

Hearing intervals

Nobody recognises an interval by counting semitones in their head. You recognise it because you already know a tune that opens with it. Learn one tune per interval, sing it back when you hear the gap, and the naming takes care of itself.

ONE TUNE PER INTERVAL — ASCENDING

INTERVAL	SEMIS	TUNE IT OPENS	WHAT TO LISTEN FOR
Minor 2nd	1	Theme from <i>Jaws</i>	The smallest step there is — it grinds.
Major 2nd	2	<i>Happy Birthday</i> — first two notes	An ordinary scale step.
Minor 3rd	3	<i>Greensleeves</i>	Sad, but settled. The minor chord's colour.
Major 3rd	4	<i>When the Saints Go Marching In</i>	Bright and open — a bugle sound.
Perfect 4th	5	<i>Amazing Grace</i>	Strong, a little military. Fanfares start here.
Tritone	6	<i>Maria</i> , from <i>West Side Story</i>	Unsettled — it always wants to move somewhere.
Perfect 5th	7	<i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i>	Hollow and stable. The easiest one to learn first.
Minor 6th	8	<i>The Entertainer</i>	A wide, slightly aching leap.
Major 6th	9	<i>My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean</i>	Warm and generous.
Minor 7th	10	Theme from <i>Star Trek</i>	Nearly an octave, but strained.
Major 7th	11	<i>Take On Me</i> — the chorus leap	Almost home. One semitone short of it.
Octave	12	<i>Somewhere Over the Rainbow</i>	The same note, higher. Nothing to argue with.

Falling intervals are harder

Learn a second set for descending: minor 2nd — *Joy to the World*; major 2nd — *Three Blind Mice*; minor 3rd — *Hey Jude*, the last two notes; major 3rd — *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*; perfect 4th — *I've Been Working on the Railway*; perfect 5th — *Flintstones* theme; octave — *Willow Weep for Me*.

Chords, not just gaps

Major — open, no shadow. Minor — the same chord with a cloud over it. Diminished — tense, nowhere to sit. Dominant 7th — leaning forward, expecting the next chord. Sing the bottom note, then the top; whether the middle sounds high or low tells you major or minor.

TEN MINUTES A DAY, IN THIS ORDER

- 1 Sing the tonic. Hold it, then find it again after a phrase of something else.
- 2 Sing up and down a major scale on solfège, then jump between degrees at random.
- 3 Two random notes at a keyboard: name the interval, then check.
- 4 Play four-bar phrases and write down the rhythm only. Pitch second.
- 5 Take a bass line from a piece you know and sing it against the recording.

CADENCES BY EAR

Perfect — a full stop. The bass falls a fifth and the tune lands on the tonic.

Imperfect — a comma. It stops, but somewhere unfinished.

Interrupted — the surprise. You expect the tonic and get a minor chord instead.

Plagal — the amen. Softer than a perfect cadence; no leading note pulling.

Ask two questions in order: did it finish, and did it surprise you.

SING, DON'T STARE

An interval you can sing is an interval you can name. Working it out silently is slower and less reliable, every time.

LITTLE AND OFTEN

Ten minutes daily beats an hour on Sunday. The ear learns like a muscle, not like a fact.

USE YOUR OWN REPERTOIRE

Swap any tune above for one you know better. The right tune is the one you can start singing without thinking.