

SIGHT READING –
A Trying Time for Teacher and Pupil

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Sight-reading is the *bête noire* of many instrumental lessons - teachers do not seem to like approaching the subject and pupils seem to have an aversion to it. I have seen quite sane, happy children become fearful, gibbering wrecks when faced with a piece of music they have never seen before, no matter how simple it is. Sight-reading is an important skill, however, and children should develop it, not only because they will need it in many situations, but because of the sheer pleasure of sitting at the piano to play any piece of music.

As a pianist, I was not a particularly good sight-reader and I am sure that I was not alone in having that awful sinking feeling in the stomach when taking an exam when faced with a deluge of dots and dashes that I was to turn into sound. I had not really learned the skill and the advice of my teacher to look ahead did not really help a great deal. By the time I had scraped through Grade 8 and had started music college, the onus on me to be able to sight-read was less; there were players who were brilliant readers who did all the accompanying; I was left to my own pace and devices.

Not being a good sight-reader had an advantage because I learned pieces thoroughly to the extent that I can still play many of them from memory. I was not reading the music, I was memorising it and it is only when I entered the competitive world of the profession that I learned to become a good reader. I use the word reader because this is what it all boils down to, the ability to read and anticipate musical patterns. Poor sight-reading seems to result from any number of the following:

1. A technique that is not commensurate with the level of playing and reading:

If there was ever a reason for taking a child through graded examinations, this is it. I am sure that I am not alone in the belief that it is not necessary to do every exam from Grade 1 to Grade 8. It should be remembered, however, that although the pupils' technique might develop rapidly, their standards of reading might not be growing at the same rate. With this comes a lessening of technical competence and teachers should be aware of this problem from the outset. There is not a lot to be done when faced with this problem; often it is because the musician has not had enough time to grow and develop. Unfortunately, many teachers become exam-pushers, that is, as soon as one is finished the next is being prepared for. This has obvious repercussions for a pupil and, although it is very pleasant to have Grade 6 after only a few years' study, teachers should be aware that working like this could ultimately have adverse effects. If your student does have a learning capacity like a bottomless pit, be careful that you don't allow him/her to run before s/he can walk; rather, allow musical growth by looking at different aspects of, for example, a particular technique through different pieces of music before going onto harder stuff. There is a direct link between this and the following problem.

2. Poor reading skills:

These will not help pupils to achieve any results as a sight-reader. When reading from a book most people are able to look ahead and be looking at the next few words whilst their minds assimilate what they have just seen. This should be the case with sight-reading. The pupil should look ahead whilst playing, but this is a difficult skill and requires the pupil to have confidence in the motor coordination of their fingers and their aural skills. It is quite interesting watching a good sight-reader in action, especially if one concentrates on what the eyes are doing. Firstly, they, like good readers, look ahead and, whether consciously or subconsciously, the eye returns for brief moments to the point in the score that is being played, as if to check that this is what was seen.

I have found over the years that students with poor reading skills at the piano do not do a lot of book reading and when reading out aloud, or reading for meaning, there appear to be problems in fluency and comprehension. Reading words or music is nothing more than assimilating a series of symbols and there is evidence to suggest that improving personal reading might improve sight-reading considerably. This is because the mind will be developing a skill of reading for meaning-a linear-reading technique is being developed and that will allow the student to put what s/he is playing into the context of a unit or phrase. Using verse is a good extension of this exercise, as here a student will develop reading

skills to a rhythm, especially if done to a metronome. It might appear funny to require a pupil to practise reading aloud several chapters of a book or a poem each week as part of their practice, but the benefits are going to be enormous. Parents should be aware that reading out aloud is a harder process than silent reading. Ask parents to check their children every so often to see if there is an improvement. Similarly, a pupil could read aloud onto tape and listen to the results. This often surprises them.

The sight reading courses on the market all stress the necessity of analysing what is going on in a piece of music and then remembering to incorporate this into the playing. Many students will launch an attack on the music without checking key signatures, accidentals, changes of clef etc., and the chaos that ensues often results in the total disintegration of the performance. There are few instances in life where people need to pay as much attention to detail as one does when playing a piece of music. We do not see in books of prose accents, dynamic markings etc., and therefore it is quite understandable when a student overlooks them in the first instance. We often have to draw attention to these details, sometimes for weeks after the student has started the piece, but by getting a pupil to study the score, away from the piano, one often finds that general reading skills improve.

In an exam, a student is faced with a piece of sight-reading with only a short period to study it before s/he has to play. Some exam boards allow the student to try bits out, but others do not and when under extreme pressure, their skills in concentration will become weakened. By privately studying the score, a student will become more used to analysing what is going on. The more this happens the better the skill will become, especially in a difficult situation. Constant questioning during the learning of a piece of music will develop the student's analytical skills. These questions should not be restricted to simple matters, but to the shape of a phrase, the harmonic direction, cadences, keys etc. There are also benefits for their understanding of theory by adopting this method.

3. A poor sense of keyboard harmony:

Good sight-reading relies on a strong sense of anticipation, that is, using one's skills to predict what might naturally follow. I found that my own sight-reading improved considerably when I became a continuo player. Here I had to play from a bass line that had numbers indicating the chords I should play. As I improved at this, so did my concept of keyboard harmony and harmonic progression. The relationship between what is seen on the page and its translations into sound require the pupil to work in a formal stage of operations and, from a musical viewpoint, this can happen much later. Do not confuse keyboard harmony with that required for theory examinations. The two are disparate and until the pupils' sense of keyboard harmony is developed to the point that they can hear harmonic progressions and melodies in their heads, will remain so. Many good tutors require pupils to learn these skills from the beginning, as well as books that develop these skills specifically. Do not ignore keyboard harmony, it is a vital part of piano playing and furthermore develops the pupils' aural skills.

4. An underdeveloped aural capacity:

This diminishes the sense of anticipation. If pupils cannot hear in their heads what they see on the page, their sight-reading is bound to suffer. The development of a musical voice in the head is difficult to foster, but can be done by showing a pupil a single line and asking him to read it until s/he knows what it sounds like (you might need to give an indication by playing it first on the piano). S/he should then listen to it again, but imagining that a violin, for example, is playing it. A third time might be a clarinet, and so on, until the student is ready to play the piece. This exercise can be developed to two and three-part music etc. The more the student "listens", the easier this exercise will become-his/her mental manipulation of tonal qualities will help to feed that all-important process of anticipation. Other aural skills will help, as they will further extend this "inner" voice. Working through graded material will do little in this instance, but structure your pupils' aural course by giving them rhythmic exercises, playing and singing phrases for the pupils to copy, and, importantly, sight-singing. These are all of utmost value, especially the latter. Those by Zoltan Kodály (published by Boosey & Hawkes) help children to develop their skills through singing melodies that initially use the tonic sol-fa with written rhythms, in memorable modes. Later, staff notation is introduced.

Take the time to do aural. A little each week is a lot better than a whole lesson two weeks before an exam.

5. The pupil has learned to rely on looking at fingers instead of the music

In the early stages, pupils will need to periodically look down at their fingers to aid their keyboard co-ordination. This is understandable - an inexperienced musician lacks confidence and with a limited aural capacity will need to look down to make sure that s/he is doing the right thing. This should not be encouraged, however, unless as an aid to finding new hand positions, etc. Looking at the fingers will ensure that the pupil never becomes a fluent reader for, rather than reading, s/he is committing to memory a series of physical movements and sounds - the reading aspect takes second place. As a result, when faced with a piece of sight-reading, an area where many people lack confidence, many children try to look at the music and their fingers simultaneously. While they might produce reasonably accurate pitch results (generally their note-finding is good), they will have problems with ensuring a fluency of rhythm and accuracy in performance markings.

These points are observations made from many years of teaching, but they are not a failsafe method of ensuring success as a sight-reader. There are also other variables, but when looking for common causes, the above might be beneficial, especially to younger, inexperienced teachers, who need pointing in the right direction. Always be looking for reasons why your pupils fail - with hindsight, we have could have all been the perfect teacher for every student we've had; with a little thought and time, we still can be.

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