

## *Preparing the Band for Sight Reading*

*by Joe Pappas*

Preparing for contest can be challenging. In addition to preparing contest selections, you have to prepare the band for sight reading. The challenge of sight reading can be overcome if the band and director prepare well in advance.

When I adjudicate sight reading, one of my statements to the group is "Relax, you are about to do the same things you do everyday." I am a firm believer in this statement. Sight reading is nothing more than applying the skills you teach/learn everyday. Practicing these skills will lead to success.

Daily warm-up drills can take away most of the fear from sight reading. Practice the drills from ensemble warm up books and learn to play the drills musically.

As a high school director, I had four books I would use as my warm up drill books.

Two were technical books for rhythms, articulations and tonality, and two for balance, blend and melodic content.

The first two were the Fussell "Exercises for Ensemble Drill" and "101 Rhythm and Rest Patterns" by Grover Yaus. Both of these books have great material to develop the needs of most bands from semester break until festival day.

The Fussell has scale studies, technical studies, chorales, and rhythm and rests studies. It was my primary book for preparing sight reading and chair placement within the ensemble. The Yaus was a supplement to the Fussell.

During my first two years of teaching, the judges wrote on the sight reading ballots, "try to develop a more musical approach to sight reading, use Bach chorales." Taking their advice, I found that not only the score went up but also the musicianship of the ensemble.

The "16 Bach Chorales" arranged by Matthew Lake and "66 Famous and Festive Bach Chorales" arranged by Frank Erickson were beneficial and became a warm up staple each year.

Both books can be used for development of balance and blend, tonality studies, musical performance and practicing dynamics. In addition, both can be used for full ensemble or brass and woodwind choir.

Another way of practicing is to pull a selection from the band library and practice going through the sight reading process. This includes reading the "rules" of sight reading, timing the recap and question section and reading the piece. Use various levels of music in your preparation.

Start with easy graded works and advance to more difficult works. A few days before the festival, use music that is the level you will be reading. After each practice run, ask the students to evaluate their reading skills and assign a rating. Soon, they will understand the skills and performance levels needed to be successful.

There is no sight reading manual or rehearsal book readily available from your dealer to prepare your group. Everything you need is in the band library.

As a director, your preparation and sight reading skills can enhance the group's performance. Learn to read a score quickly, look for problem spots. These are generally the areas you know your ensemble has as a weakness. Look for spots to draw attention in regards to meter, key signature and style. As you are looking over the score, have section leaders or stand partners discuss the piece quietly.

After a quick perusal of the score, begin making your comments to the group. Be brief and have the group remain attentive. While reviewing the piece with the students, avoid going measure by measure. Again, be general and draw attention to the areas listed above. Allow time for students to ask questions. After a brief session or time runs out, **read!**

If the group and director have practiced sight reading during the regular class rehearsal, the band should become more relaxed and comfortable with the process. It may become so routine that "true" sight reading will take place, pass out the music, step on the podium and read! You might even try this method to demonstrate to the students how their daily skills apply. With this concept in mind, students should develop a better understanding of sight reading and scores should improve.

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