

# FOUNDATIONS FOR MUSIC READING

## A Theory Curriculum for Violin, Viola and Cello

by Faith Farr

We all know that to develop fine technique we need an orderly progression of skills. The basics need to be well established or the advanced technique will never work no matter how hard the student tries. When we teach beginners, we need to teach reading the same way, by presenting the reading concepts and skills in an order that will allow the student to build a cohesive body of knowledge. Random floating facts will never produce fluency.

I have been successful patterning my teaching of music reading after the common sequence that children go through when they learn language reading. First children speak, developing an aural/oral vocabulary. Then they look at picture books as someone reads aloud to them; often they will be able to “read” a familiar picture book story because they have noticed where the page turns occur. Then children begin look-say reading, recognizing familiar words such as their name or a stop sign. At about the same time they begin learning about the mechanics of language — naming, writing and reading the alphabet letters. Then they study phonics to learn how the alphabet letters work in words. All the time they are surrounded by real life speakers and age appropriate reading material. Around grade 3 or grade 4 there is a transition from “learning to read” (where the job is simply to understand what the notation is) to “reading to learn” (where we use our reading skill in the adult way to discover new knowledge about a subject that interests us).

In music study, students usually begin learning by rote, concentrating on the physical job of playing. Often, students

can “read” a piece they are learning by ear, but like youngsters with picture books, they are actually using a combination of remembering the sound and the feel of the piece, noticing the graphic direction of the music notes and watching the finger numbers.

I start teaching music reading when students can play a little, show interest in learning for themselves from the page and are old enough to have already mastered some language reading. (For my youngest students, this is around grade 2; older beginners are ready to read music right away.) For their first experience in reading without simultaneously playing by ear, I use “look-say” music books — books with a small number of pitches to choose from and predictable rhythms. Method books work well, as does Joanne Martin’s *I Can Read Music*. At the same time as students start learning their look-say pieces, I begin introducing the mechanics of reading — note names and note value names.

After some experience with look-say reading, I want students to learn some basic theory about how the components of music notation relate to each other. This is a stage that corresponds to phonics learning with language. Without theory understanding students won’t be able to sound out unfamiliar music. To provide theory explanations from the string player’s perspective (in the familiar clef and with fingerboard diagrams) I developed my own materials which I am now self-publishing as *Foundations for Music Reading*. Advanced beginners should progress through the three books for their instrument in about 12-18 months. I recommend that students

have prior experience playing in all finger patterns in first position. (Violinists and violists should play high 2 and low 2, and at least know that low 1 and high 3 exist. Cellists should know that backward and forward extensions exist.) *Foundations for Music Reading* is suitable for group, lesson or home study. Each book includes theory explanations, worksheets and answer keys so that students can work at their own pace.

Having my theory material in a book has helped me use lesson time efficiently — students can read and re-read the material at home at their own pace; I just check things in the lesson. Using a book, I know I am presenting material in a logical order without inadvertently leaving some students with “holes” in their understanding. By including the answer keys as well as the explanations and worksheets, I have given parents the confidence to help their child at home. This has been particularly helpful for parents who do not read music at all or who don’t know how to translate what they know about music notation to their string instrument. After completing *Foundations*, I find that students are ready to make the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” unfamiliar pieces in orchestra.

*Faith Farr teaches cello at MacPhail Center for the Arts in Minneapolis where she has developed her Foundations for Music Reading curriculum over the last 20 years. It is used at MacPhail each year in a violin class of about 15 students, and in studio lessons for viola and cello students. †*