

SIGHT READING STRATEGIES

Sight reading is perhaps the most important tool a musician can possess. The good news is that sight reading is a skill that can be learned through consistent practice. In essence, it is really sight *recognition*. To say it another way, sight reading is quickly recognizing and interpreting musical symbols that have already been defined and practiced.

The two most common mistakes that students make when they begin working on their sight reading skills are that they select music that is too difficult and too long. **Sight reading practice should consist of music that is very short (16-32 measures) and very easy (music that you have a chance of playing 100% correct the FIRST time you attempt it).** Now, your definition of 'easy' should change as you become a more proficient sight reader. Always challenge yourself, but do not select music that is impossible for you to sight read successfully.

Finally, your sight reading practice should ALWAYS BE DONE WITH A METRONOME. This will ensure that you are performing rhythms correctly and will ensure that you are playing in a musical setting that will pay off when you perform in front of adjudicators without an external time source.

Below is a checklist that, if applied and adhered to, will help with any musical sight reading experience.

Sight Reading Checklist:

1) Read top to bottom and left to right – This should go without saying but, when students are in a hurry, the failure to read left to right can lead to a vital piece of information being missed. **The rest of the checklist is based off of this simple precept.**

2) Read title, tempo directions, and any other text – Sometimes there is important information in the title (March, Chorale, etc.) that can give stylistic clues as to the performance of a piece. Similarly, other written text, including tempo directions, can help determine style.

3) Clef – This step can (and has) been skipped over and led to disaster! Always double check the beginning clef AND quickly scan the piece for changes in clef.

4) Key Signature AND Tonality – Everyone checks the key signature, but not everyone then determines tonality. 4 sharps could be E Major OR C# Minor or another tonality altogether.

5) Time Signature – This is where the time and rhythm of the piece is organized. Evaluating the time signature should be done in conjunction with the tempo indication. For example, if you see Cut time, make sure that it is indicating a BPM marking for the half note and not the quarter note. Never assume.

6) Range – This is especially important for percussion keyboard players. Find the highest pitch, place your right hand mallet on that bar, then find the the lowest pitch, place your left hand mallet on that bar, and center yourself between them. This will eliminate any ‘walking’ during the performance.

7) Go the the most challenging section – This can usually be identified by finding the part of the page that has the most ink. Spend a moment working through this so that it is not surprising when you encounter this section in context.

8) Accidentals – Your key signature will tell you which pitches are active. By identifying accidentals, you will be prepared for any surprise departures from the key. Accidentals can also give you an idea as to tonality and modulations.

9) Everything else! – This includes dynamics, articulations, timpani tuning changes, ornaments, etc. While everyone would like to play every sight reading etude perfectly, it is more important to ensure that you have a solid rhythm and tonal understanding first. Beyond that, strive to play the sight reading etude as musically as you would a prepared piece.

10) I have more time! – If you are told to ‘take a minute to look at the sight reading,’ take ALL of your time. Do not feel like you have to get through this part of the audition as quickly as possible. Therefore, if you have gone through everything on your checklist and you still have time left, start at the beginning and get some mental repetitions on the piece. DON’T HURRY!

REMEMBER, SIGHT READ A LITTLE BIT EVERYDAY☺