

Sight Reading Skills

A Guide for Sight Reading Piano
Music Accurately and Expressively

Revised Edition



Faith Maydwell



West Australian-born Faith Maydwell has taught piano for more than 30 years. Her complementary activities since completing a Master of Music degree at the University of Western Australia in 1982 have included solo recitals, broadcasts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, accompanying, orchestral piano with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, examining for the Australian Music Examinations Board, lecturing at the University of Western Australia and the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts in the areas of keyboard harmony, sight reading and piano pedagogy, adjudicating, and presenting papers at state and national music seminars and conferences. Faith's university piano studies were under the tutelage of David Bollard (a student of Ilona Kabos and Louis Kentner), a founding member of the Australia Ensemble. In 1978 Faith won the Convocation Prize (UWA) for the best student of any year in the Bachelor of Music course and in 1979 she was a state finalist in the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Young Performers Awards competition. She has published a book, *Piano Teaching: A Guide for Nurturing Musical Independence* (See inside back cover for details).

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Some General Questions, Prerequisites, Materials Needed, Posture, The Diary,
Why Mikrokosmos? A Successful Approach, A Three-Pronged Approach,
Guided Reading, Keyboard Orientation - Motor Skills, Reading the Signs, Pedal,
Postlude, A Graded Sight Reading List, Appendix, Bibliography.
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*Thank you Tony for your inspiration and practical support for the
writing of this manual and sharing so much about one of the
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*Gill Dale-Jones, Philip Ellery, Janet Hocken,
Louise Hodge and Vivienne Ward.*

— FM

Contents

Some General Questions	2
Prerequisites	6
Materials Needed	7
Posture	8
The Diary	10
Why Mikrokosmos?	12
A Successful Approach	13
A Three-pronged Approach	14
Guided Reading	15
Keyboard Orientation - Motor Skills	16
Reading the Signs	20
Ledger Lines	24
Clefs	26
Key Signatures	28
Accidentals	30
Tempo	31
Rhythm	32
Chunking	36
The Checklist	38
Pedal	40
Postlude	41
A Graded Sight Reading List	43
Appendix One	45
Bibliography	46
Manuscript for exercises	48

Some General Questions

What is sight reading?

Sight reading is the ability to perform music at the first reading of a score. It might include music read in the past. However, unless a work is studied assiduously and over a long period, it is difficult to retain much of the detail.

Why another book on sight reading?

This book is not yet another set of sequential sight-reading pieces which all too often turn into dry and uninspiring exercises. It is a book to help in gaining skills in order to be able to explore good music meaningfully. When teaching this subject at university, there was not a great deal of literature available to aid the student. In less than one year students struggling with sight reading needed to be strong enough readers, able to tackle Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. This book is the accumulation of all the approaches and experiments that over the years reaped good results. I also use these ideas when teaching students of different ages and stages within my private studio.

Can sight reading keep on improving?

All musicians wish to sight read well. Whenever students tell me they feel a big improvement has been made I ask them what have they been doing differently. Invariably the answer is that they have been working consistently on a daily basis. It cannot be stressed enough that to try to improve reading by sporadically using the skill does not reap good results. However, consistency is not the only answer to sight reading well. I have known many students who have tried to sight read over a long period of time and frustratingly have not moved forward. Unfortunately, it is a too common attitude by teachers and musicians that sight reading is developed only by practising it. Add to daily practice specific guidance and help in understanding how to sight read, then progress will be dramatic. With knowledge, discipline and focus, a musician can match technical ability with reading ability. In other words, whatever recital piece is being polished, many more scores of the same difficulty can be read through satisfactorily if somewhat slower than the suggested tempo. This book aims to help those who want to approach music reading in a methodical and focused way so that results can be measured.

Who is this book directed to?

The possibility that sight reading can improve dramatically provides a great deal of hope for:

- The adult who says, “I used to play as a child but can no longer, as I don’t remember how to read.”
- The secondary or tertiary level student who has progressed through the grades with a handful of polished pieces but who is unable to explore chamber, vocal and orchestral scores, or even the most elementary of piano material in a satisfactory manner.
- The teachers who are locked into a pattern of studying half a dozen pieces with their students each year, leaving sight reading to the last minute before the examination. This usually results in the incoherent playing of an academic example labelled “Sight Reading Test”.

How do you feel about sight reading?

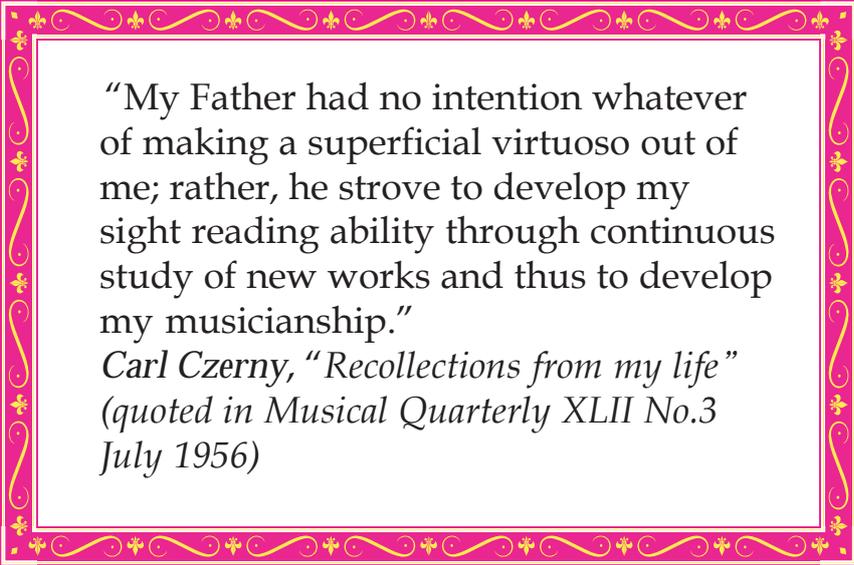
For most music students, reading music is an area fraught with negative feeling. In the initial class at the start of each year, when students are encouraged to briefly describe their thoughts and feelings associated with sight reading, words such as “fear”, “stress” and “panic” are often used. These reactions are understandable as experts agree that sight reading is one of the most complex of tasks, where material is presented in one form and needs to be instantly realised in another. Negative attitudes arise when the approach to it has been rather haphazard. However, with some help, sight reading can become an exciting musical experience.

When Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837) was eight he auditioned for Mozart. After he had finished a few pieces of Bach, Mozart put before him a composition of his own to test his sight reading. Hummel’s father said, “It came off quite well”. Shortly after Nepomuk moved into Mozart’s home becoming a student and treated like a child of the family.
Eric Schenk, “Mozart and his times”

Why is sight reading important?

Sight reading is one of the most useful skills for a musician. Here are a few reasons:

- For those involved in chamber and orchestral music, it is an extremely important skill because of the need to learn reams of music in a short time. As a professional accompanist, I am enthusiastic towards anything which helps me achieve a fluent and expressive rendering of a score in the shortest possible time. An exciting aspect of sight reading is that there is no ceiling. It can continue to improve through life. The practical outcome is that as reading becomes faster, the absorption of more repertoire will become faster.
- For the private studio and school music teacher with the need to demonstrate musical examples, accurate sight reading is of prime importance.
- Good sight-reading skills allow performers to play “off-the-cuff” on those rare moments when music is placed in front of them and there is no time to practise or rehearse. It happens!
- Acquisition of sight-reading skills leads to greater confidence in overall musicianship. A strong technique without reading proficiency reinforces insecurity and nervousness.
- As familiarity with a wider range of styles occurs and an individual’s “sound-bank” expands, overall musicianship will improve.
- Great repertoire does not have to belong solely to great performers. Any musician can have the pleasure of producing the right sounds if prepared to continually strive to improve his or her sight reading. What better ability can be carried through all stages of musical life? To take down from the music library shelf the score of a great work and to explore it coherently and expressively is a thrill.



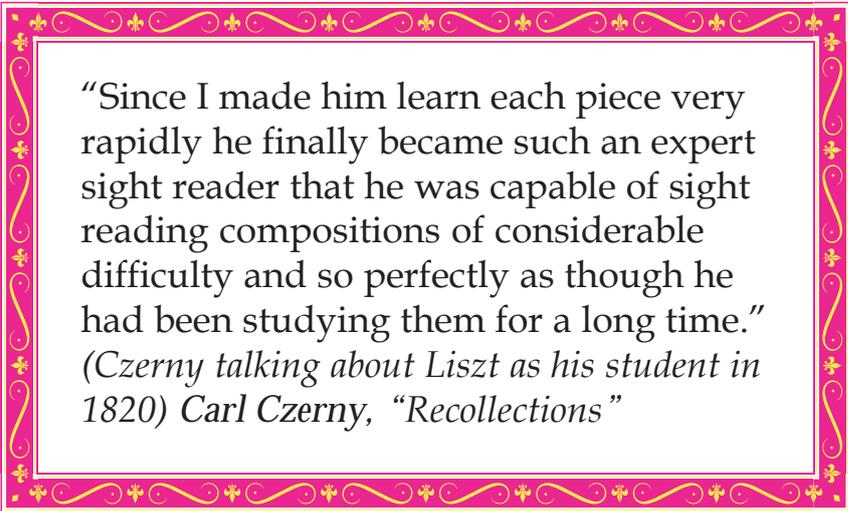
“My Father had no intention whatever of making a superficial virtuoso out of me; rather, he strove to develop my sight reading ability through continuous study of new works and thus to develop my musicianship.”

*Carl Czerny, “Recollections from my life”
(quoted in Musical Quarterly XLII No.3
July 1956)*

When is it best to sight read?

As sight reading is such a demanding and complex task, I recommend it be done when the mind is neither tired nor distracted. Experience has revealed that the initial reading of a score has a profound effect on how one reads a score subsequently. Incorrect perceptions stick like glue. This has particular significance if it is a piece that will eventually be learnt and polished.

When tackling a new score I always wait until my mind is fresh and clear, even if it means waiting a day. Working when tired or careless creates problems. Even when sight reading through a work once, maximum enjoyment cannot be obtained if there are many inaccuracies or not enough energy to create the expression and atmosphere of the piece. Notes and rhythms alone produce boredom and dryness in sight-reading study. Just a few minutes of sight reading every day when the mind is alert can reap enormous rewards.

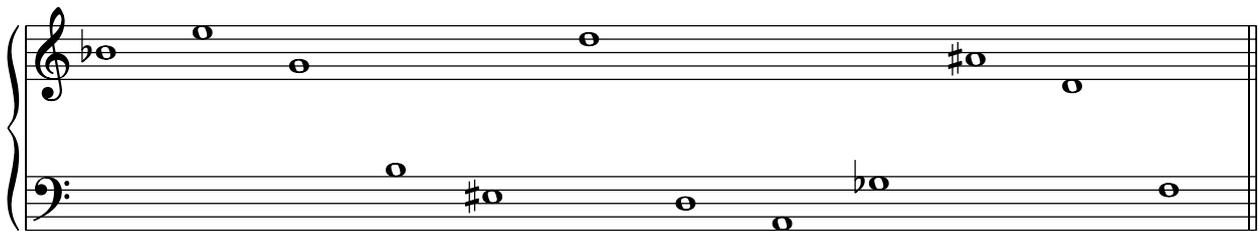


“Since I made him learn each piece very rapidly he finally became such an expert sight reader that he was capable of sight reading compositions of considerable difficulty and so perfectly as though he had been studying them for a long time.”
(Czerny talking about Liszt as his student in 1820) Carl Czerny, “Recollections”

Prerequisites

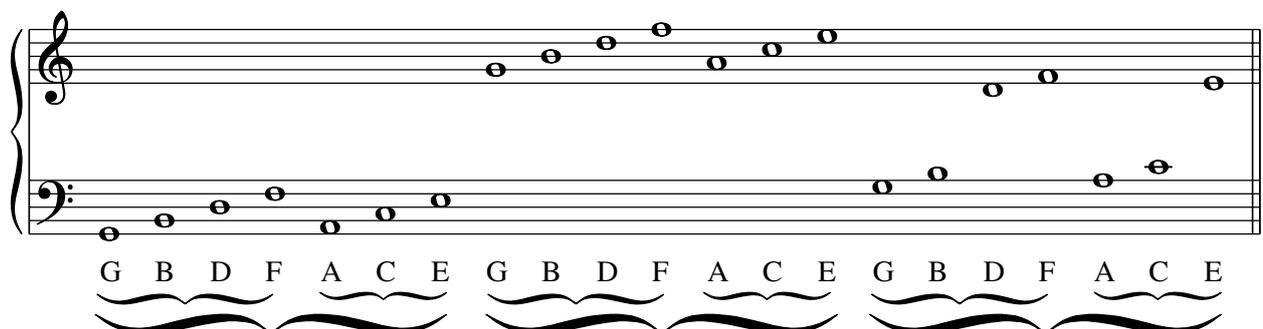
It is suggested that the whole book be read before practical work begins so that an overview can be gained and the most appropriate plan of action for each individual can be decided.

It is assumed that the basic notes and rhythms of the beginner's first months have been learnt, so that, for instance, the following notes can be named in under 10 seconds:



Learning the great staff is tricky for beginners. One of the most useful patterns for learning the great staff is GBDF and ACE which when said fast has a memorable lilt and in three positions covers all lines and spaces.

I do not teach mnemonics such as “Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit” because this involves a two-step procedure to identify the notes.



The page of manuscript at the back of this book can be used to write out any exercises to help visual recognition of notes, intervals, triads, etc. Students learn more when they work out their own exercises, discovering in the process often novel and creative approaches.

Materials Needed

1. Pencil and eraser.
2. Exercise book to be used as a sight-reading diary.
3. Mikrokosmos by Béla Bartók, Volumes Nos. 1-4.
4. Music dictionary.
5. Metronome.
6. Regular access to a piano or keyboard.

Be on the lookout for music scores to sight read. There are alternatives to buying new music; free Internet sites, second-hand bookstores, libraries and swapping music with friends. One of my students, who began learning the piano in his adult years, now finds great pleasure each weekend scouring the back stacks of both the city music and the nearby university music libraries. I asked: What is the motivation to work your way through piles of uncatalogued music? He replied, "I would hate to miss some unknown/rare gem that deserves to be better known." I joke with him that he is a prime candidate for writing *1001 Piano Gems to Sight Read Before You Die*. This pianist became interested in classical music because of general music classes in high school. The story is a good reminder to never underestimate the effect of good-quality teaching and music on a life.

Posture

The positioning of the body is important when sight reading. Students often place the piano stool extremely close to the piano with feet tucked under the stool and the head needing to rotate when a glimpse of the keyboard is required.

To help promote good posture while sight reading:

1. Be seated on the first third of the stool so that the feet, positioned near the pedals, are forced to become anchors for the body. Consequently, this allows quick movements to the extremes of the keyboard by leaning to the right or left, but not actually sliding or shifting on the piano stool. This position reduces the tendency of the back to sag thus accessing more strength and energy.
2. Place the lower side of the forearms roughly level with the keyboard.
3. Position the body away from the keyboard to be able to see the music and keyboard in one glance, so the head doesn't need to move up and down.
4. Line up the centre of the body with the centre of the piano to aid orientation. I favour middle C because of its central position on the great staff. Whatever note is chosen, work on making it consistent when sitting at the piano. When leaping through the air and stretching for intervals by feel, this central placement is an added security in keyboard orientation.



The Piano Lesson, c.1889 (detail)
Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919)

(This position does not allow the keyboard and the music to be observed at a glance.)



Marguerite Gachet at the Piano (detail)
Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Kunstmuseum Basel

(Though the back isn't sagging and the distance of the player to the keyboard in this famous painting is appropriate, do not emulate the collapsed finger joints.)

The Diary

Keeping a sight-reading diary is essential. Use an exercise book with a strong cover able to stand up to extended use. Enter details under these two sections:

1. *On double pages at the front*, record all music read. This record can be an enormous help in years to come, especially if progressing to teach music.

The listing of editions can be a useful resource when entering into the labyrinth of the publishing world. In dealing with composers such as Scarlatti, J.S. Bach, W.A. Mozart and Beethoven, the scores may vary greatly according to the edition. Time and experience teach us which ones we prefer. Urtext editions (ie, reference editions aiming to be as close to the original manuscripts as possible) are the best choice, as the page is generally uncluttered by editorial additions. However, editions with added fingerings, articulation, dynamics, etc., are interesting to read and can be particularly helpful for the newer student.

Brief comments in the last column will help to recall the sounds of each work and to analyse and understand the construction of the music. When beginning, students sometimes find this difficult. Here are some questions that aid in forming words about music:

Date	Composer	Work or Opus No.	Edition/Editor

- Does the music remind you of a painting, a scene, a story?
- Why would you want to teach or perform this work?
- Are there any special characteristics that belong only to this work?
- How is the main motif (musical idea) constructed?

2. *At the back of the diary*, list any sign or term that is not familiar. Write a concise definition beside it. It is helpful to have access to French, German and Italian dictionaries.

If these language dictionaries are not readily available a good dictionary of music will suffice at the start. The writing out of the sign or term and its definition not only reinforces the learning process but is tangible evidence of newly encountered material and is also a quick reference for the future. Search for details on the page and question everything. Do not forget to include titles. Effort in feeling secure with all details, including pronunciation of words, greatly enhances confidence.

Comments or Special Features

Why *Mikrokosmos*?

Mikrokosmos Volumes Nos. 1–4 by Béla Bartók are excellent works to read through because they are beautifully crafted and graded. Many manuals designed especially for sight reading are less than inspiring. In contrast, within these pieces we have “real” piano music full of imaginative constructions, using a variety of compositional methods that lead to the fingers being technically independent. The first few volumes were written to teach his nine-year-old son, Peter Bartók. In the preface, the composer suggests the usefulness of the pieces as sight-reading material and says that by the fourth volume the diligent student will be ready to study other compositions such as those in the *Anna Magdalena Notebook* and appropriate studies by Czerny.

For the first two volumes and the beginning of the third, the five-finger position is used (five fingers over five consecutive keys). Because the fingering is relatively straightforward, emphasis can be put on other elements, such as balance, rhythm, dynamics and phrasing. Bartók’s fingering patterns also help to establish good fingering habits.

The use of good-quality music for sight reading lines up with the philosophy that life is too short to waste on second-rate material. Sometimes the reaction to Bartók by students is that the sounds are too discordant or strange. This can possibly be overcome by helping the students to love other aspects of his music such as the driving rhythms or the lyrical lines, so that even the simplest beginner pieces of Volume I will be seen to contain special qualities not found in many specifically designed sight-reading tutors.

I recommend that even advanced students work through the first four volumes because weaknesses may be revealed in the gradual technical and expressive development of the works. This consolidates a firm foundation, which prepares the student for more difficult work. The number of works to set for reading varies. A beginner could perhaps handle one a day with the need to repeat the odd one. I set a few pages per week for tertiary piano students (non-majors). Keyboard majors could handle Volumes I and II in a week but perhaps one or two pages a day in the remaining volumes.

Due to their graded nature it is important to work through the numbers in sequence and not jump from here to there. It may be necessary to perform the pieces more slowly than suggested, with a few tries to get closer to the indicated speed. I would not move on until this can be attained.

A Successful Approach

In the initial reading of each piece the tempo can be sacrificed but not evenness, accuracy and expression. This is one of the most important insights for developing good sight-reading habits.

If there are pitch and rhythmic inaccuracies, then the speed is too fast. Accuracy and evenness are important guidelines for students. Sight reading which snatches at notes in a hazardous, bumpy way is neither confidence-building nor gratifying in any way. The overall effect must be a musical one. Accuracy includes all the detail on the page: phrasing, dynamics, tempo changes, fingering, terms and signs. Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* develops slowly enough for this to be achieved and for positive habits to be established. Subsequently sight reading is more likely to continue in this vein.

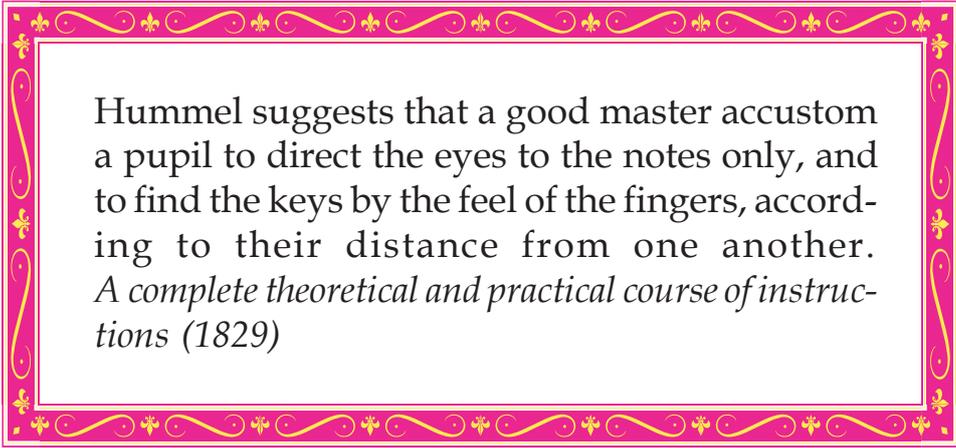
Here are some student reflections after they have used *Mikrokosmos* for sight reading:

Intermediate level - young adult (20 years) "I liked Bartok's unconventional, challenging ways - the element of surprise."

Intermediate level - mature age (50-60 years) "Mikrokosmos has helped with accuracy of rhythm and placement of the fingers. Bartok puts lots of little tricks in there. The music is unpredictable."

Advanced level - teenage (16 years) "I found Mikrokosmos to be a very valuable learning experience. It has developed my musical ability, as well as my coordination and listening skills. I would highly recommend it for sight-reading for all ages and stages of piano playing."

Advanced level - adult (24 years) "I liked the way the pieces get progressively harder, so that before I knew it I was playing pieces I wouldn't have thought of sight reading when I started (a year ago). Also, the goal and sense of accomplishment upon finishing a book is really motivating."



Hummel suggests that a good master accustom a pupil to direct the eyes to the notes only, and to find the keys by the feel of the fingers, according to their distance from one another.
A complete theoretical and practical course of instructions (1829)

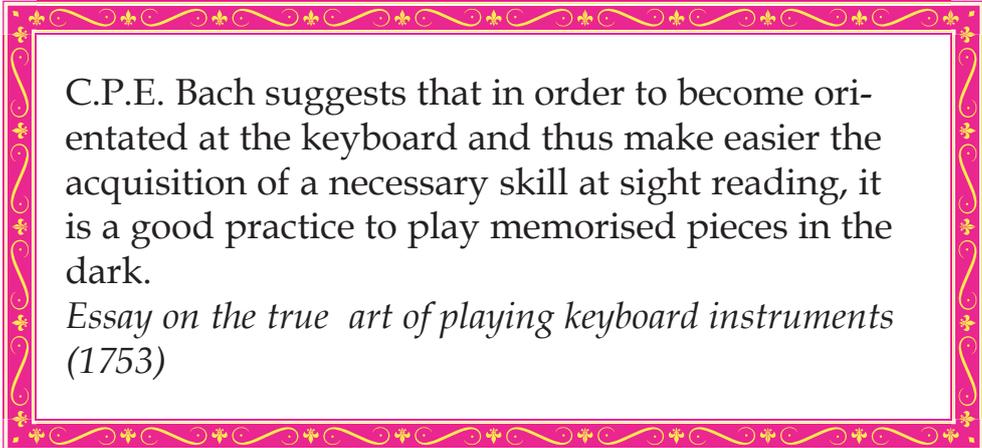
A Three-Pronged Approach

There are three areas that need to be worked on simultaneously for strong sight-reading skills to develop:

Guided Reading: The teacher plays the same material along with the student.

Keyboard Orientation: The execution of the signs using motor skills which are independent of the need to look at the keyboard. This means that the eyes are free to be trained on the music allowing more time to absorb the detail of the score. Special skills are needed to orientate oneself at the keyboard confidently, accurately and playing blind at the same time. In the blind search for a key, care must be taken not to affect tone and touch. The fingers can move irregularly, thus interrupting the smooth movement from one note to the next.

Reading the signs: The rapid recognition of the material in the score.



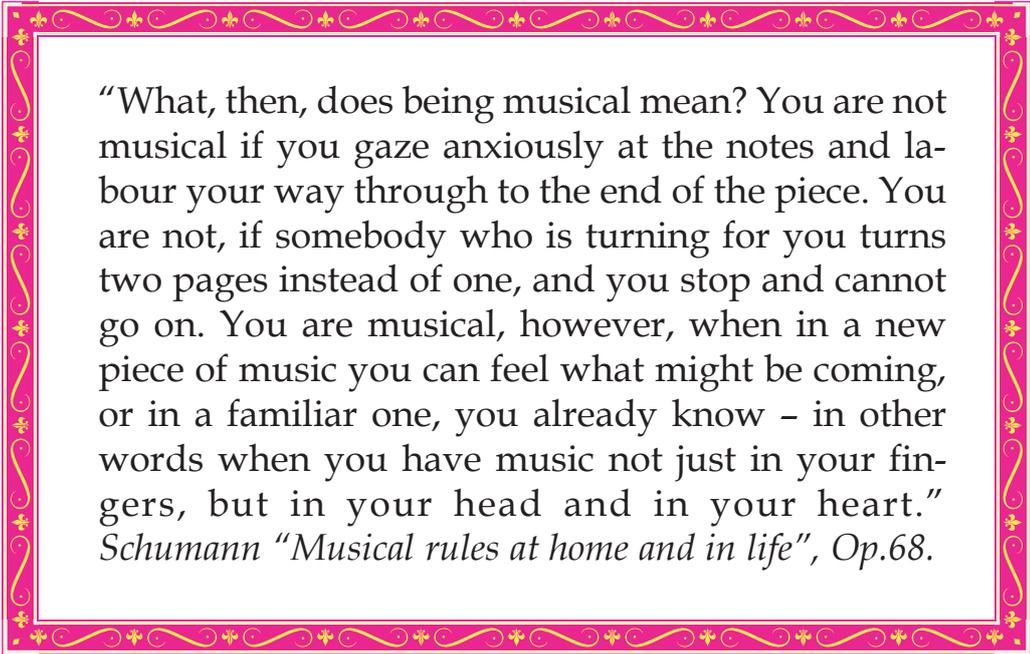
C.P.E. Bach suggests that in order to become orientated at the keyboard and thus make easier the acquisition of a necessary skill at sight reading, it is a good practice to play memorised pieces in the dark.

Essay on the true art of playing keyboard instruments
(1753)

Guided Reading

Viennese music pedagogue Leonhard Deutsch in *Piano: Guided Sightreading* (1950) devised a method of piano teaching based on this procedure. Before using this method, I would not have believed how useful guided sight reading was in building the student's confidence and security. When experimenting with these ideas, I discovered that sight reading improved dramatically when a second piano (or higher or lower on the one piano) joined in. The student cannot hurry ahead or fall behind. Rhythm is greatly aided as the student relies on the teacher for rhythm and tempo allowing more time to reflect on the expressive issues of playing. As if by osmosis, much of the teacher's shaping of the music is transferred to and then expressed by the student. When completing a work, I have often caught a glimpse of extra enthusiasm ignited in the student by the satisfying musical sounds created.

I do not, however, use Deutsch's method alone. It is important that the student be rhythmically independent. I regard rhythmic independence from the beginning as a helpful and important element in understanding musical language. A later section on rhythm outlines the acquisition of rhythmic independence from the beginning. Guided reading, however, is a wonderful introduction to chamber music. Begin with one person leading, breathing in on the upbeat at the required tempo to create a co-ordinated ensemble. Counting-in is therefore unnecessary. Find a more confident pianist than yourself who is happy to sight read through works with you. Dividing a piece, one taking the treble and other the bass, is also helpful. Another strategy is to play piano duos.



“What, then, does being musical mean? You are not musical if you gaze anxiously at the notes and labour your way through to the end of the piece. You are not, if somebody who is turning for you turns two pages instead of one, and you stop and cannot go on. You are musical, however, when in a new piece of music you can feel what might be coming, or in a familiar one, you already know – in other words when you have music not just in your fingers, but in your head and in your heart.”
Schumann “Musical rules at home and in life”, Op.68.

Keyboard Orientation - Motor Skills

Initially, look at the keyboard for all of the following keyboard orientation exercises. When fluent, do the exercises with the eyes closed, or use a device to cover the keyboard to achieve the same purpose. (The playing surface of a board game is ideal for slotting under the music stand on a grand piano to block the player's vision.)

1. Begin keyboard orientation by allowing the hands to hang beside the outer sides of the legs. Slowly bring them up to the keyboard and feel for the two black-note clusters, one octave above middle C (right hand), and one octave below (left hand). Hands together, using fingers 2 and 3, quietly play these notes. This seemingly simple exercise trips up the most advanced of piano students. It is worth working on until the hand can fall naturally on to these notes as confidently as when the eyes are open.

2. From the two-note black cluster position, move the hands to the three-note black clusters, using fingers 2, 3 and 4 and keeping the hands one octave apart. Continue from two to three note clusters up and down the keyboard.

3. It is only in music for beginners that one does not need the hand to stretch out of the five-finger position. When the hand has to stretch further, the difficulties increase. This next exercise specifically helps to gauge the intervallic distances:

Begin low on the keyboard so that you can play through to the

Seconds to Ninths

1 2 1 3 1 4 1 etc.
8ba-----

5 4 5 3 5 2 5 etc.
8ba-----

interval of a ninth (if you can reach it). The exercise can be done starting on any note by:

- ascending keyboard white notes,
- descending keyboard white notes,
- contrary motion white notes both hands starting on the same note and when once a seventh is played, move inward,
- working a), b) and c) in different keys.

By now the weaker intervals will have revealed themselves. If sevenths are weakest then an exercise can be constructed using only this interval and the intervals that immediately surround it. Feel for sixths by stretching out from the five-finger position, the seventh by moving in one note from an octave and the ninth by moving one note out from the octave.

Record the initial speed and work until the exercise (nine intervals) can be achieved in about ten seconds.

	Ascending	Descending	Contrary Motion
Key C			
Key...			
Key...			

4. For the next stage there are many possibilities. I suggest working scales and arpeggios for only two octaves, mainly as a time-saving device, as the emphasis is on orientation and not only virtuosity (see appendix 1 for fingering). Here are some suggestions for blind playing:

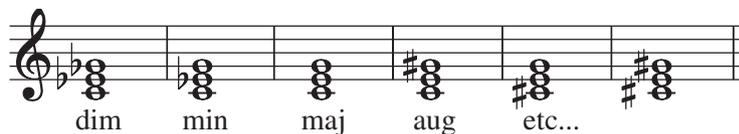
- a) Major and minor similar motion scales.
- b) Major and minor contrary motion scales.
- c) Chromatic scales similar motion.
- d) Major and minor arpeggios.
- e) Dominant seventh arpeggios.
- f) Diminished seventh arpeggios.
- g) Major and minor scales in octaves.
- h) Chromatic scales in octaves.
- i) Arpeggios in octaves.

5. This exercise targets the flexibility of horizontal movement: With the right-hand thumb, play any note and remain on that key while playing a chromatic scale ascending from the starting note, using only finger 2 as far as it can stretch. Once the limit is reached, play a semitone higher with finger 5 and descend chromatically, again using only finger 2. Work through the exercise using finger 3, 4 and then 5 using legato touch as much as possible. Notice how much more flexible the thumb side of the hand is.

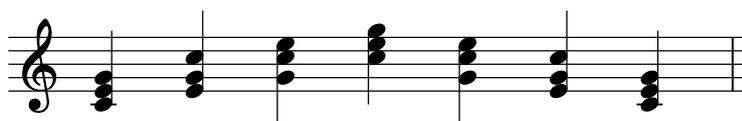
6. Along with the work on “blind” scales and arpeggios, work sequentially on the following triad and chord exercises:

Triads

Separate hands first then hands together. Work either from augmented to diminished or vice versa.



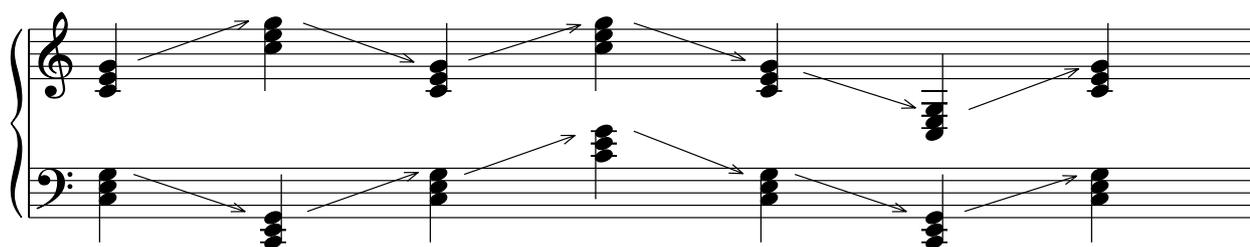
Triads and inversions



Separate hands first then hands together. Use major or minor triads.

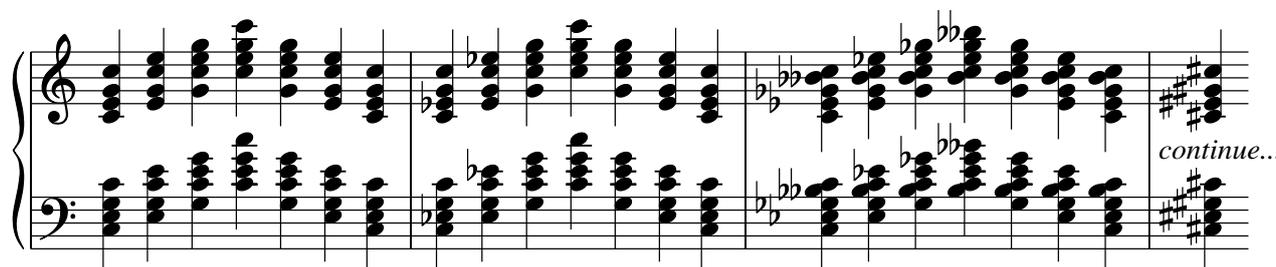
Jumping triads

As an intermediate step to moving around the keyboard, use any one of the triads from the top example and displace them one octave. It was Howard Richardson in *Super Sight Reading Secrets* (1986) who first drew my attention to the usefulness of octave displacement exercises in establishing security with orientation. Single notes, intervals, triads, four and five-note chords and even whole passages of music are some of the variants that can be used. Any pattern is possible but the following one is easy to remember and covers contrary and similar motion movement. Play hands together.



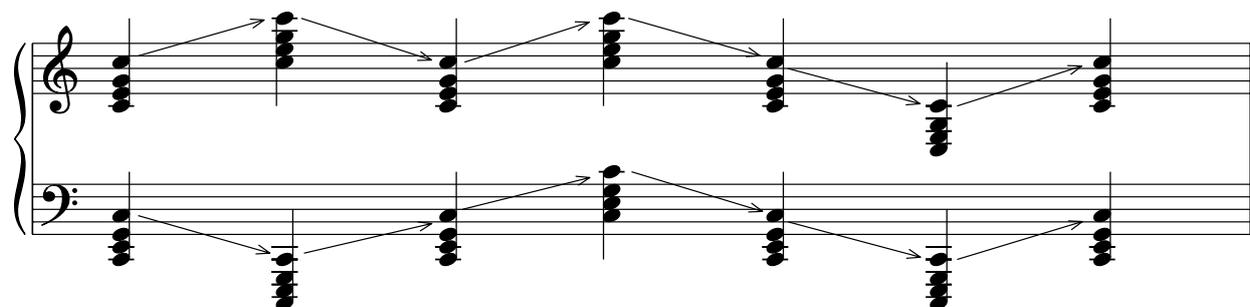
Inverted chords

Major, minor and diminished chords in their inversions. Play separate hands first:



Chords with a pivot note

After playing a major, minor, dominant seventh or diminished seventh chord, take the tonic with the other side of the hand according to the direction you are moving in so that there is always a note connecting the chords. This is the pivot note. Again any pattern can be used but the following one is easy to remember and covers all movements. Towards the end of Johannes Brahms' *51 Exercises* are some harder versions of this exercise.



Chords without a pivot note

Practise the example above but without the use of the pivot note. Any sequence of chords from a homophonic passage could be used for octave displacement work.

Exercises should be kept to the simplest possible formula or too much time is wasted in trying to explain or decipher them. As soon as they are mastered, it is time to move on.

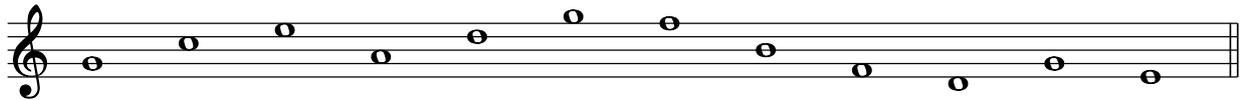
Summary

Describing the motor skills needed for keyboard orientation requires only a small amount of space. However, it may take months for some of the stages to be mastered. With the jumping triads and four-note chords hold down the chord until ready to jump smoothly and symmetrically to the next chord (both hands moving at a similar pace). The resulting sound should be resonant and warm and not percussive, hard or brittle. Excessive movement needs to be eliminated. Extra flying through the air is an unnecessary waste of time and energy. There should be no hesitation when finding new notes. Think out the new position before you move. Slightly more pressure on the top note of the right hand chord will result in a clearer sound. As in all piano music, the balance of the chords is one of the aspects to creating masterful sounds. It is easy to forget about beauty of sound when working on tactile exercises. Scales need to be even, not too heavy and without accent on the first note. Because the keys cannot be seen, students can easily fall into an attitude that the ears cannot hear. With exercises, musical sounds are of prime importance.

Reading the Signs

Work through the following lines, moving on only when a staff can be played in ten seconds. Even though such material is devoid of musical inspiration it is my preference to real music when working on speed. Such a format also helps in the quick identification of problem areas. Join the sounds using finger substitution if needed. Note the initial time it took to read each line. If more work is needed at any stage it would be helpful to construct similar exercises.

1. Right Hand



2. Left Hand



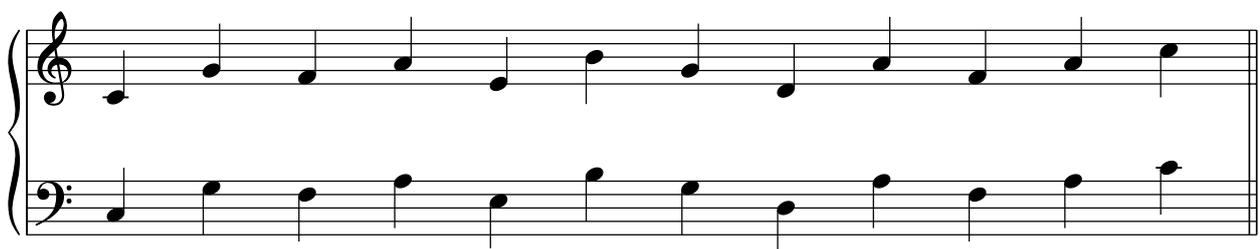
3. Right Hand



4. Left Hand



5. Parallel Unison



6. Parallel at the 6th

Musical notation for exercise 6, showing parallel motion at the 6th interval. The treble staff starts on G4 and moves up stepwise to G5. The bass staff starts on G3 and moves up stepwise to G4. Both staves end with a double bar line.

7. Contrary motion

Musical notation for exercise 7, showing contrary motion. The treble staff starts on G4 and moves up stepwise to G5. The bass staff starts on G3 and moves down stepwise to G2. Both staves end with a double bar line.

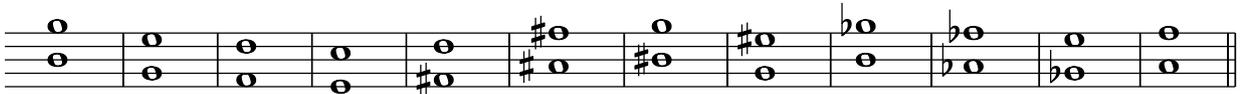
8. Random motion

Musical notation for exercise 8, showing random motion. The treble staff starts on G4 and moves up stepwise to G5. The bass staff starts on G3 and moves up stepwise to G4. Both staves end with a double bar line.

9. Random motion with accidentals

Musical notation for exercise 9, showing random motion with accidentals. The treble staff starts on G4 with a sharp sign, moves up stepwise to G5 with a flat sign, and ends with a double bar line. The bass staff starts on G3 with a sharp sign, moves down stepwise to G2 with a flat sign, and ends with a double bar line.

10. Intervals: 2nds to octaves, treble or bass clef.





11. Triads

Right Hand

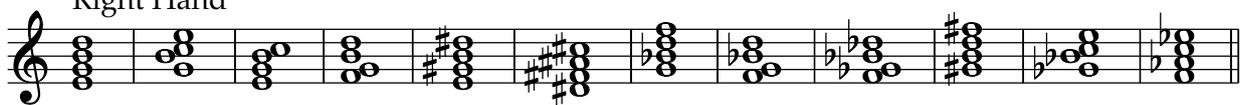


Left Hand



12. Four-note chords

Right Hand



Left Hand



Ledger Lines

Every pianist needs to be fluent in reading up to five ledger lines above and below the staves.

With the right thumb, play the first ledger line above the treble staff. Stretch a ninth above this note to play the B with finger 5. This is the fifth ledger line.

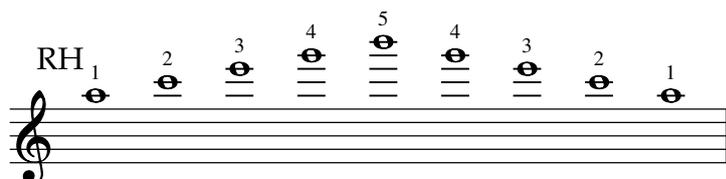


For the ledger lines below the treble staff, play the first with finger five and stretch down a ninth to the B with the thumb.



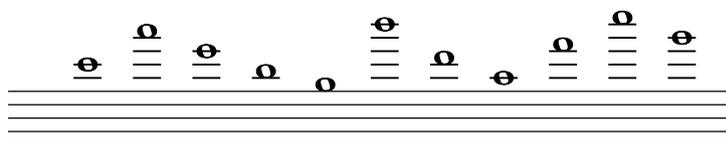
Left hand, above and below the bass staff, can become accustomed to the first and fifth ledger line in the same manner. Consolidate these four ninths so that the positions, picked at random, can be found without hesitation.

Next fill out the ninths with the other three ledger lines as follows:



Once again, practise this exercise in all the positions above and below the treble and bass staves.

The next stage is to read the treble or bass staves (by turning the page upside down) either above or below the staff. The fingering should be similar to that used in the previous exercise. The advantage of this is that the sounds can still be legato and the notes basically under one hand position rather than stabbing at notes with odd fingers.



Now rhythm is added and small phrases can be practised, again using the four positions on the staff. Compose your own motifs using many of the ledger line pitches.



Studies by Weaver have shown that the means by which the eye moves is determined by the nature of the music. In homophonic music the eye tends to move vertically and then sweep to the right followed by a further vertical movement. In more contrapuntal music the sweeps are more horizontal, moving a short distance along one line then returning to move along the other.

The Musical Mind (1985)

Video has shown that the eye can move dozens of times between the page and keyboard in just a few short measures, hence the often slow and inaccurate reading as the eye searches for the correct note on the keyboard then tries to find the place on the music score. According to Sloboda, the eye at normal reading distance can take in a circle of approximately an inch in diameter. A multitude of snapshots is taken at about seven per second, the eyes sweeping from circle to circle and absorbing information during the static fixations and not during the sweep.

The Musical Mind (1985)

Clefs

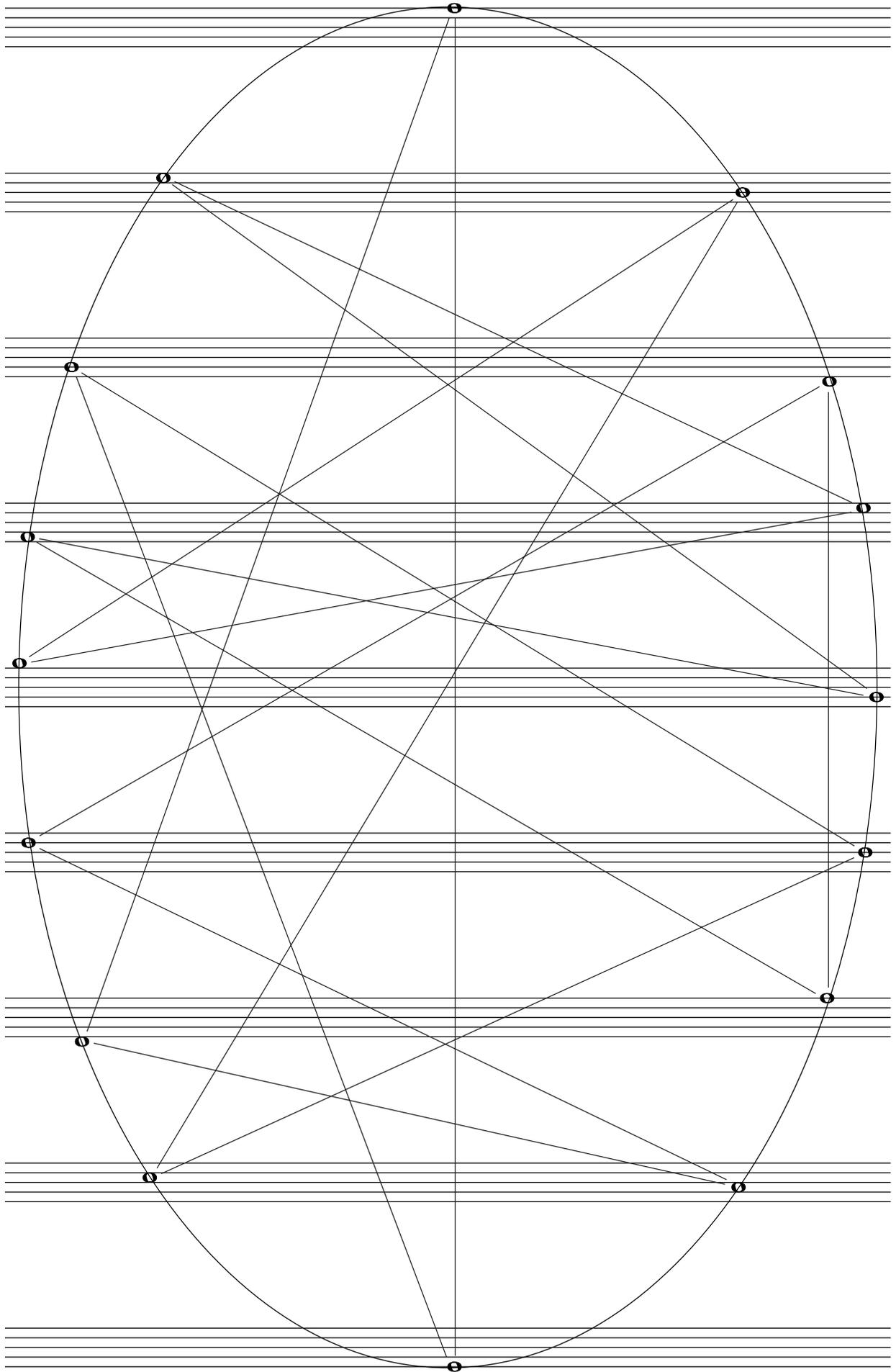
A pianist must be able to read all clefs in order to understand orchestral, chamber and vocal music and to transcribe this music for the piano. The two most common clefs after the treble and bass are the tenor clef (violoncello, bassoon, trombone) and alto clef (viola). The C clef C is not only used for the alto and tenor but also as the soprano, mezzo-soprano and baritone ranges. The only thing that changes is its position on the staff. The point where the two curved lines meet is always middle C (c^1).



Familiarity with reading the various clefs can be achieved by working around the circle diagram clockwise or anticlockwise or alternatively follow the lines drawn at random (see following page).

Recognition of clef changes in the music is often overlooked by students. Before sight reading an example, the clefs should be checked because of the odd occasion when piano music commences with two treble clefs or two bass clefs. Specific practice could involve asking the student to count up the number of clef changes within a few lines. Measures 17-26 from Schumann's *Album for the Young* Op. 68, No. 33 (*Wine Harvest - A Merry Time!*) provide such an example:

The image displays a musical score for Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, No. 33, measures 17-26. The score is written for piano and features frequent clef changes. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 17-22, and the second system contains measures 23-26. Clef changes are indicated by asterisks (*) and the word "Red." (read) below the staff. The first system shows changes from bass to treble, then back to bass, and finally to treble. The second system shows changes from bass to treble, then back to bass, and finally to treble. The score includes various musical notations such as trills (tr), triplets (3), and dynamics (p).



Key Signatures

Failure to observe the key signature would have to be one of the most common mistakes in sight reading. On the following page, key signatures can be picked at random and identified in either the major or minor key scheme. This chart is good to use when choosing a key for the “blind” exercises. This process reinforces learning the note names of each scale, something pianists sometimes bypass, relying on hand shapes and patterns rather than actual note description.

Students I have surveyed listed these as the main difficulties in sight reading, in order of importance:

- Reading/finding the notes
- Rhythm
- Maintaining a steady tempo
- Key and accidentals
- Dynamics
- Chord structure
- The details, ie, dynamics or phrasing
- The appropriate style

Expressive issues often came last and in some occasions did not rate at all. This is confirmed when listening to students’ initial approach to sight reading. Notes and rhythm are sometimes accurate, but little else. Under these conditions, it is no wonder that the activity is often associated with little or no enjoyment.

A musical score for piano, consisting of 15 numbered measures. The score is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The measures are arranged in a non-linear fashion across the page:

- Measure 1: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 2: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 3: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 4: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 5: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 6: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 7: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 8: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 9: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 10: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 11: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 12: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 13: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- Measure 14: Bass clef, notes G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2.
- Measure 15: Treble clef, notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

Accidentals

Helping students negotiate accidentals is extremely important. Short-term memory needs to be engaged so that the information is not forgotten until the barline is reached. Of course, the longer the measure and the slower the tempo, the harder it is to remember the accidentals. Before students play, they should count as quickly as possible the number of notes affected by accidentals. *Wintertime* from Schumann's *Album for the Young* Op. 68, No. 38:

The musical score is for the piece 'Wintertime' from Schumann's 'Album for the Young', Op. 68, No. 38. It is written in 3/4 time, B-flat major, and marked 'Ziemlich langsam'. The score consists of two staves: a right-hand staff and a left-hand staff. The right-hand staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The left-hand staff begins with a bass clef and the same key signature. The tempo marking 'Ziemlich langsam' is placed above the first measure. The right-hand staff has dynamic markings '1.p' and '2.pp' in the first measure. The score contains several measures with various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) on notes, which are the focus of the text. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Students could also circle these notes before the piece is sight read—until the habit of consistently observing accidentals is established.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart writing to Leopold Mozart about the pianist Vogler: I should mention that before dinner he had scrambled through my concerto at sight (the one which the daughter of the house plays—written for Countess Lützow). He took the first movement *prestissimo*, the Andante *allegro* and the Rondo, believe it or not, *prestississimo*. He generally played the bass differently from the way it was written, inventing now and then quite another harmony and even melody. Nothing else is possible at that pace, for the eyes cannot see the music nor the hands perform it. Well, what good is it?... Well you may easily imagine that it was unendurable. At the same time I could not bring myself to say to him, *Far too quick!* Besides, it is much easier to play a thing quickly than slowly: in certain passages you can leave out a few notes without anyone noticing it. But is that beautiful? In rapid playing the right and left hands can be changed without anyone seeing or hearing it. But is that beautiful? And wherein consists the art of playing *prima vista*? In this: in playing the piece in the time in which it ought to be played, and in playing all the notes, appoggiaturas and so forth, exactly as they are written and with the appropriate expression and taste, so that you might suppose that the performer had composed it himself.

Tempo

A most helpful exercise is to learn to instantly gauge metronome marking.

♩ = 60. Clap one beat per second.

♩ = 120. Clap two beats per second.

♩ = 90. Clap between the two preceding tempi.

When a metronome marking is given, clap the pulse and check with the metronome to see how close you are.

A common mistake regarding tempo is when the piece has a written tempo of say “Allegro” (but no metronome marking) and because students see the metronome as marked ♩ = “whatever” for allegro, they can’t make the tempo fit. The tempo needs to be worked out the other way round. The music should be carefully examined, especially the busiest measure and the slowest moving measure and the question asked, “At what tempo does this music sound best?” A pulse can be established, then the metronome checked to see what the marking of the pulse is.

Occasionally I require “speed reading” where the tempo is chosen and the student may need to skip notes in order to keep up. For this, chamber works are mostly used, with the student initially reading a single line, and myself the accompaniment. Not only does this introduce the student to some wonderful chamber music but it is fun, even if a little less than perfect. The effect must not be a demoralising one or confidence is quickly lost. I do not recommend this type of reading too often as I do not think it actually improves reading ability and because it can so easily turn into a meaningless mess.

Never just strum. Put your mind to it when you play, and do not stop half-way through a piece! Dragging the tempo and hurrying are both bad mistakes.

Take care to play easier pieces well and beautifully: that is better than a mediocre performance of a difficult piece.

Robert Schumann “Musical Rules at Home and in Life”, Op. 68.

Rhythm

“And the rhythm of life is a powerful thing”

A common remark by new students is “but I can’t count and play”. On returning after briefly leaving my seven-year-old alone with a sight-reading assignment, I mentioned I would like to hear the notes with their correct values. He quaintly said, “Oh, you want the rhythm as well?” – a rather unexpected remark as we had never ignored the rhythm in the past: obviously, rhythm does take a great deal of effort and care. Many advanced students exhibit a *laissez faire* attitude towards rhythm. However, approximation is not good enough. I have often come across students who have negotiated years of lessons by sheer guesswork with rhythm. Lack of secure rhythm reflects a lack of meaning in the music. As Sloboda (*The Musical Mind*, 1985) points out, we have familiar recurring patterns such as scales and arpeggios to organise the music but we do not have a dictionary of musical motifs to refer to. He says that rhythm plays an extremely important role in the organising process of reading, helping us to place material into units: small phrases, bars and half bars.

To be careless with the rhythm also means fluency and evenness are lost. The notes and rests must be played with correct values. Starting from the simplest of beginners’ scores, the pulse needs to be established: that is, felt throughout every bar.

Many ways have been suggested as to how a student discovers this level of security. I have had success using a variety of these steps:

1. Simultaneously clapping treble and bass line rhythms by right and left hands on lap.
2. As above, but now counting aloud the main beats.
3. Counting aloud the main beats while playing the music.
4. Recognising and feeling the main beats when playing the score, but not counting aloud.

Watch for any extra body movement caused by concentrating on the rhythm. Eliminate any toe tapping, head nodding or body swaying, all of which can hinder playing evenly and without unnecessary accents.

With most beginners' music, isolation of the rhythmic lines into right and left hand clapping is straightforward. As music becomes more complex and divides into three, four or more lines, rhythm work can still be achieved by choosing two lines. This work also helps in isolating inner voices of polyphonic textures.

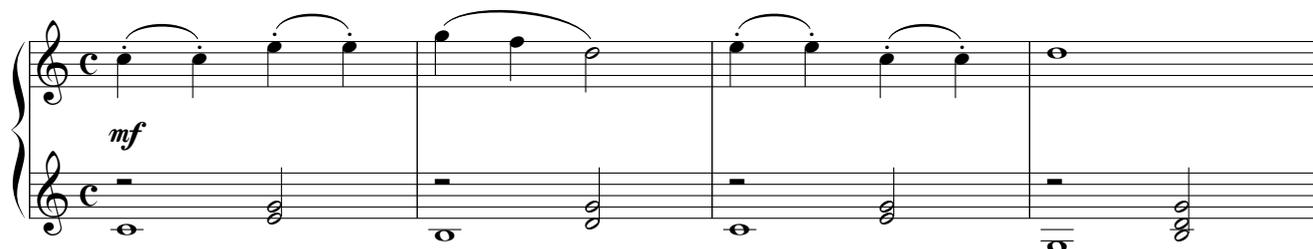
Ex.1 - The outer two lines from *Mignon*. Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, No. 35, mm. 13-22.

The musical score for Ex.1 consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system covers measures 13-16, and the second system covers measures 17-20. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/C minor), and the time signature is 3/4. The score is written for the right and left hands. The right hand part features a melodic line with slurs and accents, marked with *sf* (sforzando) in measures 13, 14, 15, and 16. The left hand part consists of a bass line with slurs and accents, marked with *sf* in measures 13, 14, 15, and 16. The second system starts with a *p* (piano) dynamic in measure 17 and includes a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking in measure 18. The left hand part in the second system is marked with *p* in measure 17 and has slurs and accents in measures 17, 18, 19, and 20.

Ex.2 - The bass and tenor lines from Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, No. 30, mm. 1-8.

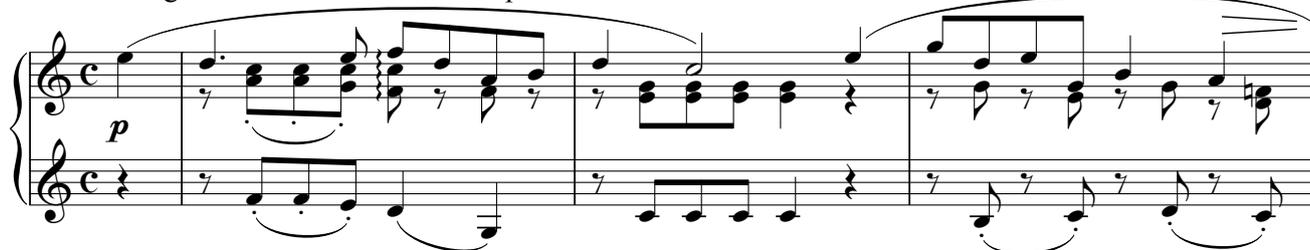
The musical score for Ex.2 is for Schumann's 'Album for the Young', Op. 68, No. 30, measures 1-8. The tempo is marked 'Sehr langsam' (Very slow). The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/C minor), and the time signature is common time (C). The score is written for the right and left hands. The right hand part features a tenor line with slurs and accents, marked with *p* (piano) in measure 1. The left hand part features a bass line with slurs and accents, marked with *p* in measure 1. The score includes a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.) in measures 7 and 8. The second ending is marked with *pp* (pianissimo) in measure 8.

Choosing what beat to count aloud depends on the subdivision of the beat. Where there is no subdivision, as in *For the Tiny Ones* - Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, Appendix 2, mm. 1-4.



If the rhythm is more complex, count the half beats as in measures 1-3 of No. 21 and measures 1-4 of No. 25, *Memories of the Theatre* from Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68.

Langsam und mit Ausdruck zu spielen ♩ = 88



Etwas agitiert



Where the rhythm is even more complex, the student in preparation can place small bars under the bass clef marking the subdivisions to be counted aloud. No. 9 - *A Folksong* from Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, mm. 9-11.



Place the rhythmic framework in easier measures preceding the more difficult ones so that the pulse can be firmly established.

When the music contains duplets or triplets, it is important to maintain a steady main beat and to make the division of the beat even. One rhythmic exercise which should be mastered at the start of sight reading study is to count aloud four main beats and subdivide each beat with two even claps:

Count	1	2	3	4
	x	x	x	x
Clap				

Then subdivide into three:

Count	1	2	3	4
	x	x	x	x
Clap				

And similarly, four and five:

Count	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Clap								
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
								

Then clap four measures as follows:

Count	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Clap								

Chunking

This is the process of organising material into blocks of information rather than individual units. Recognition of familiar patterns is important. An example is *First Loss* (No. 16) from Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, mm. 1-5. Measures 2, 3 and 4 could be read as four individual notes or the tonic chord, the subdominant chord in second inversion and then the tonic chord.

Nicht schnell



It is important to recognise previously encountered patterns within the same piece. A motif once played is going to be easier to negotiate the second time because the pattern has already been worked out and is familiar material. Students need practice at recognising such material away from the keyboard. For instance, how many times does the opening motif of measure one occur in the first 12 measures of *Song of the Reaper* from Schumann's *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, No. 18?

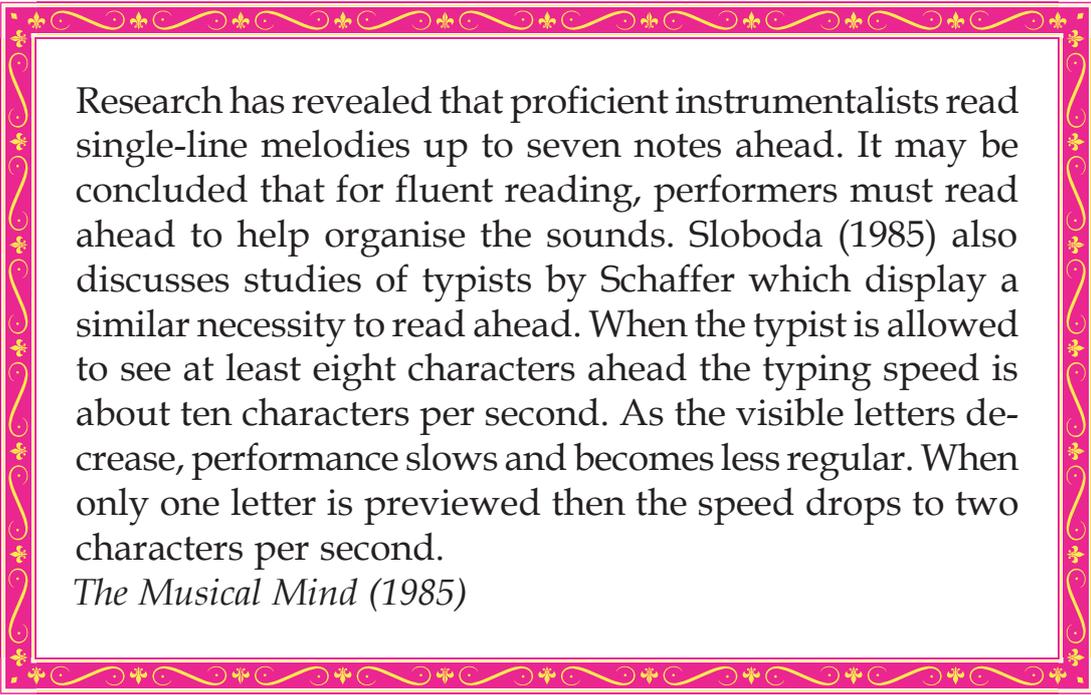
Nicht sehr schnell



When examining the main motifs of a piece, always check the fingering because the main idea is often repeated throughout the work. Sometimes a consistent fingering will help “chunk” the music faster. When the motif is repeated but a different hand position is needed because of motivic transposition, identify where the hand position has to change. Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos* excels in teaching this as all main hand shifts are marked. Following the fingering carefully for the first four volumes will set up good fingering habits for life.

Other areas associated with motivic recognition include singing the main ideas and transposition of melodic material. Research by Bozone (1986) has shown that students who used sight singing in their preliminary study of sight reading excelled over those who did not in the areas of expression, rhythmic and pitch accuracy.

For transposition of melodic material, Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos* is again extremely useful. Even if only a fragment is used, transpose at the keyboard (without writing it out). The bar or phrase may be transposed up or down a semitone or tone first, then later at wider intervals. When transposing, identify the key signature. Choose the transposition interval and then identify the new key signature. For example, if the key signature is one flat and transposition is down a tone, then the new key signature to be remembered is a tone below the F, ie, E flat major. This has nothing to do with the mode of the piece, ie, minor, major or mode. Any written accidentals need to be adjusted in the new key/mode. Not only does this work reinforce modes/scale structures but it also aids in the recognition of intervallic movement. The spin-off is that melodies can then be transposed with ease when encountering transposed instruments in chamber or orchestral music.



Research has revealed that proficient instrumentalists read single-line melodies up to seven notes ahead. It may be concluded that for fluent reading, performers must read ahead to help organise the sounds. Sloboda (1985) also discusses studies of typists by Schaffer which display a similar necessity to read ahead. When the typist is allowed to see at least eight characters ahead the typing speed is about ten characters per second. As the visible letters decrease, performance slows and becomes less regular. When only one letter is previewed then the speed drops to two characters per second.

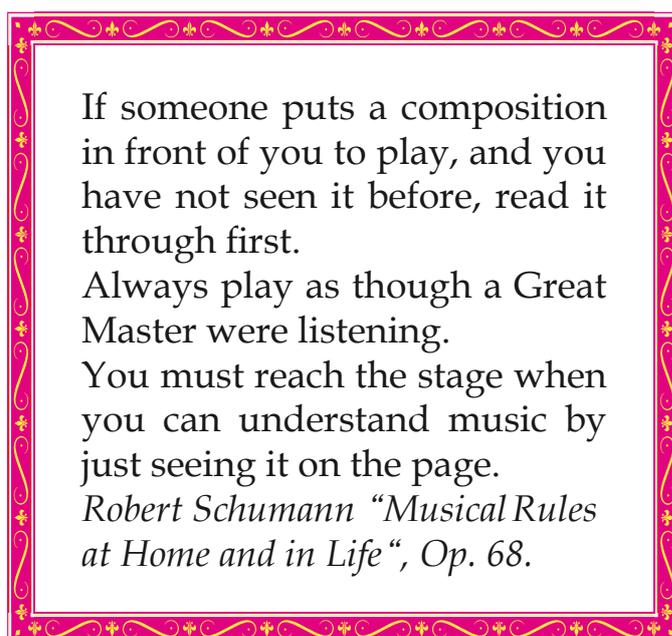
The Musical Mind (1985)

The Checklist

Wilhelm Keilmann (*Introduction to Sight Reading*, Vol II, 1975) who first reinforced for me the importance of the checklist in sight reading. He finds a parallel with the checklist used by aircraft mechanics. While sight reading does not have the same life-and-death seriousness, many unnecessary mistakes could be avoided if first a small amount of time is taken to absorb information on the score before playing. My version of the checklist is arranged so that the eye begins at the top of the page, works to the left and then swiftly down to the bottom. Assuming that the composer is familiar, the students are encouraged to read the title first. It could give clues as to the character and tempo.

Surprises include jumps to ledger lines, sudden use of pedal, pauses, tempo changes and changes of clef. Detail involves dynamics, articulation and phrase markings. Form is important because recognition of contrasting sections leads to more expressive playing and identification of a repeated section reduces the amount of new material to negotiate.

Write out the ten points below on a sheet of cardboard and place it on the music stand. Gradually the eye will be able to take in all the details in just a few seconds. Use the checklist with such works as Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* and Schumann's *Album For The Young*. The pieces are mostly only one or two pages and contain interesting terms which could be added to the sight reading diary list.



Checklist

1. Title
2. Tempo
3. Clef
4. Key signature
5. Time signature
6. Motif
7. Fingering
8. Surprises
9. Detail
10. Form

Pedal

Because pedalling is such a subtle art, it is inappropriate to discuss in this context. However, these few tips may help:

Within the *Mikrokosmos*, the pedal is carefully marked. Use it only where it is marked. Listen so that the pedal does not “clunk” when engaging or releasing. All pedalling should be without extraneous noises.

Use of the pedal should mostly be sparse in Bach, any sonatinas and Haydn and Mozart sonatas. When sight reading works of the Classical period or earlier, always begin with economical pedal use. If in doubt it is better to avoid it altogether rather than drown the music with the damper pedal. Students often rely heavily on the pedal when feeling insecure and need to be reminded to take their foot off the pedal.

Here are comments by university students after a sight-reading course:

Sight reading used to scare me. These past two years have changed that negative attitude...

I see it now as a really useful tool...

I now have a more practical approach to sight reading...

I now have an understanding of how to achieve a better standard...

I pay attention to the detail now...

I am more confident and no longer afraid of the music...

I place more value on sight reading. I use it in most of my piano lessons...

I have a love for sight reading now. In fact one of my favourite things is to go to the library and take out a whole stack of new material...

It's an extremely valuable tool...

I think more before I commence and I think more musically...

I take sight reading more seriously with my own students...

It is now a priority in my own practice time...

Postlude

With sight reading, the cognitive processes involved are often hard to ascertain. For instance, can you answer these questions?

1. How far ahead are you reading?
2. How much of the music does your eye see?
3. How are you reading, horizontally or vertically?

Until recently these questions remained largely unanswered though technology is now helping to measure some of these processes.

With sight reading a relatively new area of study, no doubt a full understanding will take many years. I feel grateful to my students who often reveal something of the process in their interaction with me. I look forward to further discovery which will cast more light in understanding the process of performing music fluently and accurately at first sight.

A fascinating area where technology has helped to gain insight into the process of sight reading is with the use of positron emission tomography (PET). A minute quantity of radioactively labelled oxygen compound in water is injected into the subject and the blood flow in the brain is mapped. The observed changes with blood flow increases in the brain indicate greater levels of brain activity. Research by Sergeant (1992) revealed that sight reading and piano performance activates parts of all four of the outer layer lobes and the cerebellum. These brain structures perform functions distinct from the duties of the cerebral regions necessary for language, although the two brain regions lie adjacent to one another.

“A wide knowledge of musical literature can be acquired only by sight reading. I cannot sufficiently recommend pupils to start early with sight reading piano as well as chamber music. I do not mean playing a piece once through, but to play it several times, so as to become well acquainted with it...

Independently of the great advantage of a wider knowledge of musical literature, thus acquired, the sense of style is improved, and it is also of use, in regard to technique, for the deftness and the surety of the fingers are increased.”

Ernst von Dohnányi, June 1929. Preface to “Essential Finger Exercises”

Charles Rosen (*Piano Notes*, 2002) estimates that the main keyboard literature could be explored in roughly nine months working three hours a day. Of course, to be reading for this amount of time in one day would probably be counter-productive because of the enormous concentration level required. To sight read accurately and expressively and to maintain interest and enthusiasm, it is better to do a small amount well. It is taking a journey which requires putting aside everyday cares. The outcome is peace of mind and emotions. In one sense when sight reading it is taking a break while in another it is working very hard.

A book such as David Dubal’s *The Art of the Piano* (1989) is a helpful guide to the most important literature and recordings for the piano. If you have the basic pianistic tools and a love of music, then little incentive will be needed to go to the keyboard and read through music.

The graded list on the following page is a rough approximation of what new elements each stage involves. The pieces become progressively more difficult. Each stage varies widely but I have observed that students tend to gravitate towards their reading level.

It never ceases to surprise me how strong the urge to sight read is after a relaxing walk, meandering through an art gallery, attending a wonderful concert, savouring a delicious meal and reading about music or great literature. Whatever it is that ignites your creative impulse – go for it!

A Graded Sight Reading List

Bartók, Béla, *Mikrokosmos* (1940) Volumes 1-4.

Children's pieces by Bartók, Kabalevsky, Khatchaturian, Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

Bach, Johann Sebastian, *Clavierbüchlein* for Anna Magdalena Bach

Sonatinas by Beethoven, Clementi, Diabelli, Dussek, Gurlitt and Kuhlau.

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Appendix 1

Scale and Arpeggio Fingerings

Scales

White keys	RH	123 12345	except: F M & m	1234 1234	B M & m	
	LH	54321 321				4321 4321
Black keys	RH	Thumb after black note	except: E _b m		B _b m	2 123 1234
	LH	Thumb before black note		21 4321 32		21 321 432

Arpeggios

White keys	RH	1235	except D, E, A, B M							
	LH	5421		5321						
Black keys	RH	2124	except F _# M	1235	E _b m	1235	B _b M		B _b m	2312
	LH	2142		5321		5421		3213	3213	

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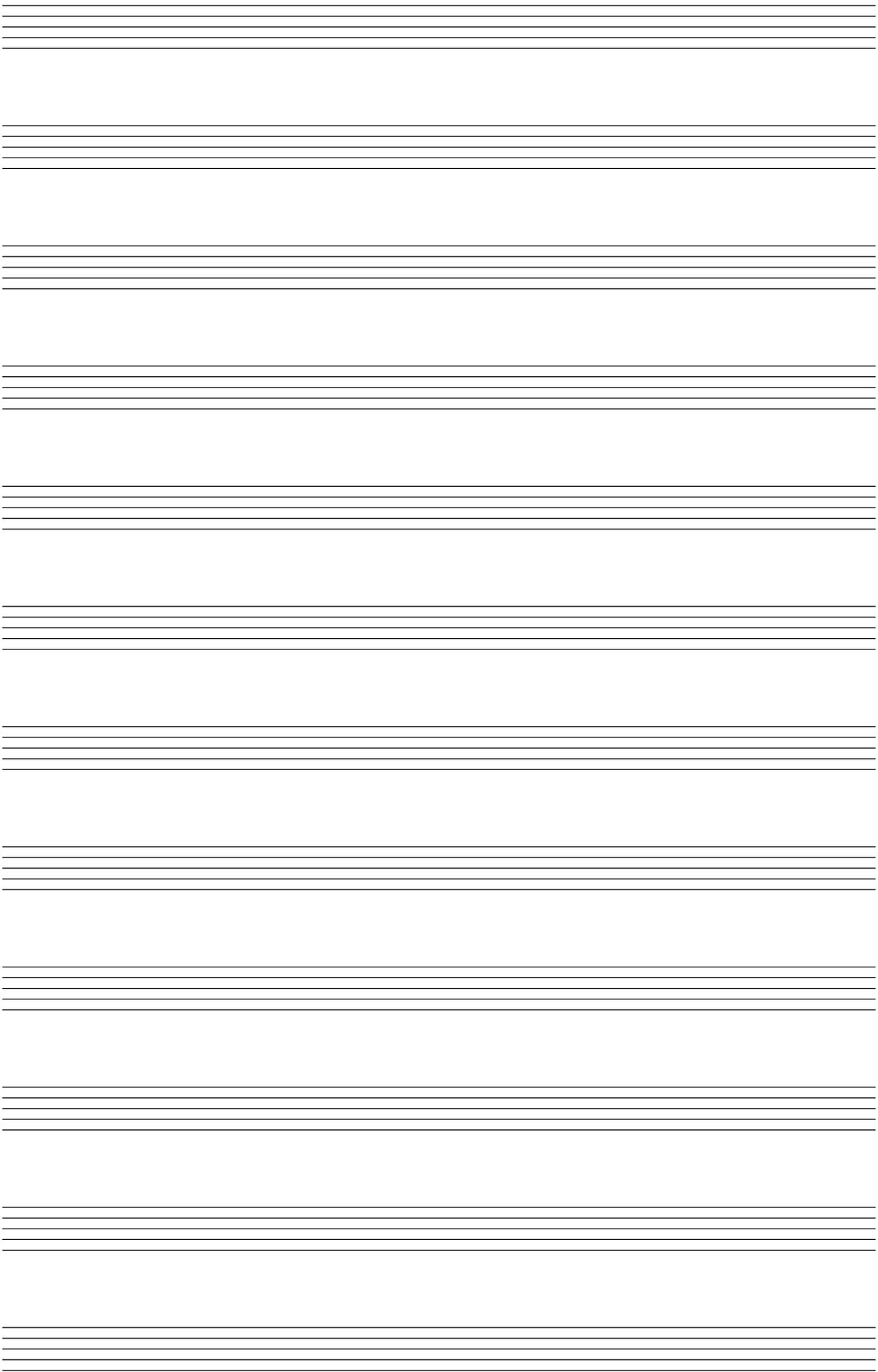
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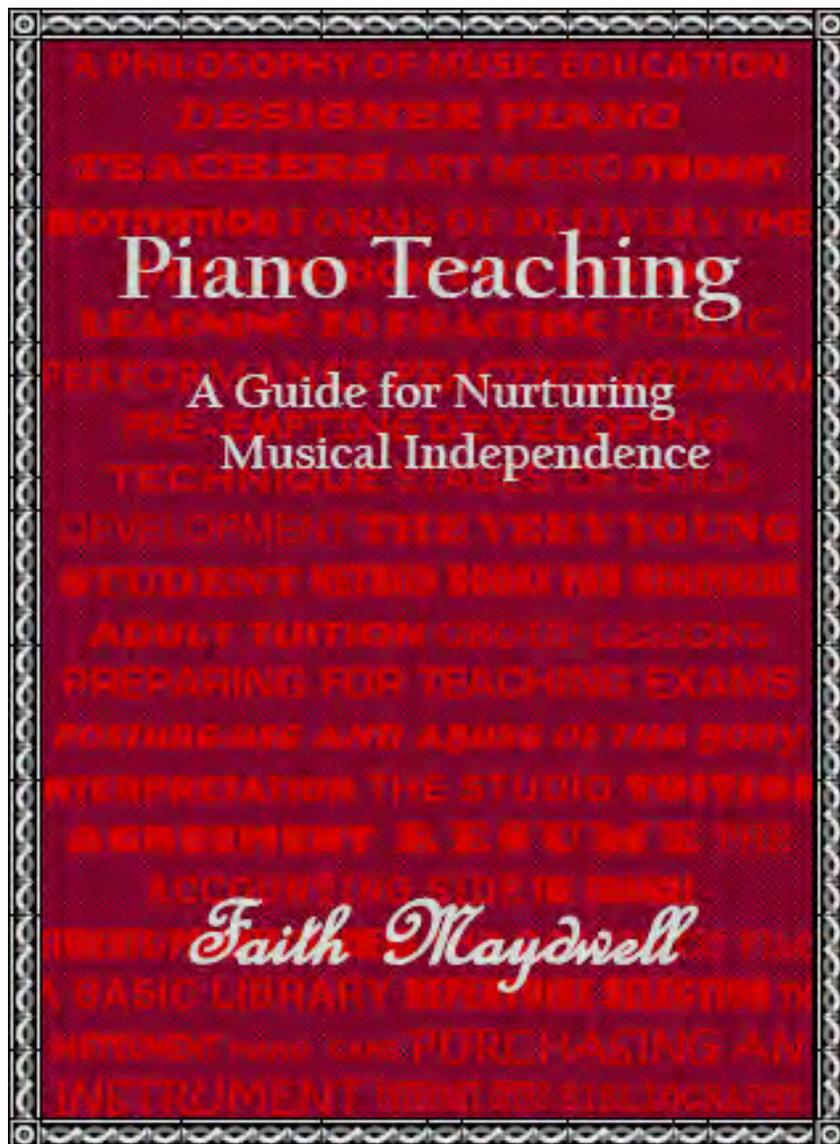
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