

# SIGHT-READING STRATEGIES

## GETTYSBURG CHAMBER MUSIC WORKSHOP

"I can play something ok if I have some time to practice it, but I can't sight-read to save my life." How many times have we heard this lament or some variant, particularly among adult amateurs? It does express a common deficiency. Sight-reading is a specialized skill, which must be acquired separately and in addition to one's general technical work, so it's not unusual for a competent player to be a weak sight-reader.

The term "sight-reading" is a poor one since it's both obvious (how *else* will you read music if not by sight?) and inaccurate ("sight-playing" is a *little* closer, though not by much). It's been used to mean several different things, but the meaning we're concerned with here, and the only context in which the skill level really matters, is when a musician plays through his/her part with an ensemble without having seen the music before. Those who can do this successfully are valued and in demand.

You can report to friends that you "sight-read" a movement of unaccompanied Bach at home, and you may indeed have done so flawlessly. But your sight-reading skill is only relevant when other players are depending on it. Good sight-readers are quickly distinguished from less-good ones when the music is going along at a predetermined pace and won't pause for that extra split-second you need to find that new position.

The necessary skill set for true sight-reading is very different from the one most of us apply when we first try to play through a new piece we'll be working on. There, we are thinking about finding optimal fingerings and bowings, and are analyzing the problems and trying out various solutions as we go. When we miss a note, we go back and fix it. When we come to a thorny passage, we slow down to be sure we are grasping everything. This is how we spend much of our initial practice time on a piece, but it is antithetical to good sight-reading.

And this is why there is often a disconnect between a player's technical level and his/her sight-reading ability level. I have observed musicians of modest ability play "beyond themselves" in sight-reading situations, and others with virtuoso technique crash and burn when similarly challenged. The distinct skill-set for good sight-reading can be developed separately from one's overall playing abilities, and indeed must be, if one aspires to become a competent ensemble musician.

When playing in a group, of any size, our overarching principle should be *Primum non nocere* ("First, do no harm"). If three, four, or nine people are sitting down to read through a piece, they do not want to stop. The cardinal sin for an individual player is to mess up to the point where the ensemble falls apart. And, just like the more serious sins in life, it is almost always avoidable if one follows a few basic tenets.

Here, the most basic tenet is: *it's all about the ensemble and enabling a successful read-through, even if not every detail is right*. Some players (even high-level players) approach sight-reading like gladiators, and make it a point of pride to try and play every note regardless of steadiness. But that is neither good music-making nor even decent sight-reading. The better approach, and one that can be cultivated from your very earliest attempts, is to always place the imperatives of the group ahead of your own wishes and needs.

Everyone knows that good sight-reading requires the player to always scan ahead; to take in a new measure while still playing the current one. This “double vision,” like anything else, will improve over time with practice. But simply seeing what’s coming up is, of course, not enough. It’s how you process what you see, and how you then prioritize and execute, that counts.

Successful sight-readers move deftly around within a rigid hierarchy of tasks (“the Levels”). They’re like fencers, thinking ahead, anticipating the threats and challenges in the music, and adapting what they do on a measure-by-measure basis. They keep to the hierarchy, adding the next Level only when the lower ones are completely under control; experienced players do not jeopardize the ensemble by fumbling at a Level they can’t handle properly.

Thus, effective sight-reading training is about understanding these Levels to the point where you can apply and adjust them instinctively, automatically. As I’ve said, it’s a different kind of thinking, almost like playing a different instrument. For most people, the most difficult concept to wrap your head around is that *finding the actual pitches comes last*. Simply chasing notes will quickly lead to disaster when sight-reading within a group. You have to apply a different mental template, where it’s about something bigger than just those dots on the page.

Of course, the more technique you have, the more difficult music you can handle. But as sight-reading is a separate skill, it can be immediately improved with specialized work, whatever your level. In a nutshell, successful sight-reading requires three things at all times: (1) counting, (2) looking ahead, and (3) prioritizing. Counting and looking ahead are self-evident; it’s the prioritizing where things get interesting. To do it right, the hierarchy of tasks must be applied in strict order, as follows:

**Level I: Keep a steady pulse and maintain your place in the music (visually, if nothing else).** Meter, tempo, and pulse are paramount. (“The most necessary, most difficult, and principal thing in music is time” -- Mozart to his father). And your first responsibility is to your colleagues, who are depending on you to play in such a way as to allow them to get through *their* parts successfully. So if you can do nothing else, play just the rhythmic skeleton, keep the basic time, follow your music along visually, and resume full playing as soon as you can without disruption. Sacrifice what you must, but never act as a drag on the ensemble; the tempo might not be comfortable, but few things are more irritating than having someone play as though with continually-applied brakes.

So whatever you do play must always fit within the pulse of the music. If you executed every detail of a given measure to perfection, but required an extra 16<sup>th</sup>-note's worth of time to do so, you have failed. When a storm hits, the bar-lines are your friends; abandon all else and hold onto them! Everything is secondary to maintaining the pulse; violation of this imperative will almost certainly lead to a breakdown of the ensemble.

"Maintaining the pulse" is more subtle and difficult than simply counting; indeed, if you count without listening you will harm the group. It means integrating others' playing (which may well be inexact) into your counting. It requires intelligent and interactive listening to what's going on around you, and assimilation of that rhythmic activity into your internal pulse. Playing in "perfect time" to your own beat without regard to your partners will swiftly lead to a breakdown of the ensemble. (Always remain alert, though, for a *ritard*, *accelerando*, or other marking that alters the pulse.)

The best way to master this Level (and indeed music-making in general) is to mark the pulse physically, somewhere in your body. My teacher, Janos Starker, said that whenever you play anything, some muscle somewhere, between the top of your head and your little toe, must contract in time to the music. It could be any muscle, however small or unobtrusive, but it must mark time comfortably and steadily. Everything you play then "rides" on this internal pulse. (And it must be an *internal* pulse; no one wants to see or hear you tapping your foot.)

Lastly, be sure you're clear on "roadmap" issues in the music, such as repeat signs, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>d</sup> endings, *da capos*, and *fermatas*. Roadmap mishaps will always lead to a halt in the proceedings, but are easily avoidable with just a cursory scan. Consult with colleagues about which repeats will be taken, and take note of all the spots your eyes will need to jump somewhere. Watch and listen at *fermatas*; either follow or lead!

**Level II: Play correct rhythms.** If the pulse is solid, your next task is to render the rhythms precisely. The more complex the passage, the more important it is that the rhythm be accurate. A wrong (or dropped) note simply means the harmony sounds funny for a moment; it usually won't affect anyone else's playing. But a wrong rhythm can derail the entire ensemble even if the underlying pulse is steady.

Typical trouble spots you should look out for before undertaking to sight-read a piece include:

- *Tied notes.* A very common tendency (even in familiar music) is that the note following a tied-over note is often played too early. It's important that you both "feel" the tied-over note, and release it slightly, like an apostrophe; this way the next note will be on time.
- *Dotted rhythms.* The same tendency applies here; the note after the dot often comes too early. Try to feel the subdivision represented by the dot(s), and be sure that

you arrive on the next beat on time. It's better that short notes just before a beat come late rather than early (as long as the beat's on time!).

- *Syncopations.* Syncopations are, in essence, a series of tied notes and, again, it is vital that you feel all the beats that are elided. Indeed, you must feel them extra strongly since you're not playing them.
- *Changing divisions.* Watch out for "math" problems. Rhythms can often break down at junctures between triple and duple patterns. In complicated licks, make sure you can visually spot where each beat falls in the measure.
- *Meter and tempo changes.* While you might not know exactly what's in store at these points, at least note where they are ahead of time. When you get to them, be on your toes and ready to make whatever adjustment is needed.
- *Rests.* This is no time to relax. Count them out as carefully as notes. If a rapid figure begins with a short rest (say, the first of four 16<sup>th</sup>-notes), the note after the rest usually tends to be late. When you have a rest longer than a few beats, it's an opportunity to scan farther ahead. But keep counting while doing so!!

These issues will usually jump out at you as you scan through a part before playing it, and you should take a moment to sing or tap a tricky rhythm to yourself before starting. If you flip a page and a nasty lick comes at you completely on the fly, you should momentarily retrench back to Level I (play only what you can, while maintaining the pulse and your place).

If the passage is very fast, this might require leaving out one or more notes, repeating a note as a "place-holder," or perhaps just playing an open string. What some call "faking" is a legitimate and even admirable application of the Levels in their correct order, with the needs of the ensemble taking precedence over the "needs" of the individual player (who wants to hit all the notes).

Even for a player of modest abilities, it's fairly unusual that a rhythm cannot be sight-read, assuming you're playing a piece that's technically within reach. Rather, it's the rhythm *plus* the notes that tangles us up. The correct approach is to focus on rendering the rhythms precisely and in time, and getting only what notes are feasible along the way. Remember, wrong/dropped notes are far less disruptive to the ensemble than wrong/dropped rhythms.

The nodus of string playing is in the coordination of two entirely different tasks between the hands. It is a cross we bear alone; pianists and woodwind players of course need great ambidexterity, but their fingers are performing the same basic action. With us, the interplay between the bow and left hand is almost impossibly complicated; rhythm can come solely from the left hand, solely from the right, or (most often) through a combined action between the two. A run of steady 8th-notes becomes much harder in an asymmetrical bowing pattern (3+1, two-slurred/two-separate, etc.).

But again, the Prime Directive is to never lose time; so if you need to simplify a bowing pattern to stay on track, don't hesitate.

Accomplishing Level II thus requires the complete understanding (and practice) of the dictum that correct rhythms take precedence over everything except the basic pulse. This adjustment is counter-intuitive and quite difficult for most people, but until it is made, sight-reading will remain frustrating for the individual and for any group with which he/she plays.

**Level III: The notes** (finally!). If the passage is one for which the first two Levels are not problematic, then you can focus on the pitches. In your initial glance, obviously, look at the key signature, but try also to determine the mode (e.g., D major or B minor). Think through (or even quickly mime) both scale and arpeggio fingerings for that key, especially if it's one you're not generally conversant with. Next, scan for accidentals. If there's a sudden thicket of them, try to figure out if it's a chromatic passage or whether the key has simply changed. (In the latter case, the passage could actually be easier than if the key signature was in effect.)

Developing one's abilities on this Level involves an unconscious process of storing and recognizing more and more patterns. Over time, you will develop a "database" of common melodic and accompanimental figures, which you will begin to match to the music in front of you. There is a syntax to the music of each style period, and when you come upon a familiar pattern, you shouldn't need to read every note.

Instead, with practice, you will gradually learn to process notes in clumps rather than one at a time. For just one example, diminished-7<sup>th</sup> harmonies often contain both flats and sharps in the same chord. Once you begin to recognize the chord in an arpeggiated figure, you need only check where it starts and ends, and then plug in a standard fingering.

So although rhythmic groupings must be kept in mind no matter what (per Level II), advanced sight-readers also create a mental "overlay" of which notes belong together. Try to spot the notes on which you'll have to shift, and to which finger. Watch out for scale patterns with gaps in them. But above all, make sure that a sudden tricky passage doesn't make you neglect the first two Levels.

**Bonus points: Character and dynamics.** The Levels at which you're operating will be constantly changing according to circumstances. But through it all, you should always try to convey the overall character of what's in front of you. Even if the passage is so difficult that you're relegated to Level I, you can still notice that it's *pp*, or that the notes should be *staccato*.

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To recap a little bit, good sight-reading requires more than accurate counting and playing; you must keep your ears open at all times and process what you're hearing. Someone else in the ensemble might be playing a difficult lick that's about to come your way, and getting it in the ear ahead of time (even with flaws) puts you ahead of the game. Even more importantly, not everyone

in an ensemble will be equally adept at managing the different Levels (if they even know about them), and attentive playing from you could be a group's salvation.

Back in the 1960's, there was a safe-driving ad campaign on television whose slogan was "Watch Out For The Other Guy" -- the point being that it was not enough to simply follow the rules of the road yourself, but that you had to allow for others out there who weren't. The same applies here. Cellists, for example, frequently find themselves playing a fairly simple repetitive rhythm while the upper voices wrestle with something more florid and difficult. There is a fine line between maintaining a beat that the others can depend on and insisting on metronomic perfection as if in isolation. And if it's you that's playing the most complicated part, hew to the underlying beats and fake/drop whatever notes you need to in order to stay on track.

Remember, the success of the group trumps all. If a subtle adjustment from you will keep things together, you should make it, and discuss the issue later. But this can't happen if you're focused solely on yourself. No matter how difficult your part, keep your ears open and always relate it to what's going on around you. This discipline will pay off in increasingly successful sight-reading experiences for everyone.