



VIOLA

Sight-Reading Observations

by Annette Caruthers

Several years ago I tried out the ASTA Certificate Advancement Program, which involves exams for students on scales, etudes, pieces and sight-reading. Although I did not continue the program, it did get me more interested in sight-reading work with my students. I had always asked students to try sight-reading etudes before working on them at home, with the idea that if they could sight-read an etude there wasn't much point in assigning it for home practice and we should move on to something more productive for that student. But I am now asking them to sight-read almost everything they do, because I learn so much from observing how they go about this.

The student who immediately begins playing, apparently in a hurry, will inevitably make many more errors than the one who takes a few seconds to check the key signature and try to hum a few bars to himself while figuring out the rhythm and getting his best playing position before starting. Students like this often just need some coaching in how to prepare before starting to play, but there are so many more things I learn!

It is really the best way for me to know what a student has learned and will make use of in learning a new work. Some are quick to recognize a rhythm or technical aspect that they have worked on before, and others need to re-learn something I know I've already tried to teach them. Some simply don't want to take a chance, and want me to re-explain every time a recognizable figure comes up. After a few rounds of explaining, I say something like, "You really need to try and figure this out yourself, so I'm teaching you new things, instead of

rehashing things you already know." A comment like this needs to be followed with questions that show the student how to think the problem through on their own.

One new student stepped to within a foot of the music stand to read the notes, so I asked if she really needed to be that close, and was told, "That's what my orchestra teacher at school was asking me, too!" Because a parent was in the studio and saw this, she is now getting her eyesight tested. I am still amazed that no one suspected a vision problem until both music teachers saw her trying to get so close to the stand.

Watching one student ignore the key signature made me start asking about the names of the notes. I was hoping to lead his thinking so that he'd discover his own mistakes, but soon figured out that he didn't know the names of the notes. "Two on A" is not the name of a note, and does not help anyone follow a key signature, but is sometimes used by teachers to help students figure out how to play, and he had not progressed beyond this point. At first he resisted the idea that he needed to know the letter names, but quickly made the transition and is learning a lot faster lately.

Just recently I watched a student who kept changing the order of notes in short sequences. I am wondering if she doesn't watch carefully enough, or if there is an actual dyslexia problem, which could be tricky to work with. I will keep having her sight-read while I watch and see if she is assuming she knows the order of the notes, or if she is really having problems deciphering what is on the page.

And of course, there is always the student who sight-reads very, very well,

and whose practicing never advances him beyond the level of his sight-reading. Only by having this student sight-read in lessons will I know what level he starts at with a new assignment, and how to give him goals for improvement, and possibly the practice techniques to improve.

One student seemed to hesitate at every bar line, changing the rhythms written into her piece. I helped her learn to look ahead just a bit, instead of focusing on what she was playing that second, so she could play more fluently. She was amazed at the difference this makes and how quickly she figures out what pieces actually sound like now.

I know I'm a better teacher when I pay attention to all my students' sight-reading, and it will also help them learn new pieces much faster in orchestra. At most lessons I also assign some music for the student to figure out on their own, because students do need that work as well; balancing this for each student can be tricky. And of course, if you try to use my examples with your students, you will have to tailor your remarks to the age and temperament of each student. My students already know I love them and am trying to help them the best way I can, and they don't mind my directness.

Annette Caruthers is a violist and teacher of violin and viola in the Twin Cities. A former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and Utah Symphony, former Principal Violist of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra for many years, she is now teaching full-time from studios in St. Louis Park and Southwest Minneapolis. Her students have gone on to careers in music and often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. ♪