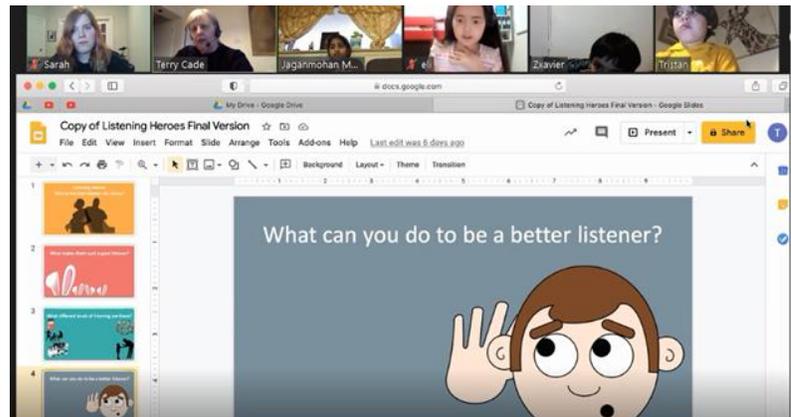


Spotlight on Social Learning

October 2020: Listening Month

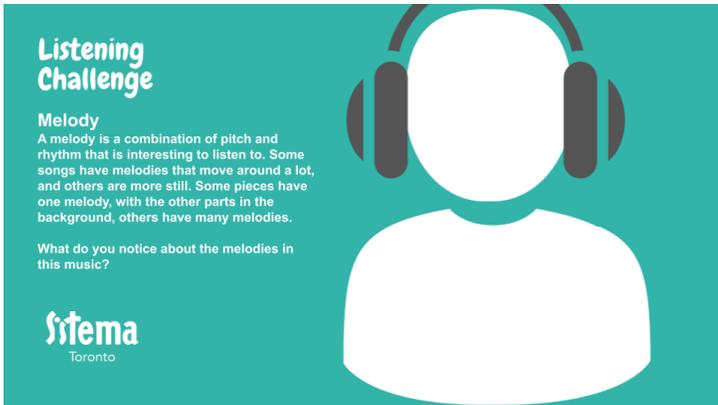
Few skills are more important in life than Listening, our Social Curriculum theme for October. Noticing and remembering **what** they hear makes skilled listeners better students and faster learners. Analyzing and evaluating **how** it is being said makes good listeners better colleagues and co-workers, and assessing and reflecting on **why** it is being said makes them more empathetic and understanding friends, family members, and citizens. Good listeners, according to recent research by the [Harvard Business Review](#), “are like trampolines”. They are helpful, not just because they are observant, but because “they are someone you can bounce ideas off of – and rather than absorbing your ideas and energy, they amplify, energize, and clarify your thinking”ⁱ. Good listeners, in other words, are not only observant, thoughtful and reflective, but also helpful.

Musical listening draws on all three of these levels of listening. Taking notice of **what** we hear, analyzing **how** the music is constructed, and reflecting on **why** the composer or performer made these choices, is how we make sense of the music we love. Like other kinds of listening, music listening is a skill that we can build over time, becoming more observant, analytical, and insightful



as we get better at it. Listening to music can be an incredibly meaningful and pleasurable activity, but many studies have shown that it can also be good for your brain and mental health. According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, “There are few things that stimulate your brain like music does.... If you want to keep your brain engaged throughout the aging process, listening to or playing music is a great tool. It provides a total brain workout.”ⁱⁱ. Music can also be experienced as inherently satisfying, because of the way it stimulates our mesolimbic reward centres, which may be one reason so many people find it emotionally meaningfulⁱⁱⁱ. The emotional benefits of music listening for young people have been shown to be a “feasible, easily applicable, and cost effective intervention”^{iv} in health care settings. Musical and non-musical listening rely on some of the same skills and habits: focus, attentiveness, attention to detail, analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, empathy, open-mindedness, and patience. This month’s Social Curriculum activities are designed to challenge our students to improve their listening skills, reflect on different kinds of listening, and recognize models of good listening in their lives.

The first activity this month, “Listening Challenge”, is part of our ongoing “Song Share” series. Students are invited to share music that they enjoy, and lead a discussion with their classmates and teachers about the music. This month, the discussions will focus on particular elements of the music.



Sistema Toronto, “Listening Challenge”, 2020

Challenging our students to focus their listening on the melody, harmony, rhythm, and lyrics of their selections encouraged them to be more observant about **what** is happening in the music, and to show them that noticing even the simplest features of a piece of music can help understand it better. Even the most sophisticated analysis of a piece of music is built out of individual, discrete observations, like those our students made during this activity, for example:

- This song has different articulations in it, (short, staccato notes in the drums and long, legato notes in the voice)
- There is an introduction section where the singer is rapping, then they switch to singing
- At the beginning they use body percussion, like we do in percussion class
- Two people are singing the same melody, one high and one low
- The voice and guitar are in the same range
- There are a lot of high pitched sounds in this piece
- It makes me feel positive. More on the major side?
- This song is a bit repetitive

Each observation about the music can be assessed, interrogated, or expanded on by the other students in the class, or by the teacher, leading towards more sophisticated understanding of **how** these features affect our experience of the music. Most important of all, the activity celebrates the listening abilities of our students, whatever their level of observational skill. Students who are rewarded for their attentiveness are more likely to feel good about their listening, and engage more actively in future listening activities.

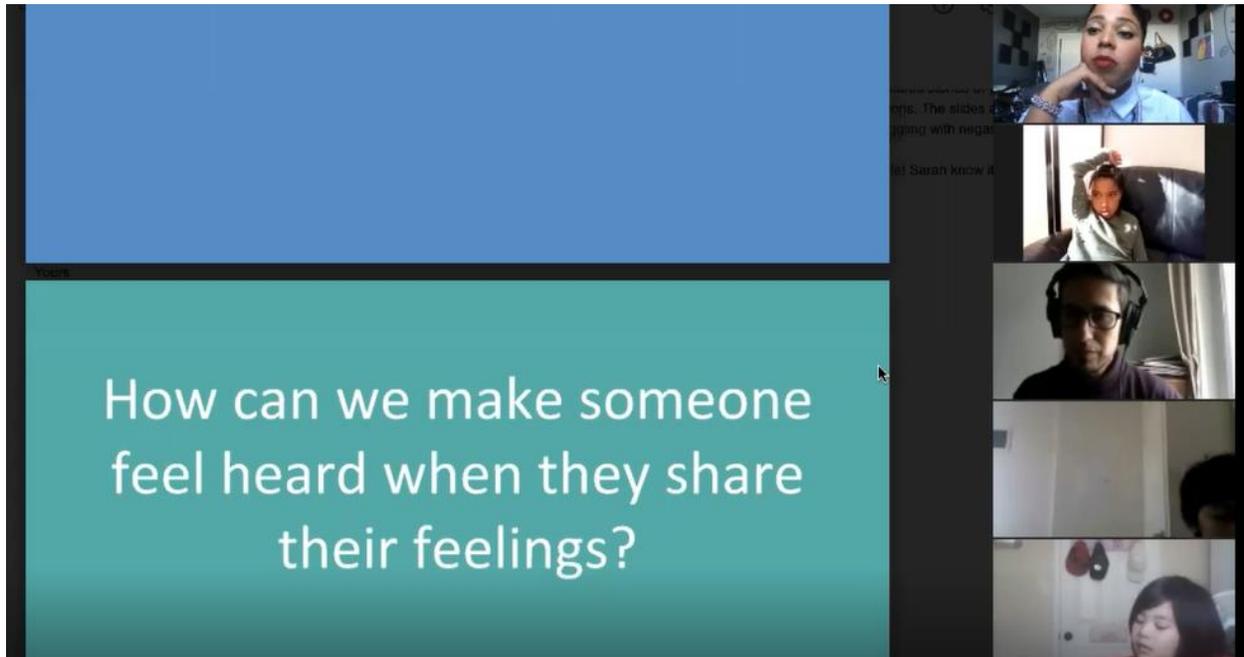
The second activity this month, “Listening Heroes”, encourages our students to reflect on different kinds of listening, and to celebrate the best listeners in their lives.



Sistema Toronto, “Listening Heroes”, 2020

At the beginning of the activity, students are invited to identify the people in their lives they think are the best listeners. The people who make them feel heard. Since the beginning of quarantine in March, our students have been more aware than ever of their reliance on family, friends, teachers, and others to help them with their emotional and social needs. Beginning with this list of role models, the students are invited to reflect on what different kinds of listening they represent. When they think of a good listener, do they think of someone who remembers facts? Someone who understands your feelings? Someone who notices your body language? Or someone who respects your viewpoint and helps you feel heard? Finally, students are invited to reflect on how they can become better listeners.

In Canada October is recognized as **Mental Health Awareness Month**, and our next activity focuses on building our students’ awareness of their own mental health, and of the supports available to them. This activity is adapted from a video and lesson plan developed by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families^v. The video focuses on the experience of two characters, Sasha and André, who each have challenges with their mental health. Sasha is experiencing school-related stress and anxiety, and André is experiencing more serious, depression-like issues. Our activity prompts the students to reflect on how they would ask for help with everyday mental health challenges like Sasha’s, or more serious mental health challenges like André’s, that might require help from an adult. By helping our students understand their own mental health, and breaking down the stigma around discussions of mental health issues, will hope to better equip them for the everyday and more serious challenges they will face in their own lives, and to be better, more empathetic friends, family members, and colleagues for people in their life who face similar challenges.



Whether we listen for pleasure, to learn, or to understand, being a better listener can help us in our lives and relationships. The activities for this year's Listening month are designed to improve our students' listening skills, in music, in school, and in their relationships, and to make them feel confident that they have people who will listen to them, and who are interested in what they have to say. As musicians, our students are part of a community of dedicated, elite listeners, and we hope they will come to enjoy the act of listening to others as much as we enjoy listening to them.

ⁱ Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman "What Great Listeners Actually Do", *Harvard Business Review*, July 14, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do>. Accessed Oct. 28, 2020.

ⁱⁱ "Keep Your Brain Young with Music", Johns Hopkins Medicine, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/keep-your-brain-young-with-music>. Accessed Oct. 28, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Strait, Dana L, and Nina Kraus. "Biological impact of auditory expertise across the life span: musicians as a model of auditory learning." *Hearing research* vol. 308 (2014): 109-21. doi:10.1016/j.heares.2013.08.004, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3947192/>.

^{iv} Jinah Kim and Thomas Stegemann, "Music listening for children and adolescents in health care contexts: A systematic review", *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Volume 51, 2016, Pages 72-85,

^v "We All Have Mental Health", *Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families*, <https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/resources-for-schools/we-all-have-mental-health-animation-teacher-toolkit/>. Accessed Oct. 28, 2020