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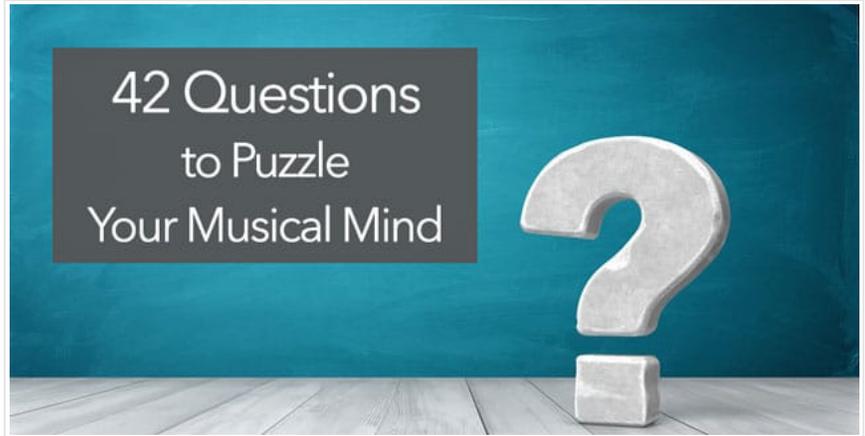
42 Questions to Blow (open) Your Musical Mind

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Have you ever heard the phrase, "Seek and you shall find"? What if it were absolutely true. What if what we expected and looked for, we often found?

If our attitudes really did shape reality, what might we do differently? What would change?

Science has repeatedly found that our beliefs, curiosities, perspectives and attitudes have a significant effect on outcomes. This is why placebos work so well.



—As a funny side note, Richard Bandler (the brilliant yet somewhat creepy co-inventor of Neurolinguistic Programming) tried to bottle placebos, clearly labeled as placebos, and bring them to market. (After all, they work as well or better than many of the drugs on the market.) But the FDA wouldn't approve them, calling them unethical!

So why not use the nature of curiosity and expectation to expand our musical capabilities?

By asking open-ended and **expansive questions**, our minds and neurology go to work seeking answers. And while there are often no definite (or possibly infinite) answers to find, the very process of asking these questions initiates a creative process that leads to new insights, abilities, and possibilities (musical and otherwise).

We can discover new levels of technique, musical interpretation, and enjoyment in our practice and performances. Asking the right questions can make our practice exciting and fresh!



Open-ended Questions

An open-ended question is one that has more than one answer. Many can have an infinite number of answers. The easiest way to create them is to start with "How could...." or "How well am I....". The point of these types of questions is not to find an answer, but to heighten awareness, create curiosity, and stimulate creativity.

Great teachers ask great questions

What's more, it is here that we find one of the main benefits in working with good teachers. They are often listening and looking for things that we are not, and in bringing them to light, give us ways of expanding our awareness of our music. Essentially, they teach us new questions to ask.

As an example,

I frequently visit my musical coach, a concert pianist, thinking I have a new piece all worked out. I strut in assuming that he is going to have nothing to say, because I have reached the absolute heights of musicality and musicianship, that he is going to fall on his knees and ask if he can pay me instead. And it never happens. Mark (my coach) can immediately point me in numerous directions that I hadn't considered.

It is not that I "could not" have considered them (after all, he's been telling me the same things every week for the last 8+ years, and I'm still learning from them), it is that I simply didn't consider them directly with that piece, at that time, in that particular way. Essentially, I forgot to ask the question that would have led to a certain solution, or idea, or created a more effective musical effect.

Over time, as I more frequently remember to ask the question (i.e. "How well am I listening to the ends of my notes?") I form habits of awareness that reflect it (i.e. My notes are more often well-connected.)

Note: This is why it is extremely rare to hear truly accomplished, self-taught musicians. We may not know what we don't know. Self-taught musicians are seldom asking the questions that will lead them forward.

It is also why the more mature a musician gets, the more humble they may become (though not all, of course). High levels of achievement often demand that we ask more and better questions, and get fewer concrete answers. So the more we know, the more we realize how much we don't know for sure, and we have to get comfortable with that.

The subconscious' role in learning music

Your subconscious goes to work night and day to answer any question you ask. So asking open-ended questions sets the subconscious in motion. Answers often come "out of the blue", as ideas or notions that you might not have had otherwise. We can learn and discover all kinds of new information quickly and easily, just by putting our subconscious mind to work on it by asking the question.

You can witness this in your own life: The name of a book or movie or person is on the "tip of your tongue", but you just can't remember it. So you give up and move on to thinking or talking about something else. Then sometime soon, the answer pops into your head when you are not thinking about it at all.

Your subconscious was working on it all along, while your conscious mind was busy with other things. (Thanks, Subconscious!) Or, as another example: You have some problem or dilemma. You think about it before bed, and in the morning you wake with the solution.

Asking good questions is music psychology in action

Asking good questions also takes us from a "know-it-all-already" state to a more inquisitive "student/adventurer/explorer" state, which is much more likely to create something worth listening to.

And as a bonus, this [state](#) also can release a whole cocktail of feel-good drugs into your body and brain, helping you to feel better, learn faster, and in general have a great time.

This is often how kids learn all the time. It is also how the greatest inventors, scientists, entrepreneurs, and leaders are thinking much of the time.

It works at all levels, from beginning to advanced, and is the most natural way for the learning process to evolve.

Committing to the unknown road is not always the easiest route, in fact it may demand more of you than any other. You may be compelled to work harder, or focus even more intently.

But the rewards can seem like magic. All of a sudden you can do things that you couldn't before, or something that used to be hard is now easy.

Remember, ask early and ask often. It can take time for the question to sink in and for you to receive strokes of insight.

Musical Questions

What follows is a list of questions (in no particular order) that seek to open us to possibilities in our playing. If you have not worked with some of the ideas below, they may not make sense to you. That is okay. Some of them are more advanced.

The point is that you create habits of exploration and curiosity by frequently asking open-ended questions that expand your possibilities.

It is all play, and there are no wrong questions, so long as they open you to new possibilities. Make up your own. Put ideas you get from lessons into open-question form and read them before practicing.

I recommend first just reading through these here, then printing them out, adding to the list as questions arise. In your practice, choose just one at a time, and focus on a passage, section or whole piece of music with that one question in mind. Then switch the question, and focus on another.

You don't have to get everything at once. Just [be curious](#) and most importantly: Have fun!

Here we go:

1. How can this be easier?
2. How steady can my tempo be?
3. How connected ([legato](#)) can my notes be?
4. How well can I articulate the rests?
5. How cleanly can I play this?
6. How effortlessly can I use the [suggested fingering](#)?
7. How can use my body effectively so that my complete physiology is appropriate to the spirit and demands of this piece of music?
8. How would the greatest musician in the universe approach this passage?
9. How can I create more forward [momentum](#)?
10. How much freedom can I maintain in my shoulders (or neck, back, wrists, palms, elbows, knees, jaw....) while playing this?
11. How can the small details reflect the larger [musical ideas](#)?
12. How can I make this musical line last even longer?
13. How could I effectively combine lines for repeated sections into larger, more overarching [structures](#)?
14. How can I most beautifully connect these two notes?
15. Is there any point where I am [stopping](#) the action? (and can I change that so that the action continues?)
16. How can I balance the voices so as to clearly demonstrate the organization of the music?
17. What if this piece could be 100 times more interesting than I am making it?
18. Am I finding the right problems to solve? How?
19. What am I assuming about this piece?
20. about technique?
21. about high notes?
22. about this [musical style](#)?
- 23 about myself and my capabilities as a player?
24. What/who am I comparing my playing to?
25. Is this comparison constructive?
26. Is there someone better I could emulate/imitate? How?
27. How would the best pianist (violinist, flautist, cellist, ...) approach this music?
28. How would the most effective performer in the galaxy (at eliciting audience emotion) know when this piece is [ready to share](#)?
29. Am I hearing every single note?
30. Is my [rubato](#) mimicking the natural movements of objects in space?
31. How do things in the natural world (animals, cars, clouds, heavy things, light things) move?
32. What is the one "white-hot" emotional core of this piece of music?
33. How can all my choices serve to demonstrate that core?
34. How quickly can I notice when my mind wanders?
35. How quickly and gently can I bring focus back to the task at hand?
36. How fully can I understand and demonstrate the musical intent and direction of [each voice](#) in this music (Melody, bass, and interior voices)?
37. How can I practice this passage differently so that I can gain a new perspective?

38. How can I demonstrate the rhythm so that it speaks to the emotional substance of this piece of music?
39. If I had all the time in the world, what would be the most _____ (beneficial, ecological, scientific, holistic, creative, fun, dastardly, brilliant,...) way to practice this passage (or piece of music, skill, technique,...)?
40. Can I exaggerate my musical ideas ([dynamics](#), articulation, rubato, ...) even more in my ? Even more than that?
41. How would I practice this phrase if it were the only thing on [my plate](#)?
42. What other questions can I come up with? (feel free to share them in the comments!)

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43 + 44

↓

And while you are getting creative with your ideas in practice, you may enjoy applying this same idea to other areas of your life.

For example:

- How can I make this store clerk smile?
- How can I make _____ feel like the most beautiful and important person in the world?
- How can I warm up the grouchy flight attendant so he lets me bring my guitar onto the plane?.

What questions do you ask? Leave your answer in the comments below!

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9 Responses to *42 Questions to Blow (open) Your Musical Mind*



Gerry Phillipson September 26, 2016 at 2:23 am #

REPLY ↩

The questions really focus the musical acumen. But it's the way of music that for every answer there are other questions! Many thanks.



Allen September 26, 2016 at 11:12 am #

REPLY ↩

So true, Gerry!



binyaqub August 1, 2015 at 8:46 am #

REPLY ↩

Hi Allen, hearing you loud and clear. The guitarist I try to emulate most is obviously the Great Valid Iran Shahi.

Ha ha joking. It's worse, I watch Marcin Dylla produce the most incredible music on so many master guitars. He is intense, he is concentrating on every single note. As any artist finds what you produce has a big dose of yourself in it. Yes it is true, after about 10 minutes of listening I'm frantically looking around for a convenient window to throw my guitar out of.

So, I like to compare different guitarist like say Marcin and Michael Chapdelaine playing Capricho Arabe. Or look for the common touches that he also uses in La Alborada. Whew.

Well back to reality for me is I'm starting all over again. You nailed me with the bridging pinky. Totally guilty of needing a physical crutch to give me infallible reference to the strings. Not any more. If I never learn another thing learning to do without it has given me freedom to be able to train myself to find the strings from my hand and arm positions.

Brilliant coaching Allen, way to go.



Allen August 1, 2015 at 10:08 am #

REPLY ↩

thanks Binyaqub! Glad to help. And you're right about the comparing.

Cheers,
Allen



Bria April 30, 2014 at 10:09 am #

REPLY ↩

I like the idea – I'd add to that to have an "open heart" along with the open and curious mind. The open hearted journey is the path of vulnerability that takes us places we don't expect to find. I find it the harder path to stay on.



Allen May 1, 2014 at 2:44 pm #

REPLY ↩

Absolutely! With any luck, one leads to the other.

Thanks for the comment,
Allen



Monique April 25, 2015 at 7:41 am #

REPLY ↩

Love this list of questions! Thank you Allen.



Allen April 25, 2015 at 7:45 am #

REPLY ↩

Thanks Monique! Food for thought!



James Zdanowski April 27, 2014 at 8:00 am #

REPLY ↩

very enlightening, i enjoy your approach to this whole thing called classical guitar, makes you really look at a piece/yourself.

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