

A creative approach to sight-reading

by Jenny Macmillan

One of the great delights for adult amateur musicians is reading unseen music. It may be what they spend much of their time doing when they have a chance to play their instrument. They may be playing in an orchestra, in a small ensemble with friends, accompanying another instrumentalist, or playing duets. Adults enjoy being able to take their instrument and play through music 'at sight'. Those who can sight read fluently will be much quicker at learning new music than those who struggle to decipher notation. The same applies to professional musicians.

Many children find sight reading difficult in the early stages, and cannot see a good reason for making an effort to develop this skill. If children can be convinced of the pleasures to be had, they may be more willing to spend time practising reading. As with all skills, reading requires practice in order to become fluent. There is little evidence to suggest that talent has anything much to do with proficiency in sight reading¹. Rather, it is a case of conscientious and creative practising. Also helpful is to become familiar with the style of the music being sight read - by listening to plenty of music as well as playing music in different styles.

SOUND BEFORE SYMBOL, TECHNIQUE BEFORE READING

A good number of music teachers now teach sound before symbol, as do Suzuki teachers such as myself. Many believe this is the ideal way to structure the sight reading process². First learn to listen well, then to play well, then to read well, then to sight read well. Expecting children to play well from sight when they have difficulty reading music is hoping for too much; as is asking them to focus on reading when their technique is not yet good; as is expecting good technique when they haven't yet learned to listen well.

So, first things first. Help children to listen carefully through listening to recordings of well-performed music and playing games (ideally in group lessons) to develop aural skills.

Then develop their technical skills – starting in the first lesson with posture, hand shape, finger and body movements – listening acutely to every sound. Then teach them to read music well – initially through games with flash cards (again, in group lessons) so every bit of information can be extracted from the printed score – studying it in detail before playing it, repeating it many times, always listening carefully. Then, finally, the child will learn to play at sight.



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AURAL AND VISUAL READING SKILLS

The early development of good reading ability requires progressive work on aural and visual reading skills. These skills may be developed in group lessons through games using flash cards to identify rhythms, pitches, musical terms, and so on, together with aural games and activity games, such as singing and clapping:

Start with the sound, and progress to the visual - play a note and find it on a flash card.

Learn to read by interval - find intervals of a second (up or down a step) and a third (jumping line to line or space to space), and so on.

Challenge pupils to identify all the notes in the treble and bass clefs from flash cards in random order in one minute (join the One Minute Club!).

Ask pupils to make a list of all the musical terms and signs they encounter in their pieces, and to keep adding to the list.

Use flash cards and/or on-line music theory software such as Hofnote, CATS or E-MusicMaestro to develop visual reading skills.

When you present your pupil with their first reading piece, there should be nothing in the piece with which they are not familiar. Therefore, it will be easy, the music will sound good and, as a result, your pupil will be motivated to do more.

PREPARATION

My suggestion is a 9:1 rule - spend 9 minutes carefully examining the piece to be read and 1 minute playing it (or 4 minutes examining and 30 seconds playing). Then, at first playing, the piece should be more or less perfect. In the early stages, I recommend the following to pupils:

Clap the rhythm of the piece, and/or tap the rhythm with one hand while tapping the pulse with the other hand.

Identify the intervals (e.g. up a note, down a third).

Name the notes.

Hear the piece in their head.

Sing it.

Find the first note in each hand.

Mime playing the piece

(at their instrument or on their knees).

As sight reading skills develop, I recommend pupils continue these preparatory activities, as well as add the usual preparation:

Be a detective, don't miss any clues - identify the clefs, key, time, speed, dynamics, articulation, and so on.

From this examination, identify the character of the piece (also look at the title, the shape of the melody, the form of the piece - build a picture in their mind).

Scan the music to identify scale passages, arpeggios, intervals, chords and accompanimental patterns - recognise groups of notes rather than reading notes singly.

If rhythms are complicated, subdivide the beat (for instance, count four quavers in a bar rather than two crotchets).

When the finger number is written on the music, it often signifies a change of hand position.

Play one octave of the scale (and arpeggio) of

the key of the piece.

READING A PIECE

When reading through a piece for the first time, all the usual aspects of reading apply. Pupils should:

Count a full bar before beginning.

Try to play in perfect time.

Sometimes read with the metronome - rhythmic pulse and continuity distinguish good readers from poor.

Keep their eyes on the music - if necessary, the teacher or parent can hold a sheet of paper over their hands to block out the view.

Look ahead in the music - at least to the next beat or bar.

Avoid looking back at what has just been played - occasionally the teacher or parent can cover the music just played.

Sit up straight - not leaning forward to peer at the music (keep body relaxed for ease of mental and physical playing).

Try not to be too much of a perfectionist (save that for practising repertoire) - aim instead to capture the spirit of the music.

HAVING TAKEN ALL THE NECESSARY PREPARATIONS, PUPILS CAN:

Play the piece, listening for a beautiful tone - keeping going, come what may.

Extract awkward notes, intervals, chords, bars, passages and practise them (slowly, out of rhythm if necessary, hands separately if appropriate).

Play the piece again, concentrating on expressive dynamics.

Work again on an awkward passage.

Play again, focusing on bringing out the character of the piece.

Then play through the previous day's reading piece.

PREPARED READING

Reading music is very exciting. It should be practised every day. I recommend doing it early in the practice, after warm-ups, scales, exercises and/or studies. Do it while still fresh, not at the end of the practice, when tired and when it may get omitted through lack of time or inclination. Each reading piece should be played several times, also hands separately, until it is mastered. Be aware of the difference between 'prepared reading' (spending a day or a week on a quick study piece) and 'sight reading' (playing a piece once or twice and going on to the next one).

Prepared reading – *repetition* – is an important part of early sight reading practice. Advise your pupils each day to practise reading a new piece and then play through some reading pieces from



Be a detective, don't miss any clues...

the previous days' practices. Setting relatively easy pieces for your pupils means they can be played correctly and up to speed, developing pupils' confidence, fluency and accuracy and giving them positive feelings towards sight reading, in contrast to playing difficult pieces slowly and hesitantly.

COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

I consider it important to look at the broader view of developing the skill of sight reading. This includes activities to improve short-term memory and to promote playing in different keys through transposing and improvising. Introduce games to help perfectionists keep going and to reduce reliance on looking at the keyboard.

SO, ENCOURAGE PUPILS TO:

Look at one bar or phrase of music for a few seconds, cover it up and play it (to develop short-term memory, for it is necessary to look

at and memorise a few notes ahead of the notes being played - this is like memorising a telephone number before calling it).

Transpose a sight reading piece - a grade or two easier than the pupil's normal sight reading level (to challenge the pupil's intellect in a different way; also for developing familiarity with playing in any key).

Improvise in the key of the piece (to be comfortable in any key rather than playing in C major with some added black notes; and bearing in mind that good improvisers tend to be good sight readers³).

Try playing the correct rhythm but improvising the notes (for perfectionists who will insist on going back to correct mistakes).

Get used to playing their repertoire pieces without looking at their fingers, with their eyes closed, or in the dark (because the best sight readers don't look at their instrument while playing).

FUN WITH READING

We all learn best when we're having fun and enjoying ourselves. So make sight reading fun, an obvious way being through ensemble work. Playing in groups is also beneficial for following a leader, counting, keeping one's place even if not playing all the notes, and listening to the other player(s) as well as oneself, in addition to the highly motivational social aspect. Take care to

choose ensemble music well within your pupils' capabilities to ensure a positive, enjoyable experience:

Teacher and pupil read duets regularly in lessons - making music together for enjoyment.

Teacher and pupil alternate playing a bar each; or one can play all the naturals while the other plays the sharps and flats in the piece.

Two pupils sight read duets in adjacent or overlapping lessons.

Plan duets for pupils of similar age, or for younger pupils with older pupils.

Encourage family duets, or trios with siblings, or parents.

One pupil accompanies another.

Sight read double duets and trios in group lessons, i.e. four or six pupils together.

MUSIC FOR READING

Many books are available for developing sight reading skills. Pupils need a variety of material, alternating between 'real' music (e.g.

Bartók and Kabalevsky) and 'sight reading' pieces (e.g. Bullard and Harris). Investigate the SightRead4Piano app for the iPad. Books with accompanying recordings are useful for developing the ability to keep going, whether or not playing perfectly. Duets and other ensemble playing are much to be recommended for improving sight reading abilities. Browse in a good music shop, where the staff may be able to give helpful advice on available material.

FINE READERS

When a pupil has developed a good ear, good visual reading skills, physical co-ordination and mental concentration, they are ready for their first music reading book. In the early stages with the approach I have outlined here, reading development may be considered slow - because the focus is on building strong foundations. Though children aged 6 to 11 may not be advanced in what they sight read, my experience is that this firm basis ensures

that by their early teens they become fine sight readers. ■

Jenny Macmillan teaches piano and directs a Suzuki Piano Teacher Training course in Cambridge. Her acclaimed book, Successful Practising, has been reprinted. See www.jennymacmillan.co.uk

Notes

- 1 Williamon, A. (2004) *Musical Excellence: Strategies and techniques to enhance performance*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.
- 2 McPherson, G. E., & Gabrielsson, A. (2002) *From Sound to Sign*. In R. Parncutt & G. E. McPherson (Eds.) *The Science and Psychology of Music Performance*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 99-115.
- 3 Williamon, A. (2004) *Musical Excellence: Strategies and techniques to enhance performance*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

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