

Hearing pitch & harmony

Aural tests are not a gift some people were born with. They ask you to name things you have already heard ten thousand times — you simply have not been told the names. Everything here is learnt by singing, not by listening harder.

MAJOR OR MINOR — THE FIRST DECISION

- Sing the tonic, then sing the third above it. High third: major. Lower, sadder third: minor.
- Try humming a familiar major tune from the last chord. If it fits, it is major.
- Trust the first instinct. Bright, open, settled: major. Shadowed, tense, inward: minor.

The distance is one semitone and it changes everything. Practise by playing a triad, guessing, and checking — twenty a day for a fortnight and you will stop needing to think.

Then do the same with whole phrases. Modes are the third stage: a minor tune with a raised sixth is Dorian, not minor.

CHORDS BY EAR

CHORD	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	HOW TO BE SURE
Major triad	Bright, resolved, at rest.	Sing the bottom, middle and top. The middle sits high in the gap.
Minor triad	Darker, still at rest.	The middle note sits low in the gap. Everything else is the same.
Dominant seventh	Restless — wants to move.	Four notes, and you can hear where it is trying to go. Follow that pull.
Diminished	Anxious, unstable, no home.	All the gaps sound the same size, which is why it is hard to place.
Major seventh	Sweet, hazy, unhurried.	Like a major chord with a note rubbing gently against the top.

CADENCES — THE FOUR ENDINGS

CADENCE	CHORDS	THE FEELING, AND HOW TO NAME IT FAST
Perfect	V – I	A full stop. Completely finished. If you could stop the piece here, it is perfect.
Imperfect	I – V	A comma. Unfinished, expecting more. Ends up in the air.
Plagal	IV – I	Also finished, but softer — the "amen" ending. Arrives without the push.
Interrupted	V – vi	A surprise. You expected home and got the minor relative instead.

Decide first whether it finished or not. If it finished: perfect or plagal — was there a push, or a settle? If it did not: imperfect or interrupted — did it hang, or did it turn dark?

Intervals: use tunes, not theory

Every interval has a famous tune that opens with it, and recalling the tune is far quicker than counting semitones. The Hearing intervals chart in this library pairs all thirteen with songs, ascending and descending. Learn those and interval tests become recognition, not arithmetic.

Sing everything

You cannot reliably identify what you cannot produce. Sing the interval, sing the third of the chord, sing the bass line. It feels ridiculous and it is the whole method — players who sing their aural practice improve in weeks, and those who only listen take years.

Rhythm, memory & the test itself

A large part of every aural test is rhythm and memory rather than pitch, and that part is the easier to train – it needs no instrument, and you can practise it walking to school.

FINDING THE METRE IN FOUR BARS

- 1 Find the strong beats first – the ones you would clap without thinking.
- 2 Count them in twos, then in threes. One of the two will fit; the other will fight you.
- 3 Ask whether each beat divides in two or in three. In three means compound time.
- 4 Two beats dividing in three is 6/8. Four beats dividing in two is 4/4. That covers most of it.

A march is in two. A waltz is in three. A jig or a barcarolle is in six-eight. If you can name the dance, you have named the metre.

Beware the upbeat: pieces often start before the first strong beat, and counting from the first note you hear will put your bar lines in the wrong place.

WRITING DOWN A RHYTHM YOU HAVE HEARD

STEP	WHAT TO DO
Before it plays	Note the time signature and count two bars in your head at the given tempo.
First hearing	Do not write. Tap the pulse and memorise the shape – where it is busy and where it rests.
Second hearing	Mark the beats as dots on the page, then place the notes between them.
Third hearing	Check the total in every bar adds up. A bar that does not add up is always wrong.
At the end	Say it out loud against the pulse. Errors are far more obvious spoken than read.

FOUR RHYTHMS TO KNOW INSTANTLY

EVEN



Four equal notes. Say 1 2 3 4.

DOTTED



Long-short, long-short. A skip. Say dum-da.

TRIPLET



Three in the space of two. Say straw-ber-ry.

SYNCOPATED



The weight lands off the beat. Say a-ONE a-TWO.

In the exam room

Answer decisively – an examiner cannot mark a maybe. If you truly do not know, say the more likely of the two and move on. And listen to the whole excerpt before deciding: the answer to "where does it modulate" is rarely in the first bar.

Singing back a phrase

Hold on to the first note and the shape, not the individual pitches. Most lost marks come from starting on the wrong note, so hum the given tonic quietly before you begin, and take the whole phrase in one breath if you can.

Ten minutes a day

Two minutes of intervals, two of chords, two of cadences, two of clapping a rhythm back from a recording, two of singing a scale degree someone names. Daily and short beats an hour on Sunday, every time.