

Teaching Your Band to Sightread

Barbara Lambrecht

The sightreading contest you will take your band to this spring is, in reality, a test of music literacy. It is your job to make sure your students can pass this test. With young students you can start with a minimum of five steps they can follow for success in the technical aspects of sightreading. Once they are secure technically you can begin coaching them on how to perform musically at sight.

First, teach them to begin by looking at the top number of the time signature to find the pulse. They can tap, clap, sing or play the rhythm on one note, concentrating on feeling the pulse. Remind them to consider the rhythm first, because a right note at the wrong time is a wrong note.

Second, the students should become aware of the sharps and flats in the key signature. Make sure they know which notes these sharps and flats apply to and notice where these notes occur in the music. Have them practice the fingerings silently before beginning to read the music so that they know the correct fingering before they arrive at the critical notes. Older students need to become aware that constant attention must be paid to the key and accidentals, as both often change during more complex music.

Third, teach the band to look for patterns. While they are clapping the rhythm, they should learn to look at the line for melodic shape and notice the movement by step or skips, repeated notes and sequences (short, repeated melodic phrases).

Next, they should notice the articulation and dynamics.

Musicians must look ahead in the music so they have time to prepare for what's coming. In addition to playing the right notes with rhythmic accuracy, they must keep paying attention to all of the details as they occur: slurs and tongued notes, style markings, dynamics and all other instructions in the part. Also, teach them to observe the dynamic shapes in the music and notice if the volumes change suddenly or gradually.

Finally, they must learn to keep going. Rather than stopping to correct a rhythm error or a missed note in the key, they can correct the error the next time it comes up in the music. If they stop playing, they double their mistake.

Once your students are comfortable with the technical

demands of reading music, it is important for you to develop their musicality while reading music at sight. The first consideration should always be the overall style of the piece, remembering that tempo and pulse are big factors in establishing the style.

First identify the character of the piece, i.e. fast, slow, happy, march, etc. Then, choose an appropriate speed both for the piece and for your students. Ensure that you will be comfortable enough to make

a musical and technically accurate performance at the first playing.

Teach your students the English translation of musical terms so that they can play the music with the composer's true intent. Encourage your band members to aim for a musical presentation, by creating shape as indicated by dynamics and phrasing. The more experienced they become, the better they will be at being able to give a stylistic, expressive and musical interpretation at all times, (not just on prepared music, but also as they read music for the first time.)

(continued)

What do you do in the next few months ... to insure your band's success in the sightreading room? I suggest focusing on fundamentals in your daily rehearsals: tone, technique, rhythm, key awareness, ... articulation, phrasing, and dynamics.

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General Preparation

As a long-time judge, I feel that students in a well prepared band have the ability to play in tune with good tone quality throughout the entire range of the instrument. They have a thorough knowledge of the correct fingerings, including alternate fingerings, for all notes in the playing range, and are able to count time accurately and incisively. They recognize and are able to execute articulation patterns, recognize and understand the words and symbols by which tempo, dynamics, expression and style are indicated, and observe dynamics. Finally, they listen to each other in order to be in control of the pitch, as well as watch and respond to their conductor, responding quickly to correct errors. Bands with such students score well in the sightreading room.

What do you do in the next few months to teach these skills, to insure your band's success in the sightreading room? I suggest focusing on fundamentals in your daily rehearsals. What fundamentals do I mean? I mean tone, technique, rhythm, key awareness, and musical details such as articulation, phrasing, and dynamics. Here are my suggestions for these areas:

Tone

Your band needs to have the ability to play in tune with good tone quality, throughout the entire range of their instruments. Here are some suggestions for working on that aspect of their playing.

1. Use the following words, or others of your choosing, to describe the tone you want students to strive for: beautiful, clear, steady, firm, supported, rich, resonant, vibrant, characteristic.
2. Breathing exercises at the start of rehearsal get the body ready. Work for noiseless intake and full exhale. Move lots of air.
3. Starting in your beginning classes, stress correct formation of the embouchure. Continue to monitor

older students. Don't forget that posture affects the air intake and support, and therefore, the sound.

4. In your daily warm-up use Remingtons, lip slurs, and scales (played slowly) to develop embouchure and tone, and to extend range. For your brass players, include practice on mouthpiece alone to develop embouchure and tone. Work to make the same quality of sound in all registers, at all dynamic levels.
5. Introduce vibrato for appropriate instruments.
6. Provide examples of great players: symphony performers, commercial recordings (video and audio), and class role models. Encourage student attendance at live recitals and concerts by professional players.

Technique and Key Awareness

Your objective for your band's technique can be stated this way: they should be able to play whatever is required of them at a steady tempo, even technically challenging passages. We all know that scales and scale exercises are tried and true technique builders, so include major and chromatic scales in your daily routine, in as many octaves as are appropriate for the age and ability level of your group. I do suggest using method books or band technique-building books on a regular basis. If you are a high school director you might consider teaching minor scales to your band.

Articulation

Work for consistency of note starts throughout your band a.k.a. "matched articulation," and remember that the ends of notes are just as important as the starts, a.k.a. "matched note length."

Often students get confused by articulation patterns when they are reading music for the first time. The *Taffanel-Gaubert Mechanism Studies* for flute gives twelve different articulations to use on scale studies.

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Use these on exercises you devise, or use the technical exercises with eight different articulation patterns in Jeff King and Richard Williams' book, *Foundations for Superior Performance*. If you add these articulation patterns to your daily drill, the band will be far more comfortable with whatever slurring/tonguing patterns the composer has included in his/her music.

Rhythm

Students must recognize and understand note values and be able to relate those to note groupings and rhythmic patterns. My feeling is that instant comprehension of note groupings spells success when sightreading, so encourage your young musicians to look at the entire measure, or at least entire beats rather than individual notes. Be sure they realize that although the actual values of notes change when the bottom number of the signature changes, the relationship of notes never changes. For example, quarter notes are always twice as long as eighth notes.

Your band should have a counting system and use it. You must make certain that individual students actually understand how to count and are not parroting what others around them are saying. Individual counting aloud is mandatory.

In my years of judging, I can generalize that young, inexperienced students have the most rhythm trouble on long notes, ties, and rests. Ensure that the players in your ensemble know what beat of the bar they are on when they end or change long notes, and what beat of the bar they enter after rests. Rhythmically, students need to know where they are in the measure, which beat they are on, and which beat YOU are on.

Teach your band to look at stems, not just the note heads.

Sightread from rhythm sheets for chair tests. Use supplemental materials: pages of rhythm drills, commercially prepared slides or flash cards and workbook/worksheets.

Skill Building Books

Here are some good books to use for rhythm, technique, learning music reading, and warm-up:

14 Weeks to a Better Band
Roger Maxwell/Barnhouse Pub.

25 Lazarus-Concone Studies
Harold Rusch/Belwin Mills

101 Rhythmic Rest Patterns
Grover Yaus/Belwin/Warner Bros.

204 Progressive Sight reading Tunes
Roger Winslow/Gore

Division of Beat
McEntyre, Haines/Southern

Division of Measure
Grover Yaus/Belwin

Exercises for Ensemble Drill
Fussell/Warner Bros.

Foundations for Superior Performance
Williams, King/Kjos

Hal Leonard Intermediate and Advanced Methods
Hal Leonard

Harmonized Rhythms
Forque, Thornton/Kjos

The Logical Approach to Rhythmic Notation
Phil Perkins/Logical

Rhythm and Rests
Frank Erickson/Alfred

Rhythm Master
Southern

Rubank Advanced Methods
Rubank

Sight reading for Band Series (1-4)
Evans, Nelson/Southern

Symphonic Band Technique
Rhodes/Bierschenk Southern

Teaching Rhythm
Joel Rothman/JR Pub.

TRI (Technique, Rhythm, Intonation)
Garner, Haines, McEntyre/Southern

Winning Rhythms
Ed Ayola/Kjos

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Listening Skills

By focusing on listening skills in rehearsal, your students will continue to develop sound awareness, sound discrimination and sound sensitivity. Developing listening skills will assist students with these things:

- The ability to concentrate
- The ability to understand what one is listening to
- The ability to remember sounds and sound sequences

The ability to concentrate is essential to the listening process. Students must be able to remember what they have heard because of the abstract nature of the music, which is sound passing in time.

Analysis

As your band learns music during the year, teach them to analyze that music. Focus on the elements present within a piece of music and look for the relationships between and among these elements. Teach the band to recognize the pattern of organization and overall structure of the music (form).

The following are examples of questions to consider during analysis, and they are things you will look for in the score of the sightreading piece:

- Does the music have repetition? Contrast? Is the repetition exact or a variation?
- How does the composer create variety?
- Is there tension in the music? How is it created? Is the tension resolved?
- Can you identify phrases that are alike and similar?
- Is there syncopation involved? How is it used?
- What is the tonality used? (major, minor, pentatonic, other?)
- Can you identify the sections of a song

(introduction, chorus and verse) and the organization or form of the music (for example; two-part, AB; three-part, ABA; rondo, ABACA)?

Preparation for the Actual Contest

You can find the criteria, (keys, time signatures, and rhythms) that composers use to write the music for your school's classification. This information is available on the UIL web site.

If you did not start preparing for sightreading contest at the beginning of the year, begin immediately. Read EASY tunes, and many of them, so that your band will feel confident. The UIL sightreading music from past years is available for purchase from RBC Publishers. Add it to your library and read music from classes below yours first, to build your students' confidence. When they are successful, your band will enjoy reading at sight. Closer to the actual event, practice sightreading the way you will do it on

contest day (timed, etc.) with music the difficulty level your band will be expected to perform.

Download and read the UIL sheet and the judging rubrics to see what criteria the judges use in evaluating your band's performance. Share that information with your students by posting it outside your office door or reading parts of it to them in class.

Teach your band how to study their music. I use KTTDC (key, time, tempo, dynamics, changes). Some beginning books use STARS (signatures, tempo, accidentals, repeats, signs). Students should look for repetition of rhythms and melodies. My band touches the key signature in the upper left hand corner, then slides down to the bottom, touching the key signature at the start of each line to discover if and where the key changes.

If you did not start preparing for sightreading contest at the beginning of the year, begin immediately. Read easy tunes, and many of them, so that your band will feel confident. Closer to the actual event, practice sightreading the way you will do it on contest day.

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- Coach your students in the art of asking questions:
1. LOUDLY.
 2. First identify a place, like “Square 32” and count from there, before or after, rather than saying “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 before 32.”
 3. Have the question in mind before they ask it to avoid stutters.
 4. Ask all questions at the end UNLESS you miss some pertinent piece of information, like “Mrs. Lambrecht, is there a key change at 36?” First chairs should ask questions they think members of their section might miss, such as, “Is C flat the same as B natural?”

Since many students get lost on rests when they sightread, train your band to count rests on their fingers and aloud (but softly). When you get closer to contest, they must shift to silent counting. I used to teach beginners to bring their instruments from the lap to the knee two bars before the end of extended rests, and to the face on the downbeat of the last measure of rest. If anyone was lost, they could see instruments around them coming up and quickly got with the rest of the section; therefore we had fewer missed entrances.

During your daily drill, vary your tempo, or volume, or style, to train your students to watch closely and to follow you. By spring most students have these daily exercises memorized anyway, and can easily look up from the book or music to watch you and what you are indicating with your hands and/or baton.

Insist that your students touch their music. Humans have five senses, two of which the players will use in the sightreading room—sight (looking at the music), and hearing (listening to your instruction.) Add touch, as in touching the music at important spots such as repeats, accidentals, key signatures, and changes of key and time and tempo as well as touching the instruments (fingering

the notes). Please, touch with fingers, not instruments or sticks. As Jim Sudduth used to say, “Absorb through the skin to the bloodstream, to the brain.”

Teach your band to “Air Band” with instruments in play position. Put the brass mouthpieces on chins. Place flute lip plates to the right or left of the lips and other woodwinds away from the mouth. Then use fingers, valves, slides, sticks and AIR as you go through the music. You can practice articulation in this way.

Pre-assign parts, perhaps putting your second-best player as first chair second part.

Just Before the Big Day

If your region does not have a TV monitor counting down the minutes and seconds, make a set of time cards (10, 9, 8, 7, 6, etc.) large enough that you can see them from the podium when your assistant or spouse holds them up behind the back row of your band. I use time cards to eliminate the spoken interruptions from the timekeeper (which tend to distract my students.)

Arrange for water, preferably cold, for your band between the stage and SR room (not just a bottle for you). And you will probably want additional water for yourself after talking nonstop for seven-to-ten minutes. If you forget the bottled water, walk the students by a water fountain after the stage performance.

Put paper clips into your coat pocket for any D. S. al Coda, etc. (These are rare these days.)

Tell the band what warm-up note they will play after the explanation at contest. I prefer not to play a new scale or note (Concert Eb instead of our usual Concert F or our Remington exercise) just because of the key of the sightreading piece. If, in your at-home practice you vary the scale before you sightread, then, by all means do that in the room.

My band touches the key signature in the upper left hand corner, then slides down to the bottom, touching the key signature at the start of each line to discover if and where the key changes.

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On the Day, In the Room

Here is a checklist for contest day. Some of these details can be taken care of before you leave for the contest. Others are things for you to remember during the explanation time.

1. Are you wearing uniforms? If so, be “uniform.” Wear the same socks, shoes.
2. Make the setup be like at home. Adjust chairs until they are just like things are in your home band room. Don’t forget to adjust stand height.
3. Train the band to place their music under their chairs so you don’t mix it up with the sightreading music.
4. Enter the room quietly, in a businesslike manner. Remind your students to look at the judge who gives the instructions and to look at you or at their music during the study time. It is important to stress this to young players who are first-timers at this contest.
5. If you teach a young band, perhaps a middle school second or third band where the large percentage of students are at this kind of contest for the first time, be sure to keep them engaged. The first row will finger along with you as you explain the music, but you must realize that the back row will hide behind their stands. Those lazy trombones will do anything to keep from unlocking that slide. Monitor them.
6. Allow the timpanist to tune quietly during the explanation time.
7. Speak the language of the listeners.

Don’t use this time to impress the judges that you know what an *anacrusis* is. Don’t call a pickup that, unless you use that word regularly in your rehearsals.

Things You Must Do in Your Explanation

Here are several more checklists. Practice doing these things on scores you study alone as well as the music you sightread with your band before contest. (When I was a young teacher, I took a stack of scores that I did not know and sat at the kitchen table with an older, more experienced director to hone my skills at studying and explaining the music.)

1. Identify the pitfalls.
2. Establish all tempos and changes of tempo. Don’t just assume the band will follow you. **Show** them the speeds you intend to take during the general explanation.
3. Look for and call to the band’s attention repetition of rhythm and melodies.
4. Warn the band of thin scoring, and soft, especially if thinly scored, passages.
5. Identify minor keys. Accidentals are the telltale sign.
6. If dynamic contrasts are few, exaggerate them. I generally tend to overplay thinly scored spots, especially if they are marked *pianissimo*. Don’t say “*Pianissimo*—play out.” Students might really be confused, unless you have told them prior to the contest that if only one or two instruments are playing and the marking is soft, you’ll ask them to overplay the volumes for the sake of confidence.
7. On key changes, don’t just say “add an A flat.” Identify the measure(s) and if you teach a young band, check their fingers.

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To learn more about sightreading from Barbara Lambrecht, attend a TBA Professional Development Clinic this month. Barbara is presenting a clinic on January 23 at Texas Tech University in Lubbock and on January 30 at Eastwood High School in El Paso.

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Using Your Time...

During the General Explanation

1. First, look at the flute part to get the road map: keys, repeats, time changes. The flute part is no more than two pages, so you can find those things much easier than thumbing through 12 - 20 pages of score.
2. Try to get to the end of the piece during this time so that during your three to four minutes of being able to sing or count, you are actually doing that, explaining tricky rhythms or singing important passages.
3. Discuss style, perhaps relating it to music you played onstage. Remind the band about phrasing, not chopping off every two bars.
4. Let the band know who has the melody, and who has accompaniment so that they can balance to the melody.
5. If you say, "Practice the fingerings to the scale in X key" give the band time to do so.

During the Summative Explanation

1. DO sing. If you do not feel confident in your note accuracy when singing, join your church choir to improve your skills. **Practice** your sight singing. (I finger my instrument when I sing. It helps me find pitches.)
2. Learn to sing one line and clap another to demonstrate how parts fit together.
3. Vary your singing, perhaps counting on pitch, change to calling out pitch note names if the section is a soli, or say on pitch "clarinets have this" or "low brass enter here" especially if you are jumping around from part to part.
4. Don't stop early when explaining a tricky spot by saying "and so on" because many times the pitfalls are toward the end, perhaps the addition of a different or difficult rhythm.
5. Last ten seconds, return to the opening to reestablish the key and tempo.
6. After your warm-up note, empty the water from the brass spit valves.

Choices

Remember, you have choices in the sightreading room. You can speak in a loud voice, talking at a fast speed to get everything done in the time allotted. Or you can speak softer, in a calm voice with slower talking to instill confidence.

Tempos are yours to set. How slow or fast is your decision. If the music calls for Allegro – my suggestion is to play fast enough to be convincing in style, but not so fast that the band cannot look ahead or control their technique. Avoid "tempo di Tear-Ass."

Here's another choice you must make. Should you start talking immediately to be sure you cover everything, or should you study the score a minute to find the pitfalls to make sure that you talk about the most important spots? That's your decision, (but don't wait too long.)

Closure

When you have finished in the room, thank your band for their hard work. Compliment their performance whether you think they deserve it or not. They will have done everything humanly possible to perform well and to make you proud of them. Acknowledge that.

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And now these final reminders: Judges **do** watch the band during the explanation period.

Good tone is always going to be the most important factor. Phrasing counts. Intonation is important in the sight reading room too. Balance to the melody.

In my experience, I have found that judges are looking for bands that read confidently, with good style, balance, and convincing changes. I have noticed that the really good bands are flexible and respond to their conductors. Those bands listen to what they are playing and correct errors quickly.

Good luck to you as you prepare this spring for what I consider to be the most “fun” part of the contest.

Conductor of the newly formed Edge of Texas Band (El Paso Community Band) is Barbara Lambrecht, recent inductee into the Texas Bandmasters Hall of Fame. Barbara retired from her position as Director of Bands at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor after serving two years at UMHB and forty years of teaching band at the secondary level in Texas and New Mexico.

Mrs. Lambrecht has been the recipient of numerous awards including Texas Tech University's Distinguished Music Educator Award, Tau Beta Sigma's national Outstanding Service to Music Award, the Texas Chamber of Commerce Cultural Award, National Band Association Achievement Award, and the TMEA Achievement Award.

Over the years, Mrs. Lambrecht's bands have been selected for numerous honors including the prestigious Sudler Cup of Excellence. Her marching bands have been finalists at BOA Regional competitions, have won their class at numerous marching festivals, and been the recipient of the Greg Randall Award for Excellence.

Mrs. Lambrecht adjudicates state and local competitions, substitutes in the Roswell Symphony (NM) and teaches a growing studio of private flute students. She writes for and serves as contributing editor for *The Instrumentalist*. Her articles have been published in several other professional journals as well as bicycling magazines. She is the author of three books, one of which served as a textbook for sixth grade social studies students at Morehead Middle School. She writes and arranges music for band and for brass quintet; several of her pieces have served as sight reading music for Texas UIL, and four of her band pieces won first place in the Barclay Arts Competitions. Hal Leonard, E. C. Schirmer, and RBC Music Publishers have published her music.