

## **Playing Without Notation—“By Ear”**

**by Roy Ernst**

Many musicians, even professionals, won't try to play anything unless they can read it from notation. To some, playing without notation is considered a lower level of accomplishment. I remember students talking to a piano professor about how great his performance was of a particular piece. One said, "Can I see the score?" When the soloist said there was no score, he had improvised it, the admiration deflated. They were expecting to see a very elaborate score. I think of playing without notation as a higher level of accomplishment.

Some people learn music without ever using notation. Those blues players in the earliest days weren't reading music, and Irving Berlin didn't read music. In Berlin's case, other people wrote down what he would sing or play on the piano. For most musicians, not being able to read music is a limitation that excludes them access to music that has been notated and from some ensemble playing.

There's no reason to not read music. It's not that difficult and most musicians who can't would benefit by taking a little time to learn to read music notation. Not being able to play anything without notation isn't good either. That's what this chapter is about.

The ability to play a song without notation can be learned and it is well worth the time to do so. It will improve your overall musicianship.

To start, pick a folk song or popular song that you really like: something like “Amazing Grace,” “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” or “Happy Birthday.”

Pick a key that is comfortable for you. Play an octave scale up and down in that key.

When you play down to the tonic note, continue playing until you get to scale degree 5 below the tonic and then play back up to the tonic. Now sing what you just played.

Musical terminology is fairly complicated and I want to spare you that for the moment, but you should learn some musical terminology as we go. So, 1-3-5 in a major scale is called the **tonic triad**. That is a 3-note chord built on the tonic of the scale. It is also a **major triad** because it is 1-3-5 of a major scale. Most songs begin on one of the notes of the tonic triad.

Sing 1, 3, 5, 3, 1, lower 5, 1. Try singing the beginning of the song from the note that you think it starts on. Now try playing it, starting on that note. If you are wrong, you will soon find that it just doesn't work, so pick a different starting note and try again.

In playing the song, if you play a note that doesn't work, try another note in that key. Play up or down until you find the right note. You might even be able to make that sound like a melodic embellishment instead of landing on the wrong note. One of my favorite teachers, Glenn Shull from Colorado Springs, who has a great sense of humor, says, "If you play a wrong note, play it twice so it will sound deliberate."

Spend 5-10 minutes of your practice time each day doing this and you will soon be good at playing by ear. This is a big accomplishment, so be patient.

All of this may seem tedious, but after you get the idea, you pick a key, think the tonic triad, pick the starting note and play the song—taking just seconds. *The main thing is to think within a key.*

For starters, play these songs by ear:

Do-Re-Mi	Start on 1
Amazing Grace	Start on lower 5
Happy Birthday	Start on lower 5
Summer Time (is in minor)	Start on 5
Silent Night	Find the starting note.
Joy to the World	Find the starting note.
Auld Lang Syne	Find the starting note.