

Sight-reading: the most useful tool in the box



Melanie Spanswick teaches how to nurture valuable sight-reading skills right from the start

Sight-reading is a skill of immense importance, for both pianists and piano teachers. It is often undervalued by teachers and students alike, but if worked at consistently, it's arguably the most useful tool in a pianist's tool box. If a pianist can read well, the whole learning process is made that much easier and quicker, and the possibilities and capacity for ensemble playing of all kinds are enormous.

Sadly for many students, sight-reading becomes the dreaded part of a piano exam; it's often an 'afterthought' which is addressed a few weeks before the actual test. To really make progress with sight-reading, however, it must be worked at regularly and should certainly be on the priority list ahead of exam preparations. In fact, it's a good idea to take sight-reading out of the exam equation altogether and study this crucial pianistic proficiency as a bona fide subject all on its own, devoting some time to it at each and every lesson (and every practice session too). Sight-reading can be a studied craft; it's entirely possible to substantially improve reading with practice, you don't need to be naturally gifted.

Reading at sight is, in many ways, similar to reading a book. Language is primarily constructed of words and sentences. When speech is first learnt, some words are much more difficult to assimilate and grasp than others, but after a while they become anticipated. Context becomes paramount when deciphering words and sentences. Eventually, even though some words are much more complicated than others, they are eventually expected because they've appeared countless times before. Any potential knowledge gaps are quickly filled in intuitively. The same pragmatic, innate approach should be implemented when learning to sight-read.

A crucial factor in good sight-reading is perspective. Pupils often survey a page of music and in an attempt to read every single note and musical sign, they forget to view the page as a whole and understand the basic context in which all the notes appear. Attaining secure sight-reading skills involves total musical understanding; it's about decoding copious different, oscillating shapes and patterns appearing on the page and comprehending this information before playing begins. It therefore becomes crucial to know and establish which signs, notes or patterns are of importance and which are not, prior to perusing any sight-reading exercise. So with this in mind, knowledge of music theory is a must and it's preferable to begin studying this aspect as soon as possible.

Also beneficial can be learning to sight-sing. Whilst not essential, being able to hear a melody before it is played, or knowing how a passage ought to sound can be really helpful and can act as a signpost too. Therefore some knowledge of *solfège* or possibly looking at the Kodály Method may be a good place to begin when embarking on a sight-reading journey. It takes time to learn to sight-sing, but rather like the sight-reading process, gradual, regular practice will proffer the best results.

Another facet which can cause unnecessary worry when learning to sight-read is the ever present problem of wrong notes and errors. To attain a high level of accuracy and speed when reading, mistakes are essential! It's really just part of development and growth, so playing inaccurately should not be viewed negatively; quite the contrary, because much experimentation is required when learning to read. If sight-reading can be viewed as an enjoyable (and even fun) part of a practising regime, improvement will be that much quicker.

To cultivate secure reading, plenty of motivation and determination is necessary, so it helps if you select music you really like and enjoy. This might appear obvious, but many reading tests are somewhat dull and lacking in imagination. A never-ending supply of good quality material is imperative and all genres must be explored: from classical right through to pop and rock. It can be in the discovery of a 'favourite' composer or style that reading skills really begin to flourish.

Concentration is a key component in successful reading and, again, this may appear trivial and self-evident, but getting rid of unwanted or distracting thoughts is the first step to really 'seeing' clearly what is written on the page. Getting in the sight-reading 'mood' will pay dividends. A totally focused mindset is difficult to maintain, so start by looking at small sections or passages making note of any mental wandering. Learning to control and refocus attention does take discipline, but it will make sight-reading so much better and easier over time.

Another useful tip is to have a regular practice session or time assigned specifically for sight-reading. Expect to read daily (or whenever practice is done) and it will ultimately become a good habit. Keeping a practice journal can be a handy way of recording what has been played at every session, and it can be brought along to lessons demonstrating what has been achieved each week.

Remember to maintain good posture and hand positions. Uncomfortable, tense piano playing will only hinder sight-reading, and it's all too easy to forget about posture when concentration

and focus is being directed towards the music, but feeling relaxed and flexible will aid swift movement around the keyboard. So breathe deeply and calmly before playing commences and try to ensure that shoulders remain totally relaxed rather than perpetually rising rigidly.

So what are the most fruitful ways of practising sight-reading? Here are a few ideas which may prove useful:

When faced with a new piece of music, slowly observe everything on the page. The key signature is a good place to start. Decide which major or minor key can be associated with that written in the piece being surveyed (it's always good to decipher the relative majors and minors as well), mentally imagine the sharps or flats needed to play the extract and then memorise the key and keep it firmly in mind at all times. Fingers will know where to go once the key has been firmly established. It can help to play the associated scale beforehand (or at least picture it mentally).

Quick recognition of certain note patterns, shapes, and repetitions can be a deciding factor in the success of any test. Noticing features such as chords, arpeggio figures, scale passages and ledger line passage work will prove extremely important. Chords can be challenging to read at first glance, therefore, remembering their patterns and shape is vital because there simply isn't time to read every note. Being able to pinpoint the tonic, dominant, subdominant chords in any given key can be a huge boost to the reading process. Other features such as phrase markings, articulation and dynamics will also be relevant when skimming a score for the first time. Examining the bass clef thoroughly can be beneficial, as often the left hand drives a work. Some memory work is required in order to learn various chord patterns and note progressions, but as with many elements in music making, these will become habitual if practised consistently.

Pay special attention to any suggested fingering, as it's best to have this element visualised before you start, particularly when negotiating scales, arpeggios or any contrapuntal sections. If fingering hasn't been determined beforehand, it will hamper the ability to move at speed.

The tempo or speed of a test must be noted, by looking at the metronome marking or speed indication, and, of course, the time signature too. This can help to gain an understanding of the character and style of the work. However, I always



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suggest playing well under tempo to begin with. For those with reading difficulties, employing extremely slow speeds is the key to eventually unlocking reading skills and becoming fluent.

The rhythmic structure is possibly the most important element in sight-reading. Both rhythmic patterns and the necessity of attaining a regular pulse can be problematic when reading. In order to keep time, it's imperative to assimilate all aspects of tempo. With this in mind, it can be a good idea to separate the rhythm from the notes completely. Firstly, tap the intended pulse. Then tap the rhythm of the sight-reading test on the piano lid with both hands; the right hand tapping the notes in the treble clef and the left hand, tapping those in the bass clef. This should not prove too taxing, enabling comprehension of the speed as well as any complex note values and rhythms.

Once the rhythmic pattern has been worked out, and rhythmic co-ordination between the hands is fully understood, a steady pulse must be kept. Counting aloud can be helpful, if the beat is subdivided, but playing along to a metronome may be an even better, more reliable option; learning to 'sit' on the beat and not rush ahead or linger behind is also crucial. The determining factor in success here is to make sure the pulse is extremely slow. Learning to read with both hands together can be overwhelming. There is so much information to process at once; the key to perpetual motion is a very slow pulse (probably a third of the intended speed). If a pulse is always constant and steady, after a while combining and coordinating the two hands should be a relatively simple affair providing eyes are always reading ahead (usually at least half a bar). It may be necessary to start the reading process using separate hands, only combining them when each clef has been thoroughly assimilated.

Slow speeds encourage reading ahead because there is ample time to find all the notes and detail in the score. Plenty of time is of the essence (even if fast speeds are indicated). It can be helpful to count a complete bar before starting to play in order to establish the pulse (I often clap a bar's rest!) and any deviation from the tempo should be discouraged. Once this has been fully understood, speed can be gradually built up over time, as reading becomes more proficient (this process can take a few months).

A slow tempo will help with the all-consuming problem of hesitations followed by total collapse. These moments cause frustration, upset and discourage sight-reading, so playing slowly bestows the confidence to build momentum and get to the end of an extract without too much grief. This latter point is arguably the most critical in good sight-reading; once a pupil has started a sight-reading test, they must never, ever stop. If hesitations are still occurring then an even slower tempo is probably required. Learning to cope with mistakes is all part of the reading experience. Continuation is so important in sight-reading and sooner or later errors will be ignored and will not distract from the overriding rhythmic and structural outline of a performance.

Musical examples or sight-reading tests must feel easy to start with, so begin with straightforward diatonic exercises. It may be necessary to start at Grade 1 or 2 even if Grade 7 is being studied. If sight-reading is all fairly simple, it's a pleasurable, painless experience. One of the many benefits of reading a whole variety of musical styles is that different genres are quickly recognised; from Classical (Baroque, Classical, Romantic etc.) through to Musical Theatre and Pop. This will prove invaluable for Aural Tests too.

When the basics have been grasped, larger chunks of music can be negotiated and there will be a familiarisation with the typical patterns which occur time and again in piano music. The bigger picture will eventually be noted, focusing concentration on the main structure of a piece, whilst including more and more detail (pedalling, phrasing, dynamics etc.).

For those of a slightly more advanced level, reading hymns can be extremely rewarding and useful. Slow moving chord progressions act as the perfect foil because they assist with reading four parts (or notes) at once, as well as fostering knowledge

and understanding of four-part harmony, and they also afford the chance to get to grips with a plethora of key signatures. As all church organists know, accompanying hymns is one of the best ways to learn to read because stopping isn't an option! As with all reading, begin calmly, moving carefully from chord to chord, making note of the various chordal shapes and patterns.

Reading at sight is fundamentally giving an impression of a work, so it's perfectly acceptable to leave out notes and other details. Bear this in mind at the beginning of each practice session. Endeavour to scan ahead fluently, playing with relatively few stumbles or hesitations using a steady, regular pulse to achieve excellent sight-reading results. ■



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