



# ORCHESTRA

## Improving Student Sight-Reading

by Christopher Jannings

It seems as though the litmus test in auditions for professional musicians all the way down through our own students centers around the practice of sight-reading. This is for good reason; perhaps no other tool for evaluation can gauge a musician's innate ability to comprehend and execute musical and technical skills as effectively as sight-reading. I myself use short sight-reading examples for my auditions for advanced ensembles at Roseville Area High School.

Unfortunately, many students experience a great amount of difficulty with this practice (both on their own and in an ensemble setting). What's more, it can be a difficult thing to *specifically* teach, as it requires the sharpening of a great number of skills. This short article will focus on some helpful tips I've found to improve student sight-reading.

### Why is sight-reading so difficult for many students?

Let us first examine why many students experience a great amount of frustration and low levels of success while sight-reading.

- Good sight-readers have the ability to audiate (hear sound when no sound is present). While some people seem to have a natural ability to audiate, it is a skill that most will need to

refine through years of practice and ear training.

- Good sight-readers have a strong sense of pulse and are great at reading and recognizing rhythm patterns in music. In my eleven years of experience as a music educator, I've found that rhythm reading is the weak link for a majority of student musicians.
- Good sight-readers tend to be able to perform well under pressure. This is something that cannot be formally taught; it requires plenty of experience and, in some cases, psychological tools for improvement.

### What can you do to guide students down the path to better sight-reading in their personal practice?

While helping students prepare for auditions that will include sight-reading, I am often asked *how* they can prepare for it. The short answer? Experience! For a more specific and helpful answer to that question, I have developed a small poster that I call *The Hierarchy of Sight-Reading* (see Fig. 1). This helpful tool is posted in my orchestra room.

- **Know what to prioritize.** I always think of rhythm as the crucial piece of sight-reading. If you are sight-reading in an ensemble setting, you could play all of the right notes yet it wouldn't matter if you weren't playing correctly in time with everyone else. Next, focus on getting the notes right. What's in the key signature? Next, articulations are important, but not nearly as important as the notes or rhythms. Finally, dynamics and other markings should be the last thing you prioritize.
- **Know your scales and arpeggios.** Many orchestral excerpts and technical studies include passages that are very scale-like or utilize arpeggios. Students who know their scales and arpeggios well will be ahead of the game.
- **Difficulty level.** Students who struggle with sight-reading should begin with easy examples. Give them something from a Book 1 or Book 2 method book to let them find some success and build some confidence. Regardless of ability level, it is important to remember that you should always slowly ramp up the difficulty level of the examples. With my advanced students (preparing for All-State or college auditions), I really like to promote the International Publications volumes of *Orchestral Excerpts*.

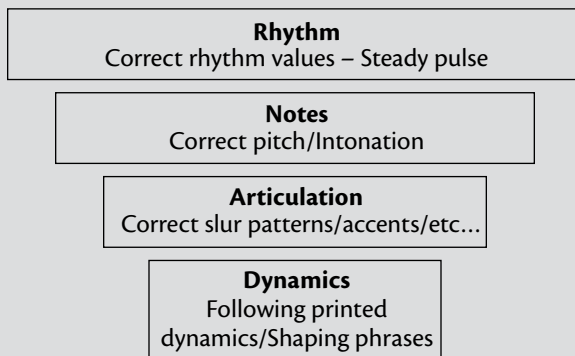
### What can you do in an ensemble setting to improve student sight-reading?

While true individual success in sight-reading must come from individual practice, there are a number of things you can do in an ensemble setting to improve student sight-reading ability and

(Fig. 1)

### The Hierarchy of Sight-Reading Steps to improve your ability to sight-read music effectively

Difficulty sight-reading is one of the most common frustrations that developing musicians experience. It is an important part of many auditions or musical tests because it evaluates a musician's ability to audiate (hear sound when no sound is present) and perform under pressure. The following is a short guide that clarifies what to practice and how to practice it.



confidence.

- **Make rhythm a more formal topic of study.** A number of years ago (after much frustration with poor student sight-reading ability), my colleagues and I at Roseville Area High School developed a rhythm curriculum that includes rhythm reading, rhythm identification, and rhythm dictation. It focuses on pattern recognition and more refined counting skills. After implementing this rhythm curriculum, we immediately saw positive results in our ensembles.
- **Work on basic ear training with your students.** This is something that I've more recently incorporated in my teaching. After years of doing playing tests and hearing students play major scales when they should be playing minor scales, I realized that it's a skill that many students do not simply possess on their own. They need training beyond the rudimentary lessons they receive in primary school general music classes. Basic ear

training will be a big step in students working towards audiation.

- **Make sight-reading a regular occurrence with your ensembles.** I try to sight-read something with my ensembles at least once a week (with heavier sight-reading sessions right after a concert). My students are pretty good at keeping me honest with this and have no problem reminding me if we haven't done our weekly reading session that they have become accustomed to. Most of the students enjoy the change of pace that sight-reading allows.

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## How to practice sight-reading – 3 helpful tips!

- 1) Practice recognition of rhythm
  - Rhythm dictation
  - Pattern memorization
- 2) Practice scales/arpeggios/key signature recognition
  - You should be able to play and sing all scales and arpeggios
  - The end goal is audiation (being able to “hear” something when no sound is present)
- 3) Sight-read every time you practice
  - Start with easy to medium-easy difficulty levels
  - As your ability improves, it is important to sight-read more difficult music
  - Consistent, focused practice of sight-reading (and the steps to become a better sight-reader) is the most important step...it just takes a lot of drilling!!!