

Perfect Pitch Versus Relative Pitch Tutorial (Part 3)

By Jay Graydon

The Perfect Pitch ideas continue. My life long friend, Dr. John Hoehn notes the following and I have tossed in replies.

<<Hello Jay,

I re-read your second perfect pitch tutorial this morning, being the one in which you interview other musicians. I had a few things to add to what I wrote to you previously.

I always make it a point to know the note that my car horn plays. Even with wide temperature changes, the horns in the cars I have owned never seem to change pitch. This means that I have a home note right there, and don't have to carry a cassette or CD, and don't have to worry about sample rates. The honk needs to be about a second long, because a quick beep is not always the same pitch as a tone that is sustained for a second or so. I only have to honk, and I have the home note, but I do have to be sure that there is no other driver nearby who might think I am honking at him. >>

Hi John,

Surely another great way to find the home note. Yea, the person must be careful when to honk. Not sure if I had mentioned the following. The electronic car lock beep sound from my car is "B". I wish I could make the beep happen when driving.

<<The above notwithstanding, I carry a pitch pipe in the car at all times. Even though in my brain I am never more than a half step off, I can't stand it when I am. When I am thinking about tunes and am off in my brain, things don't ?feel right,? and it is easier to just check with a pitch pipe in the car or a piano at home than to sit there and try to figure it out. As I said in the previous letter, if I have been playing piano any time that day, my pitch is perfect, and I don't need to check with a pitch pipe or piano. See the paragraph regarding loss of perfect pitch, below. >>

It is most amazing there are levels of perfect pitch.

<< Regarding a tiny pitch instrument for the keychain, how about the keys themselves? When I shake my keys (always by holding the same key, and dangling the others, so to not get a variation), there are several notes, but there is usually a dominant note. The dominant note is usually the highest, and in the case of my keys it is an A. If I had a dominant note that were "in the crack" I would simply find that key, and hold it, dangling the other keys by it, so that the (new) dominant note were hopefully something that was an actual note. Additionally, you don't have to go with the dominant note. You just have to go with a recognizable note from among your keys. With all of the keys on a person's keychain, and the variety of ways to hold one or two keys while dangling and shaking the others, it is most likely that every musician can find a note that is a true pitch and is also identifiable. >>

A very interesting concept John! I have tried this over a few days and it seems my keys shaken keys dominant high note that is loudest is a C#.

<< Regarding loss of perfect pitch, I think that part of what the brain does is remember tones for varying time spans, differing with each person. When you are ready to play with other cats, and you get your home note, you have to remember it, even if it is for a few seconds, so that you can relate to the key that the present tune is being played in. Then you lock in on the correct pitches, and you also remember those, for varying lengths of time, even if that is for only a few seconds. I think that perfect pitch is partially the ability to remember those pitches longer. There is probably more to it than that, but I am convinced that that is part of it. Musicians I have known with perfect pitch or near perfect pitch tend to fade to the flat side, with varying lengths of time when they don't play. In my case I am a half tone flat sometimes, when I don't play for one day. In Tony Goodman's case (see the previous letter), after finishing a math major at USC and also going to dental school there, he had obviously spent many days with 14 to 16 hours of study, without practicing music, and his pitch was thereafter a half note flat.

Regarding why the pitch fades to the flat side, which it almost always does, with most musicians, I don't have a good scientific answer for why that happens, but it seems intuitive that it would go flat rather than sharp. It takes input to cause arousal, whether that is an alarm clock arousing from sleep, or a touch arousing emotions. When the input ends, things seem to go "downwards," whatever downwards means. Regarding a cappella choirs, I think their tendency to go flat is mostly the muscles of the vocal cords getting tired, without a perfect pitch singer among them to keep them straight.

My inputs have been long, but I hope they are helpful, if you do a part 3.

John >>

A very interesting perspective. I am confident that the loss of perfect pitch takes many routes as to how it slips away just like the fact there seems to be many levels of the gift.

Marylou (one of David Foster's sisters) was given the gift. She says it went away many years ago after she stopped playing music.

Since I do not have perfect pitch, I need to constantly work with relative pitch or I get melodically lost quickly. Your above input and Marylou's situation supports the fact that even if you have perfect pitch, it must be kept in use.

I bet in the not too far distant future, gene modification will allow planting such a talent.

Jay