

Sight-reading Made Easy

by Mike Fraley, Boca Raton Middle School

The prospect of sight-reading can be a frightening and unpleasant experience for many musicians. The following article will outline a systematic approach to sight-reading that I have developed through the years.

The first thing to do when approaching a sight-reading situation is to analyze the circumstances. Is it for an audition, gig, show, substitution, seating placement in an ensemble, marching band, classical orchestra, drum corps, etc.? Try to gather as much information as possible so that you will be as relaxed and as comfortable as possible. Many students fail at sight-reading because they are overwhelmed and do not know what to look for in the music. I use the acronym STARS, which identifies the key elements to focus on. Be smart and efficient about the prep time you have and quickly scan through the music using the steps below:

S - Key Signature, Style, Stickings: It is important to know the key signature and to know when the piece modulates so you can support the music accordingly. Style is necessary for the proper feel and groove in any piece. What is the style? (Rock, Jazz, Latin, etc.) Stickings are very important. If you can figure out a workable sticking to a tricky section, it can be the difference between success and failure. Many times a difficult passage can be made easier just by selecting the appropriate sticking pattern.

T - Time Signature and Tempo: Check for any odd meters and changes. It's important to figure out any tricky meter changes and which beat pulse remains constant. The importance of tempo cannot be overstated. Maintaining the proper speed and "locking in" is necessary even when you may be nervous or easily excited because you are "on the spot." Anticipate these problems and tendencies so that you can compensate accordingly. In addition, all accelerandos or ritardandos must be observed and performed musically.

A - Accidentals and Attitude: If you are playing a keyboard instrument, keep an eye on all accidentals, especially approaching and during key changes. The other A for attitude cannot be emphasized enough. Nobody wants to work with a musician who is not pleasant and professional. I tell my students that "it's your aptitude and attitude that will determine your altitude in life."

R - Rhythm and Repeats: It is important to quickly isolate any potential rhythmic problem spots and try to figure them out ASAP. Repeats are probably the easiest thing to make a silly mistake on. Make sure you mentally mark them and know the form with D.C. or D.S. al fine, Codas, endings, etc.

S - Signs, Solo(s): Identify all musical signs and directions. Make sure you know your musical terms, especially dynamics. Many percussionists often play at one dynamic level, FFF! Contrast is the key to good music. Additionally, check for phrase marks and solo sections.

As percussionists, often we will not play on our own instruments. This presents special problems and frustrations, especially when sight-reading. Call ahead to try to find the exact equipment that will be provided. Make sure to ask if you need any special equipment or odd sized drums. If possible, find out what the logistics are of bringing your own equipment. Inquire about the possibility of arriving early to get some practice time in on the instruments to be used. Double check to make sure everything works, gauges are set properly, etc.

Always scan ahead, just like when riding a bike or driving a car. Make use of any rests to look ahead and keep ahead of the music. Do not stop!

In closing, realize that sight-reading is a skill that takes practice. Good sight readers have made an effort to improve this skill. I'm confident that everybody can improve their success at sight-reading by incorporating it into their daily practice routine and using the above outlined method.

Mike Fraley is an active teacher and performer in the greater Miami, Ft. Lauderdale area. He received his B.M. in Jazz Studies from New England Conservatory and his Masters in Education from Florida International University. He is currently the Director of Music at Boca Raton Middle School in beautiful Boca Raton, Fl. He has been named "Teacher of the Year" and nominated for the "Disney American Teacher Award". In 1996, he was recognized as the statewide recipient of the "Outstanding Young Educator Award" given annually by the Florida Jaycees. His ensembles have consistently earned the highest ratings at the Florida Bandmasters Association "Performance Assessment Evaluation".