Orchestra rehearsal, how might you approach managing ideas suggested by students that you know will be technically difficult for the group, or sound 'odd'?

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

Section 10: Developing Structure

"So would that be an extra bar of the weird note?"

Having learnt a melody, accompaniment, and experimented with texture and colour, LYFE are now beginning to piece a full performance together.

Here, they discuss links between the sections. Notice how the ensemble are free to describe their ideas without worrying about 'correct' musical language:

[Watch Video 29](#)

[Watch Video 30](#)

What ideas about structure and harmonic development do LYFE share?

How do they clarify and develop each others' ideas?

Watch them try out the ideas they have just discussed:

[Watch Video 31](#)

How does Emily develop their ideas after they have played it through once?

LYFE have one final discussion to finalise their ideas.

[Watch Video 32](#)

How do they structure their final ideas?

Watch the final run-through of these ideas:



Watch Video 33

What ideas do they have about this section after playing it through?

How could you support **Grace** from Sharp Academy with contributing ideas to structure development?

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

Section 11: Developing Improvisation Skills

Aural learning goes hand-in-hand with improvisation.

The simple harmonic structure of the piece LYFE are working on lends itself well to developing improvisation skills.

Here, LYFE and Emily plan an improvised section for the piece. Notice how Emily makes this a safe and achievable task for the group in the way she frames it:

[Watch Video 34](#)

How does Emily create a safe musical space for improvising?

What suggestions does Emily make for the content of improvisation?

What additional support might **Ali** or **Zac** from Sharp Academy need to participate in this activity?

Trying it out

Watch LYFE's first try out of the improvised section:

[Watch Video 35](#)

Why do you think LYFE struggle with improvising initially?

How does Emily support the ensemble to develop their improvising skills?

What role could **Seb** and **Grace** from Sharp Academy take in this activity?

Watch LYFE's first try out of the improvised section:

[Watch Video 36](#)

How could you support a group to improvise like this if they didn't have a pulse/rhythm section?

What would be your top tips to a group to help them improvise effectively?

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

Section 12: Preparing and Polishing a Performance

Perfecting each section

Now that musical material for each section has been explored and developed, LYFE begin to build a structure.

Watch the ensemble agree how to begin their arrangement:



[Watch Video 37](#)

What elements of the arrangement do LYFE discuss before trying out the beginning of the arrangement?

What questions does Emily ask in order to guide their discussion?

[Watch Video 38](#)

What improvements and developments do the ensemble make the second time they play through this section?

Watch LYFE's first try out of the improvised section:



Watch Video 39

How does Emily guide the ensemble through planning the structure?

How would you support **Sharp Academy Orchestra** to agree on and memorise a structure like this?

Agreeing final structure

The ensemble now talk through the structure and do a play through of the full arrangement.

Final touches

Allow some space for the group to add final flourishes to their arrangement.

[Watch Video 40](#)

What elements have the group included in their arrangement?

[Watch Video 41](#)

Final touches

Allow some space for the group to add final flourishes to their arrangement.

Watch Video 42

How does Emily facilitate space for experimentation for the final touches, and prepare the group for a full run through?

How could you prepare Sharp Academy Orchestra for a performance of this?

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

Section 13: Final Performance

Watch LYFE perform their completed arrangement:



Watch Video 43

What were the most successful elements of the performance and why?

Section 14: Plan your own Learning by Ear performance

Sharp Academy Orchestra: Aural Learning Performance

Now make a full half term plan for how you would develop an aural learning performance like this for Sharp Academy Orchestra, using the well-known folk tune [Donkey Riding](#).

EFDSS have produced a resource with activity ideas for teaching this tune, along with four others. You can access this [here](#). Donkey Riding is on pages 10-14.

You can refresh your memory of Sharp Academy Orchestra and strategies for activity adaption [here](#).

You can find even more free folk music resources on the [EFDSS website](#).

Section 15: Summary

Congratulations on completing this module!

In this module, we've given you some strategies for teaching music aurally.

This module has covered:

- Make the aural learning process inclusive of musicians at any stage of musical learning
- Teaching an accompaniment and melody without using notation
- Breaking melodic or rhythmic sections into segments to support everyone to develop their aural musicianship
- Developing musical colour and structure
- Involving your ensemble in the creative process of constructing an arrangement using aural learning techniques

Watch

Here are Emily's Top 5 tips for facilitating an aural learning ensemble:



[Watch Video 44](#)

Section 16: Reflection

Reflect on what you have learnt from each section of this module:

What have you learnt about making the aural learning process inclusive of musicians at any stage of musical learning?

Have you learnt about teaching a melody and accompaniment aurally?

What have you learnt about combining a melody and accompaniment aurally?

What have you learnt about developing an accompaniment aurally?

What have you learnt about adding harmonic colour in an aurally-taught arrangement?

What have you learnt about developing structure in an aurally-taught arrangement?

What have you learnt about developing improvisation skills?

What have you learnt about polishing a final performance of an aurally-arranged piece?

Section 17: Next Steps

The skills that have been covered in this module are relevant to a wide range of ensemble music-making contexts. You can adapt these activities for many ensemble scenarios, such as an orchestral warm-up, a Key Stage 3 class or a pop band rehearsal.

The improvisation skills introduced in this module will be explored further in Orchestras for All's Music Leadership Training module Group Composing, while considering how to facilitate a group arrangement or performance is covered in Classroom Band. An understanding of notated arranging may help to develop or underpin the arranging approach taken in this module: this can be explored further in Parts for Everyone and Making Notation Accessible. Visit www.orchestrasforall.org/music-leadership-training to access these online training modules and more.

EFDSS resources

Enjoyed working with folk? Why not get more involved with the [English Folk Dance and Song Society?](#)

As well as activities, performances and workshops to suit everyone, there is an extensive [resource bank](#) with hundreds of ideas for bringing folk music into your classroom or ensemble.