

Turning Off Your Inner Critic

by Dennis Winge

In my family, my dad had the strongest musical ear. One day I asked him why, with such a good ear, he never learned to play an instrument. His reply was “I tried once but I simply couldn’t stand to listen to myself.”

When you’re learning an instrument, it can be more difficult if you can “hear beyond your ability.” It’s possible that people who aren’t as aware of the quality of the music they’re making have an short-term advantage over those who do have a developed musical ear. This is because they are more absorbed in the process of *creating* the sounds rather than *evaluating* the sounds. Therefore they are able to plunge in and make music with passion (or at least concentration) rather than being distracted by an inner critic.

There are many reasons why someone could have developed a musical ear beyond their ability to play. Some might be:

- a close relative or friend taught them how to listen to music critically
- they took a music appreciation course or series of classes
- they have an analytical mind and like to analyze music
- they have read books on the subject
- they simply tend to be critical in nature, of everything they observe.

None of the above are negative qualities. They are all positive, beneficial assets, and in some cases illustrate quite a bit of skill in the critical realm. Critical listening and critical thinking are both very useful skills. Notice above that I mentioned that not having a critical ear is only a short-term advantage for learning an instrument. This is because a more advanced ear will help you progress faster in the long-term.

HOWEVER, in the short-term, the inner critic is *not* helpful, and if you find yourself judging your own playing harshly and negatively, you must learn to shut this voice off temporarily! By “negatively” I simply mean in any way that makes you feel less likely to want to continue the process of learning.

I once heard writer Marc Allen say that he teaches writers-to-be to make a deal with their inner critic before uncapping the pen, and this can be applied to practicing. Paraphrasing from Allen, you could say “I promise to let you have your say in all its glorious detail after the fact, but for now you must not say a word while I am in this creative process.” And then simply set the timer for however long you intend to practice, compose, improvise, etc.

Then you can go back and review where you’re at and where you want to go. There, the critic will be very useful, in fact. Or go one step further and record yourself doing one of those activities I just mentioned, but don’t listen to it right away. Give a week or at least a day or two. Then let your inner critic loose, but keep him locked up during the recording!

Tell your inner critic that you’re not *supposed* to sound good at certain times. Everyone knows that it is during the times of large-scale construction that the biggest mess is made. The road looks horrible, the whole square block looks like a disaster, the traffic has to get re-routed etc. But there is a master plan in place, and in a few weeks or months no one will ever remember how bad the mess was (well maybe a few complainers lol), but everyone will certainly appreciate the brand new or completely remodeled structure.

So it is with your musical development. Send your inner critic on an errand to go get coffee or something. 😊