



VIOLA

Reading Tips

by Annette Caruthers

We all have students in our studios who have difficulty reading music. I'm not writing about the average beginner who needs to learn as we go, but rather students we might expect to be reading by now. Some have learning disabilities or are a bit slower in their development than their age would have us expect, but there is a lot we can help them with, and it can be really rewarding when they do start to read confidently.

Often students don't know the names of the notes, for various reasons, and are trying to read finger numbers from the page, or are relying on their first-rate memorizing skills to play by ear what they hear me play. I start by having them say the names of the notes for a few measures, then sing the notes while naming them, and then play them. If this is difficult, I add in the step of having them say the name of the note and where to play it on the instrument, then sing it, and then play. This is the most successful strategy I have found so far. Older students may be able to say the names of the notes as they play them, but this may be too much for those under about 10.

Another difficulty may be that they don't know the names of the notes on the instrument, and I attack this by having them play and say a two-octave C scale several times, up and down, every day before doing anything else. Then we do "copy cats" where I play a few notes and they have to find the notes on their instrument and tell me the names of the notes. Most students enjoy this, and you can make a game out of it, even having them make up a few notes and see if you can find them and name them, or start with a few notes and then add on more as you go, to see how many you can remember—call it an "instant piece." It can also be fun to use notes from the beginning of a piece they haven't started yet and see if they ever make the connection. For very young readers, use a few notes from a piece they already know and see how far you get before they recognize it.

To approach the issue from another angle, I sometimes give students the beginning of a piece everyone knows, like *Happy Birthday*, and write it out on staff paper, then ask them to figure the remainder for themselves and write it down for next week. This is a very revealing exercise!! I have been amazed at what still needs to be explained (re-explained?) for some students to be able to do this on their own. A variation of this is to ask the student to make up their own piece on the instrument, then have them write it out on the staff.

Some students have managed to play fairly well up to their own standards without knowing the names of the notes, and they need to be convinced that this matters. I usually point out that without knowing the names of the notes, they won't know what to do with the key signature, especially when shifting! And sometimes I tell them, "You don't want to have to call me when you want to learn a new piece and you're 37 years old!"

One of my students memorizes very quickly and at the same time has trouble keeping her eyes on the music and following along as she plays. I have invented a process where I hold a small PostIt Note to cover the music up to where she is playing, so she is looking at what she plays, or just a bit ahead of where she is playing. This does seem to help, and as she improves I will move the paper to cover up what she is playing as she plays it, and force her to look ahead just a bit, because that is really what we need to do to read well. She sometimes wants to look at her left hand as she plays, so I have been known to hold up my hand over her strings, just a bit out from the bow, so she can't see her fingers. For young students who have memorized a piece, I often have them play with their eyes closed, to convince them that they don't need to look at their fingers; they can feel which fingers are on the string and which are not, and they can hear the results of what they're

doing and make corrections without looking. They are usually amazed and pleased to find this actually works, and it helps them to feel confident about looking at the music instead of at their fingers when learning something new.

Lastly, some students don't make the connection between seeing what's on the page and evaluating what they hear themselves playing. It's very revealing to have them point to the notes as I play them, and ask them to stop me when I make a mistake. I do intentionally put mistakes in to see if they catch errors. Then I have them tell me what to do to get it correct. By varying the mistakes I make I can figure out what they really understand and what they don't, and sharpen their skills at evaluating what they hear as well. Usually this is a real hit, as they don't often get to correct teachers. If they are not able to put needed corrections into words, I have them play along with me and I make the same mistake as before, and then we can talk about what we each did and whether or not what we did matched what is on the page. Sometimes neither of us played correctly, but it is a great learning experience.

The whole project is really rewarding when the students feel sure of themselves and learn pieces with little assistance, sometimes surprising me by playing something they have learned on their own.

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