

TEACHING PIANO PEDAGOGY

Rx for Sight-Reading Blues

BY ELIZABETH GUTIERREZ

Diagnosis The student is quite adept at performing Beethoven's *Sonata in C Minor*, op. 13, yet is unable to sight read a Level 3 piano piece with fluency and ease.

Prescription ???

Teachers encounter this problem more often than not, and even more alarming is how the gap between performance skill and sight-reading ability becomes increasingly wider as students progress into the higher levels. Some will say there simply isn't enough time in the lesson for ongoing development of sight reading or feel at a loss for a solution to what seems a hopeless situation.

Measured Doses

The first step towards rehabilitating reading skill is to place sight reading back into the student's curriculum immediately. Lack of attention to reading music "on the spot" is perhaps the key reason more students aren't better readers. Sight-reading practice, when administered in small, measured doses over time *will* bring about noticeable improvement.

First, find the student's "comfort zone" for sight reading. This will be a level that is considerably easier than the student's performance repertoire and should contain only those musical concepts that the student can readily comprehend and interpret with a fair degree of fluency. This includes musical signs and symbols, not merely notes and rhythms.

"Prepared" sight reading

Assign a short excerpt for the student to sight read each day at home. Begin with four-measure segments and gradually increase the difficulty and/or length as the student improves. If rhythmic ability is especially weak, have the student count and clap the excerpt before playing. *Always* have the student count aloud when sight reading, while maintaining a comfortable steady tempo. The student should play the assigned daily excerpt only once. At the next lesson the student will play one of the assigned excerpts selected randomly by the teacher. (The Eye-Training excerpts from *Piano Adventures*® Theory Books work well for this activity.)

"Prima vista" sight reading

Every third or fourth lesson, have the student read a short excerpt for you at "first sight." Guide the student through a pre-scan of the material, always asking him to describe all the elements to be interpreted—dynamics, fingering, phrasing, and so on. This prepares the student to create a more complete and satisfying sound picture.

"Portion" reading

When introducing new material in a lesson, always have the student sight read at least a portion of it. Some familiarity with a new piece will make home practice easier, and it assures the teacher that a basic understanding is already underway.

Booster Shots

Be prepared to spike sight-reading accuracy with booster shots in rhythm, intervals, ear training, technique, and theory. Again, the Eye-Training and Ear-Training exercises in *Piano Adventures*®

offer numerous activities centered on rhythmic detection, rhythm clap-backs, melodic pattern recognition, transposition, and so forth. Often the problem isn't that a student can't read; he or she may not have a firm grasp on such essentials as:

- reading by intervallic contour, patterns, and groups of notes
- tactile security with the keyboard in order to navigate without looking down
- rhythmic accuracy and quick recognition of rhythmic patterns
- awareness of key areas through scales, chords, progressions, and cadences

Center remedial activities on these elements as needed and it will greatly facilitate the reading process while ensuring a smoother pathway to increased musical literacy.

Alternative Treatments

Variety always keeps things interesting. A few fun-filled studio activities and challenges will spark motivation and help you accomplish some reading goals along the way.

Create more ensemble experiences. Schedule back-to-back lessons for two students of similar level, and overlap the lesson times so that they can work on duets and sight reading. An occasional group class for four students (two pianos) could also be devoted to reading four-hand or eight-hand music at sight. Assign some of the music ahead of time so students learn how important preparation is to team success.

Increase music literacy with a sight-reading contest. Set up an award system for those students who read the most measures of music in a given semester. This type of assignment will enrich a student's background and breed further interest in music.

Set up a sight-reading lab. A digital keyboard (with headset) located elsewhere in the studio can become a sight-reading station where students work on independent sight-reading assignments. Let them select some of their favorite styles from your library and keep a log on their progress.

Plan a sight-reading festival. Make it a multi-studio event shared with your colleagues and add other related skills like scales, arpeggios, transposition, and so on as additional events. Allow students to select a level of difficulty for individual events and award points based on the quality of an individual's performance.

While short-term performance goals are especially important for student motivation, the long-term goal of life-long enjoyment at the piano should also remain a primary objective. After the studio teacher has faded into history, a good sight reader will always receive great satisfaction from reading all kinds of music and learning selected choices quickly and independently. ■■■

Elizabeth Gutierrez is Associate Professor of Piano and Coordinator of the Keyboard Area at the University of Texas at San Antonio and also serves as Piano Editor for Carl Fischer and the Theodore Presser music companies. She performs extensively as a soloist and chamber musician and presents numerous workshops, conferences, and master classes throughout the U.S. and abroad.