

The Developing Sight-Reader

by Dave Smith

Sight-reading is a very important part of any musician's career. The ability to sight-read proficiently can often land a great gig as a direct result. Stemming from the practice room (no bread), to auditions (potential bread), to studio sessions (BIG BREAD), the developing sight-reader will certainly have his/her challenges to endure. Speaking of challenges, how about...

Countless rhythms and time concerns— Remember that any rhythm can be written any number of ways within any given time signature. Try to “sub-di-vide” at all times when sight-reading, keeping the time signature and strong beats in mind. Additionally try to “read ahead” by retaining as many sequential measures in short-term memory as possible. Most players suggest scrolling between one and four measures ahead on average. Another suggestion is to scan through as much music as is allotted if on a time line, isolating the difficult figures first. I would venture to say that I have always had less than five minutes to really look something over on average, in my 16 years of performance. It certainly can be said that using time wisely is critical when looking something over - (that's if any time is given to look over the music beforehand!)

Key signatures, Clef Changes, Instrument Changes & Transposition – It really doesn't matter how well rhythms are read if the key signatures and accidentals aren't performed correctly. I usually save about 25% of my brain when sight-reading to remember the key signature. Don't forget the clefs as well. Isn't it just great when there is a quick page turn, and guess what? You quickly find that not only has the clef and key changed, but instruments as well. Again, reading ahead for this type of info is very important.

Chord Changes – I can only imagine that being a rhythm section player and reading chord changes can be a nightmare at times because of the varying terminology in chord notation. There yet seems to be a standardized chord list that copyists and musicians can talk about with any certainty, so don't hold your breath for one. Try to learn as many of the symbols for major, minor, augmented, and diminished chords along with the scales that accompany them. There are many highly regarded books relative to the subject. Here are a few

Baker, David. ARRANGING AND COMPOSING FOR THE SMALL ENSEMBLE.

Downbeat Workshop Publications, 1970

Grove, Dick. ARRANGING CONCEPTS. Dick Grove Publications, Studio City, Publications, Studio City, CA, 1972

Haerle, Dan. THE JAZZ LANGUAGE. Studio P/R, Lebanon, IN, 1980

Continuing Efforts – I cannot stress how important it is to practice sight-reading with a metronome and without stopping; second efforts are rare in most cases, especially relative to auditions. Getting it right the first time is always preferable, right? I also do not suggest practicing sight-reading for long periods. I have it unconfirmed that a study on sight-reading was performed in the Midwest that tested three separate groups of readers. The first group never practiced reading. The second group practiced for an extended period of time (one hour or so). The third group watched television and only sight-read during commercials. Supposedly, the group that practiced only during commercials showed the most improvement, followed by the

extended period group. Of course, the group that never read didn't accomplish anything.

Musical Elements – The amount of information that the brain can process is about as amazing as anything that could ever be put to paper. Add these factors to part of the functioning side of the brain when sight-reading: repeat information, articulations, text information, phrase markings, measure numbers, music manuscript (hand vs. computer generated), etc. The importance here is to absorb, try to make sense of everything, take nothing for granted, and always be MUSICAL!

Sight-reading: Solo vs. Ensemble Reading – Don't forget other musical aspects such as pitch, balance, and blend when sight-reading. Just because something new is in front of you, is no excuse to laps in musicality – come on!

Interpreting Styles – Many times music is unmarked with regard to any given style or articulation. It is as if it says, "just try to figure me out." I always accept the challenge and take a stab at it. I think that experience will be the best guide on this one.

Currently Mr. Smith is a free lance musician (Trumpet) and a Copyist/Arranger for Express Music Publishing.