

# What is the Sensory Triangle?

by Anne Sullivan

When I first started learning the harp, I was focused on learning the notes, just as every other music student is. As I matured, physically and musically, I realized that “learning the notes” was not a single process. Several different factors affected how quickly and well I could learn a piece of music. What these factors were, and more specifically what core skills were needed to be an effective and efficient learner, was something I became very interested in when I began teaching solfège (ear training) at the Curtis Institute of Music. Over my nineteen years of teaching there, I realized that music learning was dependent on the coordination and development of three of our sensory systems – our fingers certainly, but also our eyes and our ears. These three systems are what I call the “Sensory Triangle.”

Expert players never just practice the notes for technical proficiency; instead, as they practice they are noticing patterns of intervals and pitches and bringing their years of musical background, not just instrument practice, to help them understand the music before them in many meaningful ways. This is the goal behind the ear training courses that are required for every music conservatory student. The courses teach the students to associate pitches and patterns with the notes on the staff away from their instruments and to bring a deeper state of awareness of the building blocks of music. Ear training seeks to improve a student’s abilities in three specific ways: to enable her to “hear” the way the music sounds just from looking at it; to enable her to play or write down music just from hearing it; and to be able to recognize patterns quickly. When these skills are combined with the practical, technical work that is part of practicing an instrument, the student develops a strong Sensory Triangle.

A strong Sensory Triangle allows you to do three important things. You can:

- Play What You See – with instant note and pattern recognition
- Play What You Hear – developing your sense of pitch and pitch relationships
- Hear What You See – “making music out of the dots on the page”

These are the skills that make a good sightreader, a fast learner or someone who can play well “by ear.” Are all three of these skills part of your skill set? Or would you like to improve them, and see how much easier, faster and more fun learning and playing music can be?

For more information, and for some helpful ways to develop your Sensory Triangle, visit my online “conservatory,” [ARS Musica](#), where you will find articles, podcasts and practice regimens to help you become your best. Or email me for more information – [harpist@annesullivanharp.com](mailto:harpist@annesullivanharp.com).