# An Educator's Guide: Teaching Effective Sightreading on Mallet Instruments

**John Lane**

Among the many skills young percussionists must learn, sightreading on mallet instruments remains one of the most difficult to master (and often to teach). It is often the skill that has developed the least by the time the student reaches high school or beyond. Sightreading is a skill that must be developed if a student is to have a truly meaningful musical experience through the study of percussion.

The skill of sightreading must be managed along the same lines as the development of technical skills. In fact, sightreading is a technical skill. How many high school students have you seen who have tremendous technical ability, only to find out that these students read like a beginner? This is because the *skill* of sightreading has not been developed. It is also because some educators place the skills of performing well technically above the skill of reading.

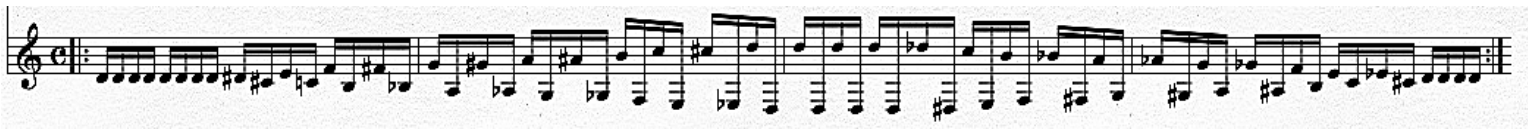
Technique and sightreading are symbiotic. The hands can do a lot on their own, but sightreading incorporates the eyes, brain, and hands in order for them to work together. Marimbist Gordon Stout wrote, "Sightreading is learning to train your eyes to stay out of the way of what your hands can already do."

## Tactile Sense and Kinesthetic Memory

Percussionists, unlike pianists, do not have a direct tactile relationship with their instrument. Instead we have implements of actuation which act as extensions of our fingers and hands which inhibit us from feeling our instrument in the same way as a pianist. Unlike the piano, the keys of mallet instruments change size from instrument to instrument and model to model. These issues are not going away, so we are faced with finding a solution. Percussionists must train themselves to know the keyboard with a limited tactile sense and rely on muscle memory (or *kinesthetic memory*) to "guess correctly" where the notes are on the keyboard.

Kinesthetic memory is an interesting physiological phenomenon. Kinesthetic sense allows people to *feel* the movements of their muscles, joints and tendons. In most cases, it is learned through repetitive motions (tying your shoes) and/or some kind of equilibrium training (walking or riding a bike). In fact, most of our physical movements draw upon kinesthetic memory to make those movements automatic. Think about how difficult it would be to walk if you had to think about each step!

Printed below is an excellent exercise to help students begin to develop kinesthetic memory:



Obviously, this is a good exercise for technical development as well, but the main focus should be gaining a tactile sense of the keyboard. It is a good idea to have students practice looking at the page or looking forward and not at their hands. This allows them to use peripheral vision to see the keys, which is a key element of effective sightreading. Looking at their hands can be reserved for strict technical practice or when performing music from memory. Also, once the student is comfortable with the symmetrical exercise, try transposing to begin on a different note. The marimbist Gordon Stout has an entire book of similar exercises for 2 and 4-mallets to develop this kind of technique, *Ideo-Kinetics*.

One of the problems of learning kinesthetic memory, as mentioned above, is the size of the targets on a keyboard instrument. This problem is magnified by the poor sound quality and size of most beginner model "bell kits." Student kits are generally frustrating and depressing to young players who see their peers playing on instruments that (at least in appearance) resemble professional instruments. Honestly, it is difficult to motivate young percussionists to practice on their toy-like bell kit—it does not seem like a real instrument when compared to the other beginner model brass and woodwind instruments. Therefore, whenever possible the students should play on regular size concert instruments (marimbas, xylophones, etc…) and not on the student model kits. If height adjustable instruments are unavailable, it is possible to construct simple risers to bring the student to the correct height for the instrument.

## Recognizing Intervallic Relationships and Patterns

It is important that educators point out how intervallic relationships in space relate to the printed music. For instance odd intervals, like the 3rd, 5th, and 7th, are either line to line or space to space while even intervals, like 2nd, 4th, 6th, are line to space or space to line. Once the student has a pretty good *feel* for a particular interval, say the 5th, then they should be able to relate that to an image of two notes either on a line to line or space to space. This may sound like an oversimplification of the process, but I have found that many students have not taken this into account when reading. They are caught up in reading one note to the next trying to name each, rather than concentrating on intervallic or patternistic relationships.

## Solving the Problem

Learning to read on mallet instruments is uncomfortable. Without knowingly doing so, some educators have created environments where wrong notes are completely unacceptable. However, wrong notes are an integral part of the learning process. Once the students have learned to hear when they are playing the wrong pitches, it can be frustrating to hear all of the wrong notes coming from the instrument. Therefore, students shy away from practicing the skill of sightreading because they do not want to "sound bad." No one wants to sound bad, even in the practice room. This kind of attitude is what must change. With time and the right kind of motivation and patience, the wrong notes will become right. Here's the process…

## The Three R's = Rhythm, Rhythm, Rhythm…

The hierarchies of skills in sightreading are:

1. rhythm
2. direction
3. pitch
4. tone

Once students have trained themselves to stop when they hit a wrong note, it is very difficult to overcome. I have seen college students who cannot read a simple single line without stopping when they hit a wrong note. The importance of pitch should, of course, be taken seriously, but should not be the paramount concern when initially teaching sightreading. After all, a right note in the wrong place is still a wrong note.

NOTE: I do not want to overlook the importance of making a good sound on the instrument. However, it is important to remember that the brain will be very busy thinking about rhythm, direction, and pitch. The skill of producing good tone will gradually creep into the student's sightreading if they are consistently working toward making good sounds when they are NOT sightreading.

Now, let us look at each skill independently.

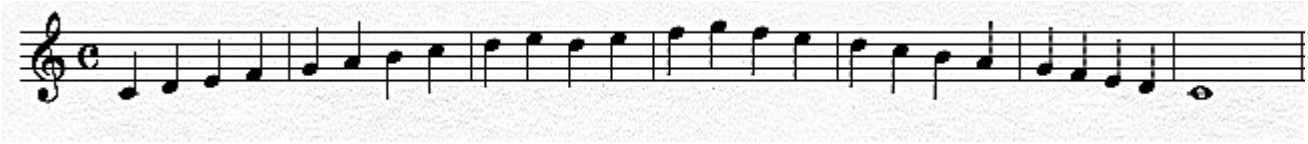
***Rhythm***

The first and most difficult rule: There can be no stopping—for any reason. You must insist that the students read without stopping. Also, make sure to model in lessons or beginner classes how to use the metronome properly. In this case, the metronome is the teacher who will not wait for wrong notes. Remember, speed kills—slow and steady will win the day. Also, remember that difficulty-tempo-and right notes are interrelated. Meaning, more difficult music ⇢ slower tempo = more right pitches.

***Direction***

Next, direction must be consistent with what is on the page. Simply put, if the line goes up the student must know to move to the right on the keyboard and vice versa. Recently, the use of graphic notation has become a useful tool in my own teaching for many musical skills.

The following is a type of graph that can be easily created using notation software (or with an old fashioned pencil and paper). The idea here is to remove rhythm and work solely on direction. Percussion students get plenty of work with non-pitched rhythmic activity, so this could be a welcome change of pace. When using the graph, I would suggest that the rhythm be a constant pulse with no rests, say quarter notes at 60 beats per minute.



This is a possible realization of the above graph:

The above is an extremely simple form of this technique. I would encourage you to be creative when challenging students (and yourself) to invent and read graphic notations. Graphic notation can create a mistake-free environment by essentially removing the other factors from the equation. Basically, the students are guessing at the right pitches, but making informed choices about direction. Eventually, how much to move down or up when they see a particular interval is based on their kinesthetic memory of the keyboard. By removing the actual pitch, the student is free to concentrate on changing directions without worrying about intervallic structures.

## Materials and Method

"**Tools of Discipline**" — metronome, kitchen timer, and plenty of music. These are the tools that will make you an efficient teacher (of any skill). The use of the metronome, as described above, is crucial to the success of students in sightreading. A kitchen timer is a good idea for any student who wants to stay on task. For sightreading, a timer can be invaluable as it is easy to get bogged down and spend too much time on this skill. Plenty of music is an absolute necessity when teaching sightreading. Other instrumental method books can be an invaluable source for material. I have found that oboe and/or recorder method books work well because the material tends to stay within the staff. Violin, guitar, flute, piano, and clarinet books can quickly move to notes above and below the staff in ledger lines, which can make for difficult sightreading for young percussionists.

**Consistency** — Try to commit some time during each lesson or beginning session for sightreading. Insist that the students practice sightreading every day. The good news: it only takes about 10-15 minutes per day to produce significant positive results.

## Conclusions and Solutions for the Band Director

The ability to read at sight is an invaluable musical skill. It is a skill that will follow the student for the rest of their musical career and one that should not be taken lightly. With the right approach and the right tools educators can overcome the challenge of teaching this difficult skill.

Here are some specific things you, as a band director, can do to improve the sightreading and general musicianship of your percussionists:

- During "warm-ups" include the percussionists in the pitch/listening process by having them play on pitched percussion along with the winds.
- Make sightreading a part of your daily lesson plan/ routine.
- Have plenty of music on hand to use for sightreading.
- Though it sounds elementary, teach your students how to use the metronome effectively.
- Insist that students practice sightreading consistently—15 minutes per day.

*As both a composer and performer, Mr. Lane was recently featured at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, OH. His compositions involving electro-acoustic applications have been performed on the Sonic Explorations concert series and the MUSIC X new music festival at the Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music. He has also been featured as a performer in the Van Cliburn Foundation's concert series Modern at the Modern at the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art. In 2004, Mr. Lane was a collaborator, composer, and performer in an interdisciplinary multi-media production, Scaling the Walls, at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore, MD. In addition, he has appeared as a soloist and with his percussion quartet, The Bain Percussion Group, at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention. He is also a former member of the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps.*

*Mr. Lane is also active as a recitalist, clinician, and adjudicator across the U.S. and abroad. He was most recently invited as the Clinician and Adjudicator for the Rainbow Inviatational Marching Festival in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is currently a DMA candidate at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and holds degrees from the University of North Texas, and Stephen F. Austin State University.*