

Thoughts On Teaching Sight Reading On Mallet Percussion Instruments

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A few months before the audition, high school students will come to me for lessons on their All-Region percussion music. The students usually come in fairly well prepared on their snare drum and mallet music. My task usually ends up tweaking their musical approach. The most difficult part of their preparation is sight reading, especially sight reading on mallets. Few of these students ever intentionally practice sight reading. The students usually have their mallet etude memorized and can't read it very well. If they stop they can't find their place in the middle of the exercise. This can be a bad experience if this happens at the audition.

Teaching sight reading can be a very difficult task. This difficulty is magnified on mallet keyboard instruments. The player has to read the music while using their peripheral vision to orient themselves to the notes on the keyboard below their hands. This is further complicated by the distance which is created between the player and the sheet music by the instrument itself.

Most instrumentalists touch the instrument they are playing. A pianist touches the keys of the piano. They have a physical

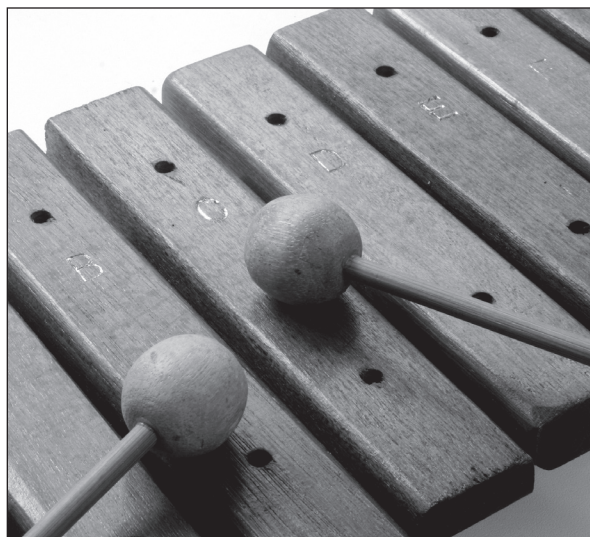
sense of the size of intervals. The clarinetist and trumpeter touch the instrument. They can feel where the keys and valves are located.

They don't have to look at the instrument. However, the percussionist doesn't touch the keyboard while playing a mallet instrument. This is a disadvantage to their physical reference to the keyboard. The size of the

marimba bars change by octave on many marimbas. Then one adds the fact that the percussionists are also learning snare drum at the same time. This can be a lot for a percussion student to grasp.

Beginning sight reading at a mallet instrument can be much like learning to type on a computer. Everyone usually starts reading with the hunt and peck method. We have all been there. Students look up at the music for each note and then down to find the note on the keyboard. Meanwhile they lose their place in the written music when looking down and become hopelessly lost. This is a

big reason that students memorize their music. Memorization is not a bad thing. However problems arise when students have a memory slip



and are unable to find their place in the written music. In addition, the students never become competent sight readers. It takes them a long time to learn their music which leads to long and strenuous rehearsals and practice sessions resulting in frustrated percussionists. I often ask students, "How long would it take you to memorize your history text book assignment rather than just reading it." The correct reply is, "a long time." I remind them that if they could read music as well as English, life would become a lot easier for them.

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METHODS I USE IN TEACHING SIGHT READING:

Physical Familiarity with the Mallet Keyboard and Peripheral Vision

It is very important that students center the music stand as much as possible in the middle of the range of the etude. I have mallet students stare at the music stand and use their peripheral vision to find the accidental bars on the marimba with their hands. I have them place their hands on C# and D# while looking at the music stand. I then have them locate F#, G#, and A# while looking at the music stand. I emphasize that C natural is left of the two accidentals C# and D# and that F natural is left of the three accidentals F#, G#, and A#. These are visual markers for them to locate notes.

I will then have students place their hands on random notes while staring at the music stand. I will have them find the first five notes of some simple major scales. Instructors should have the students play the first five notes of a C Major scale up and down continuously in a triplet mode. Have them start by looking down at the keyboard at the notes E natural and F natural. While playing these five notes have them gradually look up at the rails between D sharp and F sharp. Gradually have them look up until they are looking at the music stand and their hands are playing the first five notes of the C scale. Emphasize to them that they will see notes of the scale out of their peripheral vision. Make sure the student does not stop if they hit wrong notes. Playing perfectly is not the point of the exercise. Eventually repeat this exercise with the entire one octave major scale. Repeat this exercise with all the scales.

Sight Reading with Small Groups of Notes

Next have the student concentrate on a small part of a melody. This may be as small as one measure or three or four notes. Initially I have students describe the shape of the melody. Is the melody moving stepwise or in leaps? Is the melody moving up or down? Often I have had students move down the register when the melody was supposed to ascend. What intervals are the leaps?

Sometimes I will have them put their hands on the melody notes and say the note names while looking at the sheet music on the stand. This technique helps to reinforce their knowledge of the note names. They can then use their mallets. Have them only play a small group of notes WHILE KEEPING THEIR EYES FIXED ON THE SHEET MUSIC. Don't let them look down at the keyboard until the end of the group of notes. Don't let them go stop and fix a mistake. Push them through the measure with a consistent slow tempo. After their reading starts to improve have them increase the size of the material that they read to

one measure or two measures or more importantly a whole phrase. Moving on to larger groups of notes may be slow. Build confidence with small groups of notes. Keep it slow but steady! MAKE IT AS FUN AS POSSIBLE!!!! Learning to sight read can be frustrating. I have had students become upset when trying to keep their eyes on the music. It is great if you can have them practice a scale without looking at the keyboard and then link it to a melody in the same key.

METHODS:

Physical Familiarity
with the Mallet Keyboard
& Peripheral Vision

Sight Reading
With Small Groups
of Notes

Daily Reading

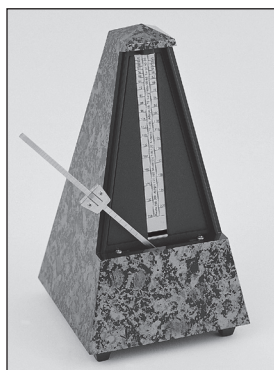
Using the
Metronome

Sight Reading
vs. Learning for
Performance

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Daily Reading

A big problem I run into is that many students do not enjoy sight reading on their own, so they won't practice sight reading on a daily basis. I try to encourage them to read a short time each day at the beginning of their practice. Beginning violin and flute books work well for beginning sight reading. When students get more proficient they can practice in groups. They can read Bach Inventions, string quartets etc. Practicing in groups is great for freshman college students. Many of them have motivation problems in getting to the practice room. The idea of practicing with friends can be much more inviting to a student than constantly going it alone. A great sight reading book at the intermediate level is "Rhythmic Articulation" by Bono.



Using the Metronome

Many teachers (including myself) have done an excellent job of teaching students to stop every time they make a mistake. Students can really become excellent at stopping in the middle of an exercise. Have students use the metronome as a disciplinary device. It can keep them pushing ahead. If they stay with the metronome while reading they take less momentary breaks and look down at the keyboard. Their rhythmic reading improves. Their eyes keep moving forward in the music. They can't stop for wrong notes in an ensemble, so their ensemble

performance improves. They learn to roll long notes for the correct duration. Their subdivision improves. I insist that students use the metronome in their sight reading. I will have them read with the metronome going at their weekly lesson. I have to constantly remind them not to stop for a mistake.

It is really important that the metronome be set on a subdivision smaller than the main pulse. It should be set on eighth notes if they are playing with a quarter note pulse. This subdivision is especially important to keep them honest at slow tempos.

Sight Reading vs. Learning for Performance

Instructors should make sure the student understands the difference between sight reading and preparing an etude. After they have played through an exercise once it is no longer sight reading. When they sight read, the sticking may not be pre-determined and written on the music. They may get tangled up. This is part of the difficulty of sight reading on mallet keyboard instruments. Students have to learn how to survive this process. In preparing an etude students should write in the stickings and keep them consistent. This process develops motor memory, consistency, and a fluid musical approach.



Craig Collison has been professor of percussion at Arkansas State University since 1998. From 1997-1998 he served as an assistant professor at Western Illinois University where he taught drum set, marching percussion, and jazz band. Craig was a percussionist with The United States Air Force Concert Band, Washington, D.C. from 1985 to 1996. He received his bachelor's degree from Washington State University, master's degree from The University of North Texas, and completed his doctoral residency at the Eastman School of Music. Craig has soloed at the 1986 and 1990 PASIC Conventions. He has studied with Alan Abel of the Philadelphia Orchestra, John Beck of the Eastman School of Music, Alfons Grieder of Switzerland, Jose Eladio Emat of Cuba, and Dr. Robert Schietroma of the University of North Texas. Presently he is an Educational Endorser for Vic Firth.