

Playing By Ear

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Who Can Play By Ear?

Playing by ear means to derive and play a song *without* written music. Most people assume that playing by ear is an inborn ability. But barring any hearing problems, *anyone* can do it!

In fact, you already play an instrument by ear—your voice! When you sing, there are no keys to press, strings to pluck, or horn valves to push. Of course, some of you would admit that you don't "play" your instrument very well! But the problem is not your singing; it's your *listening*, or more precisely, your lack of it.



When you first heard your voice on a tape recorder, you probably thought it sounded awful. To your surprise, others said it sounded just like you. Why the difference? Listeners hear only the vibrations that come *out* of you. But your ears also pick up the vibrations that come from *within* your body, so you sound different to yourself.



People singing along with portable-music players usually think they sound great. But because headphones prevent them from hearing their outer voices, they usually sound terrible to everyone else!

To sing well, you must listen to your voice's *external* vibrations, making corrections as needed. Perhaps you've seen images of singers in a recording studio holding a headphone to one ear and assumed they were listening to the music. In fact, they were listening to their *own* voices and making adjustments to ensure they were in tune.

Similarly, to play piano by ear, you must listen to the keys you press and make corrections as needed.

Hearing Test

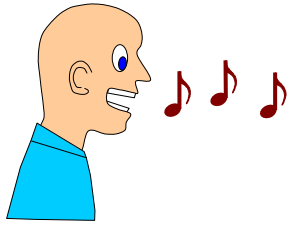
Below are two versions of the beginning phrase of *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. One is correct; the other contains a wrong key. Play them both. Assuming you know the melody, if you can hear which version contains the wrong key, you *can* play by ear.

	ROW	<p>RH</p>		ROW
	ROW			ROW
	ROW			ROW
	YOUR			YOUR
	BOAT			BOAT

Which version has a wrong key?

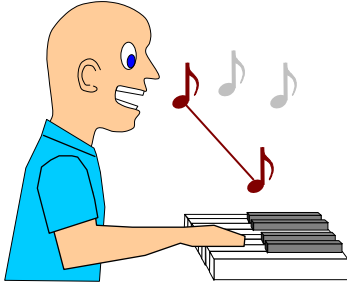
How To Play By Ear

Playing by ear is a matching game—you match each tone of a song to a key on your piano keyboard. At first, this may be a slow process. But in time the piano becomes an extension of your body, and your fingers will “know” which keys to press, just as your voice “knows” which tones to sing.



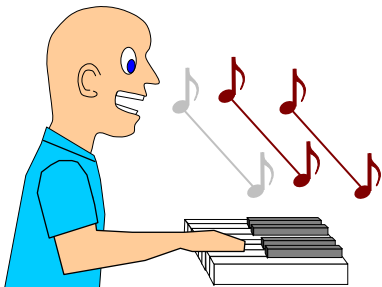
HUM or sing the melody.

To play a song by ear, you must know it well enough to hum or sing it, or have someone hum or sing it for you. Try to start and stay within your natural voice range—singing outside of it strains your vocal cords and sounds bad.



Match the FIRST tone.

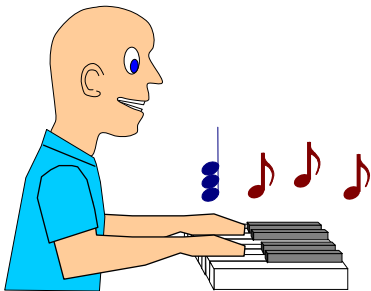
Press piano keys until you find the tone that matches your first hummed tone. This is a trial & error process that gets easier with experience.



Match the NEXT tone(s).

Hum the next tone and press keys until you match it. It will be the same, higher, or lower than the previous tone.

Continue to hum and press keys until you’ve matched each tone in the song.



Add CHORDS

Adding chords for harmony is also a trial & error matching process, but here are some guidelines that may help.

- Melody: Try chords that contain melody keys. Example: If the melody includes C, E, and G keys, try a C chord.
- Family: Try chords of the same family. Example: If a song has C and F chords, it may also have a G chord (All White family).
- Scale: Use the scale (key) of the song and the Circle of Fifths to select chords (see the *Practical Music Theory* lesson).

Why Create A Keyboard Songsheet?

Although playing by ear means playing *without* written music, there are advantages to writing down songs on a blank Allcanplay songsheet as you pick them out by ear.

- By marking keys on a songsheet as you go, you **won’t forget** the keys you’ve already picked out.
- You can more easily add and **arrange chords** on the songsheet to enhance the melody.
- You can experiment and replace the key marks with **finger letters** that work best for you.
- When finished, you’ll have a picture of the song that **others can play**.
- You’ll be building a *free music collection* of songs *you* like to play.

Happy Birthday To You (By Ear)

While at your piano, fill in this songsheet as you follow the step-by-step tutorial on the next pages. It helps to have a clipboard or another solid surface, like a song book, to write on.

Since you must know the rhythm of a song to play it by ear, there's no need to fill in Timing counts. Therefore, instead of Measures, the song has been divided into Sections based on the lyrics as shown.

C ³	Middle C ⁴	C ⁵	LYRIC CHORD	Section
[Piano keyboard diagram]			HAP-	1
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-PY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			BIRTH-	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-DAY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			TO	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			YOU.	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			HAP-	2
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-PY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			BIRTH-	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-DAY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			TO	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			YOU.	

[Piano keyboard diagram]			HAP-	3
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-PY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			BIRTH-	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-DAY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			DEAR	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			NA-	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-ME.	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			HAP-	4
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-PY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			BIRTH-	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			-DAY	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			TO	
[Piano keyboard diagram]			YOU.	

Marking Keys

dot = right hand
x = left hand

At first, lightly mark your songsheet with *pencil* until you're sure everything is correct. You can later add finger letters and color for increased visibility.

Blank Songsheets

For creating a written record of future songs you pick out by ear, download and print the blank keyboard songsheets from the link at the bottom of the **Piano** webpage.

The highest right-hand key and the lowest left-hand key of a song will determine whether you need the 2½ or 6 octave version.

Match Tones

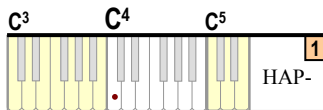
Mark Section 1 Melody

Although you'd normally match a play-by-ear song to your personal voice range, we'll start on Middle C so we can stay together for this tutorial.

Since we don't yet know which specific fingers to use, we'll use dots (right hand) and x's (left hand) as placeholders to mark keys.

Match the 1st Tone

Play Middle C and sing HAP to match it. Use a pencil and lightly mark a tiny dot on C⁴ on your songsheet.

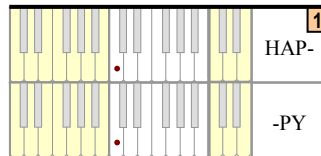


For this tutorial, we'll start on Middle C.

Match the 2nd Tone

Sing HAP-PY.

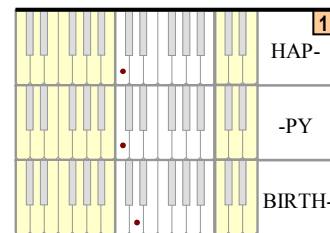
Is PY the same, lower, or higher than HAP? Press keys to see it's the same. Mark C⁴ again.



Match the 3rd Tone

Sing HAP-PY BIRTH.

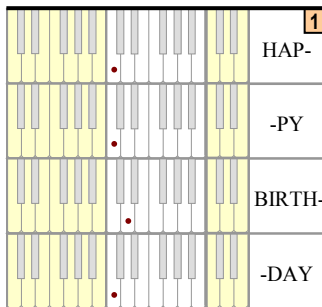
Is BIRTH the same, lower, or higher than PY? Press keys to see it's 1 higher. Mark D⁴.



Match the 4th Tone

Sing HAP-PY BIRTH-DAY.

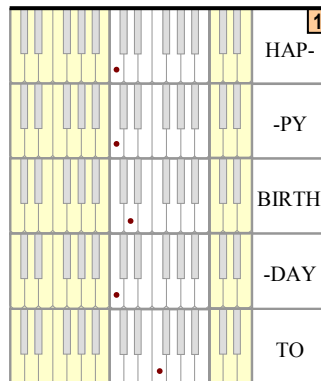
Is DAY the same, lower, or higher than BIRTH? Press keys to see it's 1 lower. Mark C⁴.



Match the 5th Tone

Sing HAP-PY BIRTH-DAY TO.

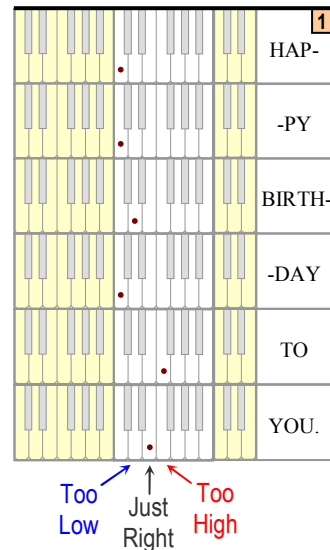
Is TO the same, lower, or higher than DAY? Press keys to see it's 3 higher. Mark F⁴.



Match the 6th Tone

Sing HAP-PY BIRTH-DAY TO YOU.

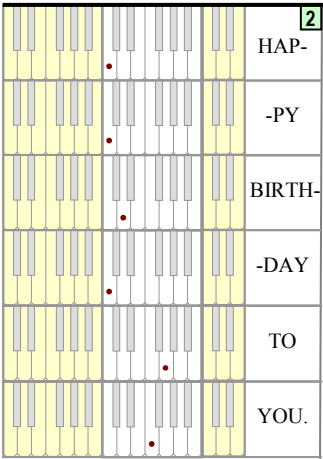
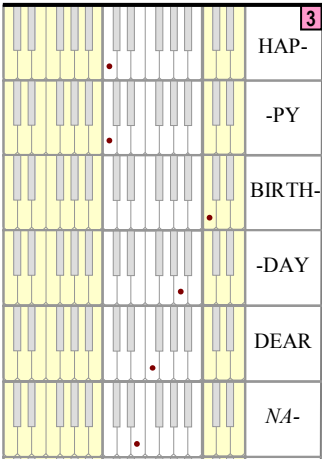
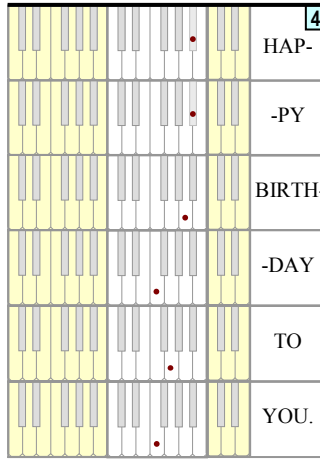
Is YOU the same, lower, or higher than TO? Press keys to see it's 1 lower. Mark E⁴.



Continue to pick out and fill in the remainder of the melody by ear, then compare your markings to those on the next page. As you gain experience, you'll find that you won't have to sing from the beginning of the song or section each time to find the next key.

Mark the Remaining Melody

Find the remaining melody keys, then check your marks against the following.

		
HAP-	HAP-	HAP-
-PY	-PY	-PY
BIRTH-	BIRTH-	BIRTH-
-DAY	-DAY	-DAY
TO	DEAR	TO
YOU.	NA-	YOU.
	-ME.	

Add Chords

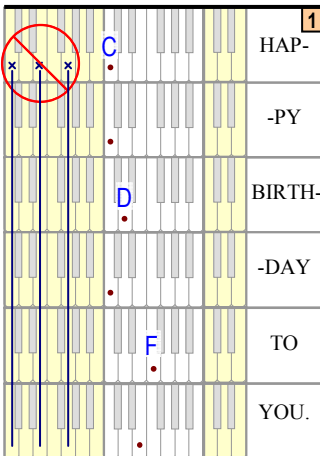
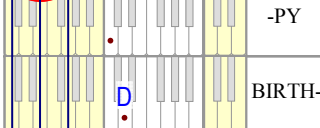
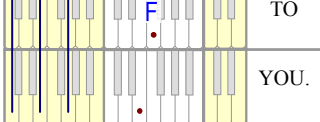
Mark Section 1 Chords

Using the melody keys as clues, find and pencil in chords to add harmony to the song.

1. Since it starts on a C key, play Section 1 with a C chord—it doesn't sound right.

2. Since it has a D key, replay Section 1 with a D chord, which also doesn't sound right.

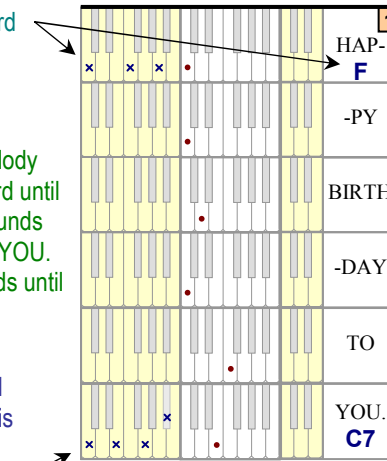
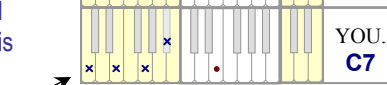
3. Since it has an F key, try an F chord. (Invert it by playing C³ instead of C⁴.) It works!

	HAP-
	BIRTH-
	TO
	YOU.

4. Pencil in an inverted F chord and a bold F beneath HAP-.

5. Play the melody with the F chord until it no longer sounds good—at lyric YOU. Try other chords until you find a fit.

6. The C chord works, but C7 is even better. Pencil it in.

	HAP-
	-PY
	BIRTH-
	-DAY
	TO
	YOU.

- Try to find and fill in the remaining chords and chord changes. Then compare your findings to those on the next page. Like many standards, this song contains just 3 chords. We've already found F and C7. Your challenge is to find the 3rd chord. (Hint: It's *not* G.)
- If the melody keys don't give clues to good-sounding chords, randomly try every chord you know. If you haven't yet memorized the 12 Major chords, refer to the *Major Chords* lesson.
- If a chord sounds close but not quite right, use the simple rules on the *Chord Constructor* chart (from the *Chord Variations* lesson) to try minor, 7th, and other variations.

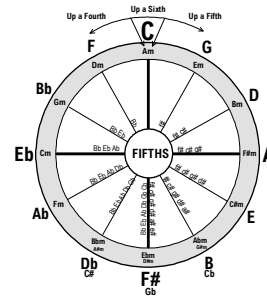
Mark the Remaining Chords

Find the remaining chords and compare your markings to those below.

- The F and B^b chords were inverted so they wouldn't encroach on the melody area.
- The chords are shown with *all* their keys. You may prefer to keep and play all keys or only some.
- You'll also want to choose how often to play or hold (tie) each chord, and whether to play chords blocked, broken, or arpeggiated (see the *Major Chords* lesson).

Middle		LYRIC	Section CHORD
C ³	C ⁴		
		HAP-	1 HAP-
		-PY	-PY
		BIRTH-	BIRTH-
		-DAY	-DAY
		TO	DEAR
		YOU.	NA-
		C7	Bb
		HAP-	2 HAP-
		-PY	-PY
		BIRTH-	BIRTH-
		-DAY	3 BIRTH-
		TO	-DAY
		YOU.	TO
		F	C7
		HAP-	4 HAP-
		-PY	-PY
		BIRTH-	BIRTH-
		-DAY	-DAY
		TO	TO
		YOU.	F
		F	F

Adding chords gets easier with practice, but you can often find chords more quickly using the Circle of Fifths.



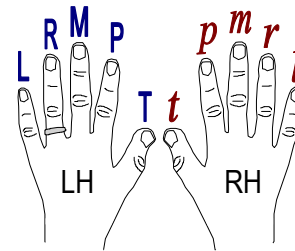
Circle of Fifths

Using the Circle and other info from the *Practical Music Theory* lesson, you'd learn that this version of *Happy Birthday* is in the Key of F, whose three main chords are F, C, and B^b.

You'd also learn that many songs follow a I-V7-V chord progression, making C7 a better fit for this song than C.

Fingering

Because you're also training your "muscle memory," it's important to find the fingering that works best for you and replace the dots and x's with finger letters. Then play the song with the same fingers *each* time.



See the *Fingering* lesson for general fingering tips and one possible chord arrangement for *Happy Birthday To You*.