

DEVELOPING CRITICAL LISTENING SKILLS

We have all used tonal terms to describe music reproduction but what does it matter if we have a "full" bass if the bass guitar line disappears whenever the drummer hits the bass drum? Terms like full, bright, and rich usually tell us more about the listening room's acoustics than the accuracy of music reproduction itself. What is accurate music reproduction? Is it really a matter of one's taste or have all those audio magazines been lying to us all these years? Could you imagine a wine magazine implying that the selection of Thunderbird over Lafite-Rothschild was a valid expression of good personal taste? Obviously, since there aren't any perfect audio components, taste certainly plays a part once one has developed critical listening skills.

You can start developing critical listening skills by asking yourself suitable questions about the music being played. A list of suitable questions follows below:

1. How many people are playing this music? (Check the album's liner notes)
2. Is it possible to hear all of them all of the time?
3. Are they all playing in tune?
4. Can you pick out the melody each instrument is playing and are they all playing in time?
5. As the notes get louder and higher, do the instruments tend to move about?
6. Listen to the bass line - is it a bass guitar or a double bass? Is it playing a melody or is it all one note?
7. What kind of guitar is being played? If electric, is it a slide guitar? If acoustic, is the player using a plectrum or picking with their fingers?
8. Is the tympanist using hard- or soft-headed sticks? Can you hear him change sticks?
9. Does the band seem to be playing together?
10. Does it appear as if people are playing instruments or is it more like a sea of noises with no human element that a synthesiser could be making?
11. Can you hear the musicians start and stop playing their instruments or are the instruments playing themselves?
12. Does the singer continue to exist between verses?
13. Is there a rhythm guitar? Is it playing all the time or does it disappear when the rest of the band gets louder? (chances are it will, but it shouldn't)
14. Is the rhythm guitar as important to the general mood and effect of the music on this component/system as the last one? Was it worth the guy even turning up for the recording session?
15. On a piece of music that starts with a bass guitar line, when the rest of the band comes in does the bass part get quieter?
16. Can you hear the hi-hat when the drummer hits the bass drum or is it obscured?
17. Can one person or instrument get louder without the whole band getting louder? (they should but most mass market components/systems make it hopeless)
18. Try some choral music (never mind that you don't like it - this can be an advantage because we tend to be more forgiving of that which we like or know). Do the singers stay the same size all the time - or do they get smaller as more of them sing?
19. What is the overall mood of the music? Is it happy, sad, lilting, aggressive, dreamy...?
20. Are there any backing vocalists? If so, how many? (check album liner notes)
21. Is there any emotion at all in the music? Does it sound urgent or calm?
22. Would you care if someone switched the system off or would it be a relief?
23. Does the music have potential? Can you predict how it's going to end or do you get the feeling that it will carry on much the same as before? Is it possible that anything remotely dramatic is happening?
24. Should you spend money on this album that you're listening to?
25. Are you enjoying the music or has your attention drifted back to the sound of the hi-fi?

I hope some of this has been of help and please stop by again.

Thank You,
Peter M. Cuddy
Hi-Fi Haven