

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE...SIGHT READING

BY CHRISTINE BROWN

In my many years of teaching I have found that very few pupils have the ability to read piano music fluently and accurately at sight. Piano pupils almost always dread sight-reading and it is not hard to understand the reason. Most people find reading at sight difficult, because even at the elementary level it is a complex process, and moreover it has to be done in strict time. Nevertheless the ability to read music with ease is so important that we must try to unravel the complexities and help our pupils to become good readers.

Sight reading requires a physical response to a visual symbol, so it is clear that in order to be able to read music the pupil must have a knowledge both of the symbols i.e. of notation, and of the instrument on which he is to make the physical response. We usually spend much time in the first term dealing with these matters, but I feel sure that if we continued to provide regular training in developing these necessary skills our pupils would make better progress as readers.

Recently I have been experimenting with a variety of strategies to help my pupils to improve their reading. I have noticed that many pupils long past the beginner stage are still uncertain of finding notes, especially those above or below the staff. So I show a diffident pupil a flash card and ask him to play the note on the piano. Then I play a note and ask him to find the corresponding flash card. This exercise takes very little time and done regularly soon brings about an improvement and a gain in confidence. Flash cards can also be used to reinforce knowledge of other symbols, and their use at home or in lessons makes a welcome change from working theory papers.

One of the most important skills required for fluent sight-reading is the ability to grasp time patterns within a steady pulse. A pupil may be able to tell you that a crotchet is worth four semiquavers, but he may not be able to clap correctly a crotchet



followed by four semiquavers. There is no time to do sums while sight-reading! Regular practice with rhythm flash cards of gradually increasing difficulty will enable pupils to develop this essential skill. Another useful strategy is for the pupil to tap out the rhythm of the piece to be read, the right hand tapping on the right knee and the left hand on the left knee. This very physical response to the symbols of the notation provides ideal preparation for successful sight-reading.

To read at sight with continuity it is essential that the eyes are trained on the copy so that the head is not constantly nodding as it moves from copy to keyboard. In order to develop their ability to play without looking at their hands, pupils should be encouraged to play with their eyes closed the scales, broken chords, arpeggios and pieces they already know. This strategy will help to develop their knowledge of the geography of the instrument. A particularly useful strategy to help 'noddors' is to concentrate on reading pieces which are based on a five finger position so that there is no necessity to look down.



A large amount of material is required and I have found Alfred's Sight Reading Unlimited very useful.

Each page is divided into four segments, each segment bearing a line of music written for both hands using treble and bass clefs. The various possible combinations of these segments yields over two thousand pieces, all lying in a five finger position. Pupils of all ages seem to enjoy setting up the pieces they are to read, and as there is nothing childish about the presentation this book is particularly valuable for older pupils. They can also benefit from transposing the pieces into other keys they know, and exercise which further develops their knowledge of the geography of the keyboard.

Pieces selected for sight-reading should be well within the technical powers of the pupil so that he can keep his eyes on the copy, play in strict time and derive some pleasure from the activity. If the piece chosen is too difficult technically not only does the pupil fail to read it well, but he may also develop bad habits. An enjoyable change from reading at first sight lies in giving a pupil a Quick Study, a piece to

be learned in one week and performed at the next lesson. Much suitable material for this strategy can be found in the wide variety of Alfred volumes containing one-page pieces (e.g. the Essential Keyboard Repertoire series). Even better for this purpose are the volumes in the First Impressions series because the inserted study guide helps the pupil to prepare carefully before attempting to play each piece. Learning to make this kind of detailed inspection of the copy will strengthen and develop his understanding of notation.



"From sightreading unlimited 1b"

An essential skill required for fluent sight-reading is the ability to memorise. We are inclined to think that pupils either memorise or read at sight, but the truth is that those who are busy memorising their pieces do not do enough reading to become good at it! The good reader is actually memorising perhaps a bar or even just a few notes ahead, and that is why his reading is fluent. This short-term memory is limited, but it can be trained. To help pupils acquire this skill I use an envelope with a window and place the window over the first bar of the piece to be read, making sure that I have left visible all the necessary information such as clefs, key signature, time signature and tempo indication. I allow the pupil to look through the window for as long as he wishes and then move the envelope to cover the bar, asking the pupil to play it from memory. This strategy has produced good results with pupils at all levels, possibly because it helps their concentration.

Young string, wind and brass players are often better readers than young pianists. One reason may be because they have only one, rather than two, lines to read, but a more significant factor is that they usually take part in ensemble activities on a regular basis from an early stage. It is not easy to find suitable music for elementary piano ensembles, but I have recently discovered pieces for four pianists in Alfred's Basic Piano Library. If it proves impossible to organise such large ensembles we can fall back on duets for pupil and teacher or, making use of modern technology, allow the pupil to play with a Midi disc or CD. Pupils respond well to all these activities and soon realise the benefit of being able to read at sight.

There are no short cuts to making our pupils good readers, but it must be our aim because in general it is only those pupils who can read with ease who continue to play through the difficult teenage years and into adulthood. We must present sight-reading in a positive way.

Systematic and regular training will produce good results which will encourage our pupils and lead them to discover the pleasure of exploring music for themselves.

© Christine Brown MA FTCL GRSM ARCM DipPhilEd has a private practice in Leeds and lectures frequently throughout the UK, Europe and beyond, specialising, amongst many things, in Bartok's Piano Music