

How to Listen to Music

Music is ubiquitous in our society but it matters less than ever before. How is this possible? As with so much in our contemporary lives, the answer has to do with attentiveness - and the tyranny of distraction. This session offers a lesson in how to listen carefully to music, illustrated with some of the great masterworks, with the goal of increasing our attentiveness.

Delta David Gier has been called a dynamic voice on the music scene, recognized widely for his penetrating interpretations of the standard symphonic repertoire, passionate commitment to new music, and significant community engagement. Orchestras Mr. Gier has conducted include the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, the St. Louis Symphony, and the Minnesota Orchestra. In Europe, his engagements include the Bergen Philharmonic, the Polish National Radio Symphony, and the Bucharest Philharmonic, along with many other orchestras in Italy, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey. He studied at the University of Michigan under the renowned conducting teacher Gustav Meier, along with studies at the Tanglewood Music Center and Aspen Music Festival. He was a Fulbright scholar in eastern Europe from 1988-90. He has chaired the music jury of the Pulitzer Prize and is a frequent panelist for the League of American orchestras. The Lakota Music Project was developed under Gier's direction to address racial tensions between Native Americans and whites in the region the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra serves. Other engagement projects with the SDSO have included Arab, Chinese and Sudanese/Somali refugees.

J. Mark Bertrand is a bibliophile, a novelist, and a pastor. He is the author of the non-fiction book *Rethinking Worldview*, and of three crime novels: *Back on Murder*, *Pattern of Wounds*, and *Nothing to Hide*. He is also the writer behind Bible Design Blog, a site which has led to a resurgence of interest in the design and production of quality editions of the Bibles. Mark is a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America.

I. How do we listen?

1. Do we actually listen?
2. Is there a problem?

A. Ways of listening

Images come pre-packaged with “ways of seeing.” (John Berger) In order to see differently, we must learn new ways. The same is true for listening. The problem isn't that we don't know how to listen—it's that the way of listening our music has instilled serves us poorly. Better music must be heard according to its better way.

B. The problem of sustained attention.

1. The reason we struggle to listen is the same as the reason we struggle to pray. To the beginner, it's as if he is being asked to “do nothing” for a lengthy period of time. He gets bored, his mind wanders. Nature abhors

a vacuum.

2. Typical solution: TECHNIQUE. Teach me how to listen, how to pray. But first ... you must develop the capacity for sustained attention—for self-interaction.
3. You can “listen” without technique, just as you can pray without technique. Technique will enhance listening, but first you need “lung capacity.”

C. The problem of abstract immersion.

1. “Field recordings”: Immersion in sound (will produce visual sensation. Some sounds, though they can be visualized, become white noise. But it is surprising how the brain can fill in the pictures from the sounds.
2. By contrast, music is much more than an audio track to the visuals. Its techniques, its abstractions, its pulse all function in their own realm—even when they imitate sounds of nature. The music can make a case, can argue, and it can elucidate, transport, all on its own terms.
3. This is where technique and knowledge enter in: if you are going to sojourn in this world, then you will want to know a bit of the language.

II. Elements of Music

- A. Melody
- B. Rhythm
- C. Harmony
- D. Form

III. How to Listen (carefully)

- A. Beethoven
- B. Shostakovich

Suggested Readings: