Stages of Sight Reading Development

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SAA May, 2014

Suzuki trained students begin the reading process with proficient playing ability and gradually develop reading ability by stages. One can define these stages as reading readiness, symbol introduction and recognition, symbol translation and sight reading at various skill levels. The following explanation can be helpful in understanding sight reading development further.

-Reading readiness

Reading readiness helps students prepare to read visual symbols. Skills include the introduction of meter, rhythm, ear training and intonation/pitch through games, singing and movement. Readiness may include developing skills with the instrument, such as reviewing Suzuki repertoire while watching the printed music or learning alphabet names of notes on the finger board.

-Symbol identification & recognition

Identification and recognition begins when a student is introduced to symbols, recognizes them and usually can name them. The student begins to comprehend the relationship between visual symbols, the sounds they represent and the physical actions necessary to produce them. Teachers may separate pitch and rhythm learning/reading at this point. Consider a child first recognizing his abcs. He can name the letter "b" but may or may not know the sound it makes or how it goes together with other letters to make words. Gradually, this instruction leads to basic symbol translation. "D...a....d, duh.a.duh, It says Dad!"

-Symbol translation

Symbol translation begins when a student can recognize a symbol and play the correlating notes or rhythms on his instrument. The process of "seeing the symbol and reacting to produce the sound" begins. The musical result may be slow or halting. A student can figure out a piece by himself, but may need to write in fingerings, subdivide a complex rhythm or truly practice challenging sections. This stage of the developmental process is important as musicians will return to it when learning technically difficult new repertoire. Few musicians can sight read at their highest level of technical playing proficiency.

-Basic sight reading

One can define basic sight reading as "the ability to play the notes, the rhythm, most fingerings and bowings the first or second time through with little or no hesitation". If the student needs more than two or three repetitions to play the notes or rhythms or if he hesitates, he is translating the music and not sight reading it. In this case, the student needs easier sight reading material for practice and review in order to continue to develop. If the reading material needs to be practiced for other technical, ensemble or musical reasons, it should be identified to the student as such and be studied in a thorough, analytical fashion. Sight reading material should not require repetitive "practice" unless it has another purpose.

The "two times rule" increases reading focus and concentration. Few students will be careless if they know they can only play something twice to learn it. They delight in reminding the parent..."but the teacher said to play this only twice all week!" And parent responds "Do it well the first time then. You will have to sight read something similar at your lesson."

-Pattern and chunk sight reading

Like the skilled language reader who visually "grabs" an entire word or phrase, most musicians eventually begin to recognize patterns of musical "vocabulary" they know well. They can glance at a melodic or rhythm pattern and recognize it in its entirety. Skilled language readers do not r....e....a....d every letter. Cambridge University released a study investigating written comprehension which said, "the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe". Even letter order did not affect reading comprehension. A musician reaches a similar stage of development. First, a student should to be able to play and visually recognize patterns, scales, arpeggios, sequences etc. Then students can preview a piece for patterns before reading it. Eventually they will recognize patterns with ease and will begin to read "chunks" or units of music at once. The teacher can help the student to learn to "grab" units of music, a pattern or a measure, at a time. One simple way to teach this is by covering and uncovering a measure at a time with a 3x5 card while a student sight reads.

-Technical challenge reading

Technical challenge reading involves adding an unwritten technical challenge to a easy sight reading piece. Most students can be challenged by adding a complex bowing pattern, changing the style, reading in a different position or reading up an octave if they have to do it correctly the first or second time. Technical challenge reading is very useful in an ensemble with readers of different abilities or for the student who needs position reading or bowing pattern development.

-Advanced musical sight reading

Musical sight reading is the ability to sight read materials with appropriate style, phrasing, dynamics and articulation the first or second time through the music. This level requires a great deal of applicable stylistic and performance practice knowledge of the music to be played. First students can be encouraged to play printed dynamics and articulations and then gradually add unwritten stylistic, intuitive and musical interpretations to sight reading.

Eventually reading concepts must be introduced, practiced and mastered in all typical musical situations.
For example: Consider the difference in sight reading in 3/4 meter at a slow subdivided tempo vs 3/4 in a quick one waltz feel.

Selections from an article by W. Crock for the SAA Journal of the Americas 2003