Cello

Empowering Young Sight-Readers

by Teresa Richardson

"How was your audition?"
"It was good, except for the sight-reading. That was pretty terrible."

Early in my teaching career, I heard this answer far too often. I found it frustrating that, after thoroughly preparing scales, a solo and an orchestral excerpt, a student could come away from a youth orchestra audition feeling defeated and deflated based on a subpar sight-reading experience. I asked myself what I could I do as a teacher to prepare students to sight-read under pressure. I resolved to address this issue each week in lessons. Sight-reading is a skill that needs to be practiced to be developed.

When writing this article, I realized that teaching sight-reading is even more important than I initially thought! It is an assimilation of all the things we strive to instill in our students. Sight-reading becomes far less intimidating the more it is practiced. It is a skill in and of itself, and it can truly be so much fun for students! I love the sense of satisfaction and empowerment that my students gain from sight-reading even somewhat well. Sight-reading…

- tests a student's knowledge of fingerboard geography
- improves listening skills between members of an ensemble
- encourages perfectionistic students to forge on despite mistakes
- requires a big-picture mentality, thinking of the music as a whole, rather than fixating on individual notes or measures
- hones keen observation skills
- necessitates focus, anticipation and looking ahead
- involves counting and accurate rhythm reading
- enforces internal pulse and steady tempo

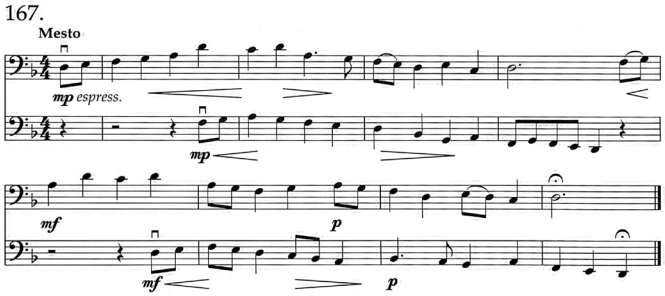
DC-based cellist, teacher, writer and clinician Robert Battey has some fascinating insights on sight-reading that I have found helpful with my own sight-reading and teaching processes. He writes, "… correct rhythms take precedence over everything except the basic pulse." This assertion challenges a misconception that many students have; they often believe that pitch matters the most! I have found that following Battey's hierarchy of tasks in strict order will yield excellent results:

- **Level 1**: Maintain a steady pulse and keep your place in the music. "Mozart said, 'The most necessary, most difficult, and principal thing in music is time.'" In an ensemble, this means listening to the other players and "assimilation of that rhythmic activity into your inner pulse."
- **Level 2**: If Level 1 is working well, then the next task is to play correct rhythms. The concept that *rhythm is more important than anything else except the pulse* may be foreign to students and can feel counter-intuitive. It is important for them to understand, however, that a wrong pitch sounds odd momentarily, but a wrong rhythm could derail the ensemble entirely.
- **Level 3**: If Levels 1 and 2 are not problematic, then the final task is to play correct pitches! Battey says, "Developing one's abilities on this Level involves an unconscious process of storing and recognizing more and more patterns. Over time, you will develop a 'database' of common melodic and accompanimental figures, which you will begin to match to the music in front of you." He mentions that strong knowledge of fingerboard geography is necessary to optimally execute this Level. Interestingly, Battey adds that a mental "grid" of what pitches are under one's fingers at any place on the fingerboard is more useful than knowledge of mere positions, which he says are "the tail, not the dog."
- **Bonus points!** If the above three Levels are going well, then the player should try to include articulations, bowings, dynamics, and character.

I asked the conductor of Minnesota Youth Symphonies' Philharmonic, Jim Bartsch, what he listens for during the sight-reading portion of MYS auditions. Jim primarily listens for these three things: rhythm, especially rhythmic relationships between note values (if half notes, quarter notes, etc. are correct in relation to each other), key signature, and whether more advanced players are comfortable reading in higher positions and in tenor clef (cellists).

When looking for a sight-reading method book that would help my students, I came across *Cello Sight-Reading* by John Kember and Juliet Dammers. There are sight-reading books by Kember available for nearly every instrument! I have enjoyed the tuneful, catchy melodies in these books so much that I've used them for many years and highly recommend them. I have often noticed that the melodies I am humming after a day of teaching are from *Cello Sight-Reading*! A review on John Kember's website describes the exercises as "practical and original gems that could easily be prepared as part of a concert." My students are eager to sight-read in their lessons because of these books.

Cello Sight-Reading Volume 1 is organized into nine sections,



Independent rhythm duet from Section 6 focusing on dotted rhythms and upbeats from *Cello Sight-Reading Volume 1* by John Kember and Juliet Dammers

starting with open strings in section one. In subsequent sections, fingers are gradually added, along with key signatures, rests, rhythms, time signatures, accidentals, bowings, extensions, and finally, compound time. Each section begins with specific steps for success but can be summarized as: look at the time signature and the key signature, look for patterns and shapes in the rhythm and melody, check the performance directions and bowings, and keep going! Many performance directions are introduced, including tempo markings, character indicators and dynamics.

Each section of the book begins with the student alone playing short, one-line exercises. I feel that initially playing alone allows the student to become accustomed to the concept introduced in that section without distraction of another voice. These are followed by duets for teacher and student to play together homorhythmically and then with independent rhythms. Lastly, there are duets for the student to play with piano, in which the teacher could alternatively play just the bass clef line on the cello, which is what I do. It is nice that there are opportunities in this book for the student to practice sight-reading both independently and with the teacher. The duet part reinforces a steady tempo and provides harmonic context that helps the student lock into the key.

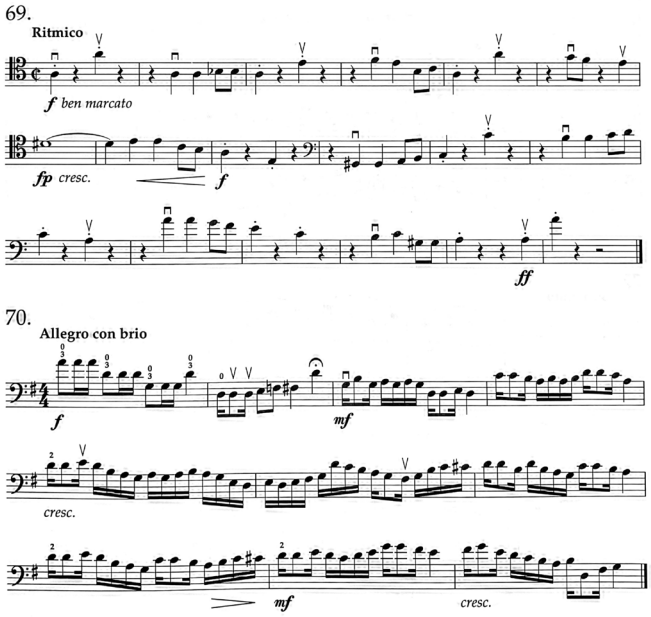
Cello Sight-Reading Volume 2 is organized into five sections, starting with fourth position and more complex rhythms. All positions up to fourth are then added, as well as tenor clef. Section four extends the range and uses irregular time signatures and swing rhythms. Section five presents treble clef, thumb position, further extended range and harder key signatures.

I love how Volume 1 starts off so simply with open strings, and how Volume 2 finishes with exercises in treble clef and key signatures with several flats! The books are gradual in their approach, but they are also incredibly comprehensive. Aside from a few fingerings and counting numbers, there is very little text in the music portions of the book. I feel this simple, clean print helps students focus on the task at hand. There is no shortage of variety of rhythms, keys, and musical styles. Every exercise has a character indicator or a tempo marking at the beginning, which is a great opportunity for students to learn Italian music words.

Generally, I have found that for a student to feel confident to sight-read, it is of utmost importance that the sight-reading material be below the level of the solo repertoire of the student. I do not have students purchase the book; they sight-read only at the lesson. In my own notes, I keep a record of what number exercise is next for each student. We work on sight-reading for approximately five minutes of the lesson, which means reading either several lines of shorter exercises or maybe two longer exercises. If the student did not practice much during the previous week, we might do more!

I coach students to make silent observations about the exercise for at least a minute or two. I instruct students to milk the observation time in auditions, disregard how awkward the silence might feel, and only start playing when the auditioner tiredly says, "Okay… please begin now." I have noticed that students tend to look at the key first, then make other observations, and forget about the key by the time they begin playing. The mantra has become "Look at the key first, and then again right before you start!" I encourage them to observe the following items, in this order: key, meter, find a medium tempo based on the fastest part, think or silently tap the rhythm, look for patterns and surprises including accidentals, shifts, leaps, and pattern changes, check out the road map (repeats, D.C., D.S.), and look one last time at the key.

For beginning sight-readers, I count off a full bar before they



Single line exercises, offering different reading challenges, from Section 3 focusing on positions 1–4 and tenor clef, from *Cello Sight-Reading Volume 2* by John Kember and Juliet Dammers

begin. After they gain more experience, I transition to having the student find their own tempo and start independently. Early in the book, I coach students through all the steps of observation. With intermediate students, I like to provide one or two hints, like "look at the ties and dotted rhythms" or "there are two bars that work best in a certain position." I usually provide no coaching at all to advanced students before they play a sight-reading exercise.

I feel strongly that it is important to stay silent while a student sight-reads, even if it means watching them struggle. If the whole point is to be able to play through without stopping, an interruption from a well-intentioned teacher disrupts the process. However, we do talk after the first read-through. I compliment the student on what they did well, and then ask what they could have observed before starting that would have enabled them to have played better. They will usually have an idea of what went wrong. After a short discussion, and perhaps proposing an extra challenge if they played fairly well (i.e., adding dynamics), the student reads through a second time. I offer praise and consider the exercise completed.

One of the most advanced students I have ever had used to struggle considerably with sight-reading because of perfectionism. He would panic and stop after making a mistake and want to start again from the beginning or discontinue altogether. It took a tremendous amount of coaching to help him achieve this single goal: "Keep going!" Over the twelve years I worked with this student, he went from not being able to complete a single sight-reading exercise to learning the most Popper and Duport etudes of any student I have ever had and serving as principal cellist of MYS Symphony for two years. Working on sight-reading every week in lessons helped him develop a growth mindset.

I asked my former student, 2014 graduate Eliza Edwards, what she remembered about sight-reading in lessons. Eliza said, "It was really rewarding to take a piece I had never seen before and transform it from paper into music, like translating a poem in real time. The more I practiced sight-reading, the more awareness and confidence I gained in tackling whatever the page threw at me. Because I grew up with sight-reading books in my cello lessons, I was able to join a sight-reading orchestra for a summer in high

school. Sight-reading Beethoven's Third? No problem!"

The struggle with sight-reading is real! But I've learned how to make it an essential part of lessons in my studio that students truly look forward to every week. I hope that these resources and strategies empower more students and inspire more sight-reading success stories! Keep going!

Battey, Robert. 2012. *A New Look at Sight-Reading (Part 3)*. CelloBlog on the CelloBello website. https://www.cellobello.org/cello-blog/self-discovery/a-new-look-at-sight-reading-part-3-2/

Kember, John and Dammers, Juliet. 2007. *Cello Sight-Reading 1* and *Cello Sight-Reading 2*. Schott Publishing.

Kember, John. 2004–2021. *The Sight-Reading Series*. www.johnkember.com/sdxsig.htm. There are sight-reading books by John Kember for nearly all instruments.

Teresa Richardson, cellist, is Assistant Principal of the Minnesota Opera and teaches at North Star Cello Academy. She previously taught at MacPhail Center for Music, St. Joseph's School of Music, University of St. Thomas, and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.