

Sight-Reading and Dyslexia

An Insoluble Problem?

Ji Poppy Hyde

“She can’t be bothered with little black dots on the page.”

“He plays everything by ear, you know.”

“She memorizes everything so quickly that she doesn’t need to sight read.”

“He’s just lazy.”

Just some of the “reasons” given to me by parents to explain the extreme difficulty their children have in making sense of printed notation. I am not referring to the poor sight-reader but rather to the child (or adult) who is seemingly unable to read music. This is a very real problem, and without careful handling can turn the weekly piano lesson into a frustrating grind for the teacher and, more importantly, real distress for the pupil, often leading to an early abandonment of the instrument.

Without wishing to minimize the value of playing by ear, (actually this is almost always muscle memory) inability to sight read is a tremendous disadvantage to the would-be musician, closing the door to a great many enjoyable aspects of music making and making others much harder. Yet I have often heard reading

referred to as if it was in some way inferior to memorization, something that real musicians do not need to concern themselves with!

Can anything be done? I believe it

can. The problem is often linked

to dyslexia, and it appears to the pupil that the notes simply jump around the page. So I tried to make the notes more easily recognizable to the pupil by making each one a different shape. Once I had decided on a clear and recognizable shape for each note, I wrote out simple exercises for right hand for a severely

dyslexic pupil. She was easily able to recognize C as a circle, D as a square, E as a triangle, F as a heart, G as a diamond. I was delighted with the result, and soon added A and B. The music was exactly the same as real music in all other respects. It was only the shape of the notehead that had changed.

I have since extended the idea to several other pupils, who have all found themselves able to read far more easily. After they have successfully played the piece in shapes, I then show them the piece in standard notation; so that they may be able to make the transition when they are ready. I am always pleased with their shape reading,

and even more so when they actually make the transition to standard notation reading!

Pupil “A” is a fifteen year old girl, musical but severely dyslexic. Constantly starting but never finishing pieces, and bored to death with young children’s pieces, she has now learned Bach’s C Major Prelude using

the modified score, playing with skill and sensitivity.

Pupil “B” is twelve year old boy. The dyslexia is so severe that he has been unable to play anything unless he has each note fingered and then only if he is shown where to put his hands. He is lost as soon as the hand position changes.

The inability to sight read is a tremendous disadvantage to the would-be musician, closing the door to a great many enjoyable aspects of music making and making others much harder. The problem is often linked to dyslexia, and it appears to the pupil that the notes simply jump around the page.

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Using the modified score he is able to read music on his own. He no longer dreads his lesson.

Pupil “C”, a nine year old girl, has only mild learning difficulties but nevertheless has progressed much faster through use of the modified score. Much to my delight, enjoys it so much that she has produced a notebook full of tunes she has written herself.

I could add many other examples.

Obviously the shape system is not an answer to all musical ills. It cannot turn a poor ear into a good ear, or help much with poor muscle coordination (dyspraxia). The shape system will not make all sight reading difficulties simply disappear. However

the value of the shape system is similar to that of armbands in swimming—a very helpful tool during the early stages of the pupil’s study, but hopefully to be discarded eventually.

It has to be said that writing out music in shape notation is somewhat time consuming, but well worth the effort. Presumably a piece of computer software could be designed to make the task easier. Seeing children enjoy their music more and learn more easily brings tremendous reward.

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Poppy Hyde GRSM is a teacher at three schools in Sussex, England.
She studied piano at the Purcell School and the Royal Academy of Music.
Ms. Hyde also writes music for children.*