

**Focus on Social Learning**  
**November: Listening Month**

**Active Listening: More Than Just Hearing**

Listening is the central activity of any musicians’ life. It is also a crucial social skill, and a key learning skill. Excellent listeners are better musicians, but also better students, friends and colleagues. Studies have shown that listening is an important component in how people judge communication ability in the workplace, and that being perceived as a good listener is closely linked improved performance in the workplace<sup>1</sup>. In a study of over 400 university students, subjects were given a listening test at the beginning of their first semester. After their first year of studies, 49% of students scoring low on the listening test were on academic probation, while only 4.42% of those scoring high on the listening test were on academic probation. Conversely, 68.5% of those scoring high on the listening test were considered Honors Students after the first year, while only 4.17% of those scoring low attained the same success<sup>2</sup>.

Listening is an essential life skill, fundamental to our ability to absorb and process information, collaborate, resolve conflicts and think critically. Good listeners are able to calm their bodies and minds so they can focus their attention and internalize information perceptively. Great listeners listen reflectively, thinking deeply about what they hear and responding with compassion and empathy. As our students move through the program we work with them to become better listeners.

Sistema Toronto  
**Different Types of Listening**

		Hears	Understands	Responds
01	<b>Receptive</b>	Instructions	What to do	Follows instructions
02	<b>Attentive</b>	Information	What you mean	Notice patterns and details
03	<b>Perceptive</b>	Intention	Why it's being said	Analyzes ideas and responds to emotions



<sup>1</sup> John W. Haas and Christa L. Arnold, “An Examination of the Role of Listening in Judgments of Communication Competence in Co-Workers,” *The Journal of Business Communication* (1973) 32 no. 2 (April 1995): 123-139

<sup>2</sup> Martha S. Conaway, “Listening: Learning tool and retention agent”, in *Improving Reading and Study Skills*, ed. K. Espalier, & W. Algier (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982).

First we work on becoming *receptive* listeners, willing to listen to and follow instructions. Then we work on becoming *attentive* listeners, able to calm their body and focus their attention on someone else. Finally, we work for them to become *perceptive* listeners, analysing what they hear and thinking deeply about it.

For young children the first stage in learning to listen is learning to focus their minds and bodies on hearing what is being said by teachers or other students so they can follow instructions. When we remind a young student to “listen to the teacher”, we usually mean they need to do what they have been asked to do, and begin participating in the same activities as the rest of the group. Once they are ready to participate, *receptive* listeners are able to hear and understand what is being said or played. *Receptive* listeners are able to follow instructions and answer questions in school, to show their friends and families they paying attention to them, and to respond to the needs of colleagues, clients, and customers in the workplace. In music teaching, *receptive* listeners mostly learn by rote, listening to what the teacher demonstrates and trying to copy it themselves.

Teachers use a variety of routines and techniques to prepare their students to listen to their instructions and understand the activity they are being asked to perform. As students become more comfortable in their role as learners, they become increasingly receptive listeners, willing and ready to take in and process information.

In Sistema this work is deeply ingrained in our ensemble rehearsals. As our students move from their classes into their ensemble rehearsals, and ultimately towards a performance, they become more and more receptive to the conductor’s instructions. As they move through the program, we ask our students to notice and understand more of what the teacher is saying, challenging them to focus their minds and calm their bodies to take in and process information. They become increasingly *attentive* listeners.

Attentive listeners are able to hear not just what is being said or played but *how* it is being said or played. They are more likely to understand and remember the details of what a speaker is saying, or to



notice details of a musical performance. In school and the workplace being able to take in, understand, and remember more information helps us learn better and do our jobs more effectively. In relationships, it helps us understand each other and be better friends, colleagues, and family members. In music *Attentive* listeners are able to notice practical and expressive details about *how* the music is being played, from noticing whether their section is rhythmically together to recognizing different articulations, dynamics, and tempo changes.

### Social Learning Activities for Listening

One of our favourite Social Curriculum activities, “Whole Body, Whole Mind Listening”, draws on mindfulness exercises to help a class build their listening skill and become more attentive over time. “Whole Body, Whole Mind Listening” begins with instructions to quiet the class and prepare them to listen. Each time the class performs the exercise, the teacher must take the time to have students calm their body and mind to prepare to listen to a new piece of music. Students are asked to consider how they can actively listen using all parts of their body – hands, feet, breath, eyes, ears, and minds. After listening, the teacher asks the students to consider whether they met their goals for full body listening and asks which parts of their body did well and which parts needed more practice. The teacher then leads a discussion about the music and their experience of listening to it. At first, the focus of the discussion will mostly be on the physical and mental experience of the students during the exercise. Then, as the class gets better at establishing and maintaining calm, the focus of the exercise increasingly shifts from what they notice about themselves to what they notice in the music. The better the students get at regulating their behaviour and focusing their mind, the more positive feedback they will get from the teacher and the more they will notice in the music.



Experienced listeners, who are able to calm their bodies and focus on what they are hearing, take in more information and become more perceptive. *Perceptive* listeners are able to go beyond noticing what is being said or played, and even beyond how it is being played, to understand *why* it is being said or played that way. *Perceptive* listeners analyse what they hear and think about it deeply. *Perceptive* listening is helpful in all parts of our lives. An *attentive* listener may notice that the orchestra is not together, or remember you told them you have a test coming up, but a *perceptive* listener is more likely to notice that the cellos are behind the conductor, or to understand you might be feeling nervous about the test.

The more our students advance, the more we rely on them to listen perceptively and take initiative. By the time they play in senior orchestra, we expect our students to be able to learn their own notes, practice their own parts, and even correct their own errors based on what they notice in rehearsal. We also expect them to be *receptive*, *attentive*, and *perceptive* listeners, able to stop what they are doing, focus their attention on someone else, and listen to them with empathy and understanding.