



VIOLA

Does Sight Reading Matter? How Can We Teach It?

by Annette Caruthers

The youth symphonies have applicants sight read during the audition process because they know some students work very hard to learn their audition piece, but when faced with sight reading they cannot play nearly as well. When someone has this combination of good and bad points, the orchestra directors know they will struggle to play in the orchestra, where reading and performing many different pieces in a short time is required. I used to think this didn't matter, that these students would just have to practice to keep up, but I realize after watching a few struggle that it really is a handicap and very frustrating for them. It takes them so much longer to learn new music!

I have spent some time trying to find information on how to teach sight reading. Very little is easily available, except what a few piano teachers have written. I am now working on solid plans to help my students with this. Some of what I do is based on what my teachers did with me, plus my experience with various students and ongoing research.

Elements I can see are important include learning the letter names of the notes as soon as possible. There really isn't any reason to have students call a note "third finger on G" rather than calling it "C" so I have always used letter names, whereas some of the more handicapped sight readers I've worked with almost always are very slow to figure out the letters. Without the actual letters, it's very difficult to relate to key signatures, scales, intervals, etc. And all of these appear to really help with sight reading.

Reading music in addition to pieces that are being perfected also helps. It seems

necessary to begin on a level that is below what they can perform, so I begin students with a book like the Belwin *String Builder, ABCs of Viola*, or some other beginning method book along with their Suzuki books or other solo volumes. This gives them lots of reading practice, with different patterns of rhythms, note patterns, key signatures, and meters that they might not otherwise get. I love using the Rubank *First Etude Album* by Whistler with my violin students because it has many short etudes, four grouped together with the same key signature, in order of difficulty. This is not available for viola, so I have transcribed it for my students. Reading the easier material, then playing it faster until it becomes almost automatic gives the brain a chance to internalize the patterns, which I am convinced is necessary for sight reading.

As students progress, I also use the Sevcik *40 Variations, Op. 3*, which was first recommended to me by Mary West for bowing work. I've found it helps with sight reading just as the other volumes do, because of the short pieces, with varying patterns to learn. The viola version (ed. By Margaret Major, available from Bosworth) lacks some of the markings that are in the violin version, but you can add those. I love being able to improve bowing and sight reading at the same time! What a genius Mary West was.

I have students sight read in lessons. I always ask them to sight read the beginning of new etudes before I assign them. Partly this is because I see no reason to spend a week practicing an etude that they can sight read, partly it is to find problem areas they may need help with, and partly it is for sight

reading practice! I sometimes ask them to sing what they see, as this makes a direct connection to what they are thinking as they look at the music. A mental picture of what the music should sound like is really necessary in order to know if what is played matches what is on the page.

I also use any time remaining at the end of a lesson for sight reading on duets that I always have with me. Many students love this and really look forward to it. Doing the duets means they have to keep a beat and keep moving even if they make a mistake, which they will need in orchestra as well.

Playing in small groups also helps. I try to get my students who have no school orchestra to come to group lessons with me. My goals with the groups are partly social (so they don't feel isolated in studying their instrument), partly related to keeping concentration while someone else plays something different, partly to learning rhythmic figures really well, partly to learning theory, and partly to develop sight reading. They do seem to help.

I am still working on this project and hope to have more to offer in the future, but I'd really appreciate your ideas, too. Please let me know if you know of good materials to use, or new approaches I might not know of. What works for you?

Annette Caruthers is an experienced former performer and private teacher with studios in St. Louis Park and Southwest Minneapolis. Many of her students play in the youth symphonies and go on to continue their studies in college. ♪