

Improving Your Sight Reading

by Adrian Brett

As a studio session player for some 30 years, who never has known what music would be on the stand each day, classical or pop, middle-of-the-road, opera or jazz-orientated, I think I may be well qualified to help in regard to sight-reading.

There are three main areas for your concentration and for your preparation—notes, rhythm and style. Confronted with a page “prima vista” (first-sight) you have to instantly assess what the problem is, but more importantly what the problem is for you, with your own individual strong and weak points. Obviously you must concentrate on what you know to be your weakest aspect. This I have to say is usually rhythm, not TIME i.e. pulse, but the relative relationship of note values. Let us look at my assessment of the three disciplines.

NOTES: If you really are conversant with all your scales and arpeggios and chord patterns you will not be slowed down by being confronted with lots of notes. You will recognize these as the patterns you have become familiar with in your daily practice in the same way that your verbal vocabulary enables you to read fluently by recognition of familiar words. Only a strange or unfamiliar word slows down your rhythmic pattern of speech.

The same with flute-playing. Spot the foreigners, the accidentals which do not belong to the key and see how they relate to the normal patterns, as in lower and upper auxiliary notes. Learn to read well in front of where you are playing in order to recognize the strangers, the un-familiar or the slightly altered. Most importantly you must be able to instantly recognize those note-patterns which present special technical problems.

These might be Bb or A# in keys such as Eb minor or B min where the RH 1st finger is mandatory or 3rd register patterns which are rapid, such as D F# A, where knowledge of the correct choice of fingering decides whether you can play it or not!! To summarise, learn your musical vocabulary, scales, arpeggios and chordal patterns and spot problems before you get to them!

RHYTHM: As an examiner and one who has had to audition players for college entrance and for jobs in orchestras you must believe me that there are more mistakes made in the reading of rhythms than any other area. I honestly believe that most errors are caused simply by not understanding the basic relationship between simple and compound time, beats which are divisible by 2-4-8-16 or by 3-6-12. This is music theory, not flute-playing.

Listen to lots of music while reading the scores helps, particularly if there are only a few parts as in string quartets. Imagine you are playing and listen to hear if you get caught out. Also listen to different styles particularly jazz and ethnic music where poly-rhythms and asymmetrical beat groups, (9/8 as three quarters and three eighths for example) occur frequently. Study the most influential composers of each period to assess the type of rhythms they use.

STYLE: You need to listen to a lot of recordings, together with the scores, to begin to understand this difficult subject. In its simplest form it is knowing which notes to play long and which to play short—very true for baroque and jazz styles. Also when to minimize emotional input and when to maximize it. Nothing worse than Bach sounding like Brahms or vice versa. Play what the composer wrote, not what you think he meant. There is a thin line between an individual approach which is within the parameters of good taste within a woodwind section and that which is merely showing off and likely to alienate both your colleagues and the conductor.

A FEW TIPS: Always take time to assess the problem which confronts YOU. Is it notes, rhythm, style? Spot the hazards before you get to them. The panel is more impressed with someone who gives an expressive, stylish and convincing rendition which is in tune even if it does contain the odd wrong note, than a note-perfect and out-of-tune performance.

Do not panic. Take a few good deep breaths while you are looking at the passage, assessing its key, speed and style... music theory again. Always have a silent performance before you launch into tempo. If you make a complete idiot of yourself when you know you ought to have done better just turn politely to the panel and say to them “I am sorry, I know I can play that much better”.....then make sure that you do. If you do, they will admire your composure, if you don't they might admire your cheek!

It is good to note what works have recently been played by the orchestra or band. If the principal flute has had to struggle with a passage recently he often has it far forward in the memory and might like to hear how you cope. Of course if he or she has had trouble with it and you play it...you won't get the job!! Sometimes it pays to play a good psychological game.

Mr. Brett lives near Wakefield in England. He started his musical life in the band of the Royal Marines and has since played with some of the world's top artists and orchestras. He regularly works with Trevor Wye and William Bennet and is at present completing his flute players bible the “Big Black Book”