Sightreading

VMT

Edward Maxwell

Edward Maxwell is a freelance trumpet player and teaches in primary, secondary and higher education, including at Cranleigh School, Hurstpierpoint College and Reigate Grammar School. He is a keen composer and arranger, and his educational music books have been published by Boosey and Hawkes, Spartan Press, Music Sales and Warwick Music. He is an examiner for Music Teachers' Board.

Introduction

What does the term 'sightreading' mean to you? For many, it's a negative term, accompanied by a shudder of dread associated with music exams. As we'll see later, sightreading was a consistently weak area in my own past music exams, garnering some rather blunt comments.

However, it should be seen as a crucial skill with benefits that reach far beyond an exam syllabus: the excitement of being in an ensemble about to try out a new piece; the fun of playing through music with family and friends.

In this resource, I'll explore the benefits of strong sightreading and look at how we can demystify it, recast it in a positive light, and integrate it into our teaching – rather than pigeon-holing it as a peripheral part of our lessons.

Why is 'sightreading' even a thing?

For many years, I had a job teaching trumpet at a university. A pianist friend of mine accompanied my students for their recitals, and the students were always impressed by her ability to play the most virtuosic accompaniments at sight, ranging from densely written orchestral reductions to seemingly impenetrable contemporary music. After the rehearsal, the students were surprised when she handed the music back. 'Don't you want to take it away to practise?' they'd often ask, to which she'd reply: 'Oh, it won't get any better with practice – this is as good as it gets.'

I would argue that 'sightreading' should be so fundamentally integrated into our teaching that it does not have a separate name: it's just 'reading'. An English teacher never refers to 'sightreading' a book, because it's assumed that it will be understood on first reading. Admittedly, paragraphs sometimes need a second reading in order to fully grasp their meaning, but you normally get the gist first time around. If you're completely unable to comprehend the meaning, the book you're trying to read is clearly too hard for you, and you should be reading something easier. In music, a fluent reader can understand the music at first sight – just as my accompanist friend did – and have the technique to be able to express this.

To answer the question 'why is sightreading even a thing?', it's because music exams tell us it's a thing. According to most exam syllabuses, it's worth 10 to 15% of the overall exam mark. That means, like aural tests (another 10% or so), a lazy teacher can marginalise it and give a few cursory exercises just before the exam. If sightreading was worth 50% of the exam, would that change your teaching style? Would it be beneficial or detrimental to your students' progress?

Why do we need to sightread?

Music is a social activity. People usually derive most pleasure from practical music making when it's a shared experience: performing with, or to, other people. Although it's fun to sightread through music by yourself, the only time you will ever *need* to sightread fluently is when you're playing with others. You might think that an exam or audition contradicts this assertion, but remember that these are a means to an end, not the end itself: they're just setting tasks to develop and test the skills we need in our musical lives – namely collaborative music making.

Ensemble playing

A fluent reader can seamlessly slot into an ensemble, whatever the standard. If a student unexpectedly has to miss a school concert – and in these days of Covid, last-minute dropouts are commonplace – it's great if you can find another student to take their place and sightread their part, rather than having an adult stepping in.

A good reader is always in demand in an amateur orchestra, and strong reading is a prerequisite for a professional player. You often turn up to play in a concert not having seen the music beforehand – indeed, sometimes not even knowing what's in the programme. There's a three-hour rehearsal (or, to be more accurate, run-through), and then you perform to a paying audience. Sometimes a conductor with poor time management will not get through everything in the rehearsal, and the orchestra will be sightreading in the concert.

Likewise, a session musician will turn up to the studio without having seen the music beforehand. At least when recording, you can do it again if you make a mistake, but if you can't read something fluently, you'll be costing everyone a lot of time and money, and won't be booked again. West End 'deps' do not have the luxury of a rehearsal. Although they do get to see the music in advance (except in an emergency), and 'sit in' on a show, the first time they actually play the music in earnest is in a performance.

Anyone who has coached school or county ensembles will know that while some students are confident readers, others seem utterly clueless. I've seen trumpet players resorting to trying to copy their neighbour's finger movements rather than actually looking at the music. There is a two-part problem here: first, students may not have been taught the basics of reading; secondly, the arrangements are often completely inappropriate to the standards of the student. Often 'one-size-fits-all' packs of ensemble parts simply don't cater for the appropriate standard of the student. For example, trumpet and clarinet parts are frequently interchangeable because they're both in B flat, despite the fact that a beginner clarinettist has a higher range than a beginner trumpeter. Music often needs substantially rewriting, and it's usually best to produce your own arrangements that cater for the skill sets of your particular cohort. Don't just play the same repertoire all term – constantly explore new things for your students to sightread through, even if you have no intention of performing them in the end-of-term concert.

Encourage your students to play in ensembles as soon as they can. Many schools or county music hubs run ensembles that cater for complete beginners, and these are great for instilling the basics of sightreading: playing together with a common sense of beat.

Playing with friends and family

I wrote about the benefits of playing music with family members during the Covid outbreak in a Family Band resource (see July/August 2020). Obviously, this is something that should be encouraged at any time, not just during a lockdown. If you teach piano, encourage your student to sightread accompaniments with siblings and friends. Try finding mixed instrumental duets, or compose your own. It surprises me how few piano students accompany their friends and siblings.

Playing for fun

Why is there a distinction between playing exam pieces and 'fun' pieces? Shouldn't all pieces be fun? If you can sightread fluently, exam pieces can be learnt quickly, and you can be exploring new repertoire at the same time. Ensure that your students have plenty of supplementary material, or know where to find music online. Browse through *all* the pieces in a music book, not just the exam pieces. Play through easy books of pieces – there's nothing wrong with a Grade 5 student playing Grade 1-standard pieces. I try to ensure that the majority of my students' repertoire is non-exam material (I try to set something new *every* lesson). Students who are constantly circulating different things will have no problem when it comes to sightreading in an ensemble, or for an audition or exam. It's important that students have the resources to be able to do this, so encourage them to buy books of music beyond the exam syllabus. You can also get them to swap books with fellow students, or start up your own music library, lending out second-hand books.

Finding an appropriate level

I once took on a piano student who had passed Grade 5. Despite having somehow gained the pass mark in the sightreading section of the exam, it quickly became evident that they could barely read a note or rhythm and had been taught the exam pieces by rote – these were riddled with errors and had no sense of phrase or musical understanding. They were good enough to satisfy the low baseline for passing a music exam, but nevertheless entirely technically and musically unconvincing. I gave the student a Grade 1 sightreading test and was dismayed to find that it was a struggle even to locate the correct notes on the piano; the test was also played with no discernible sense of rhythm or pulse. Because of this, I considered the student to be *Grade 1 standard* and decided that we needed to go back to basics. The student's mother, however, was adamant that, having passed Grade 5, her child was now *Grade 6 standard* and should be working on a new set of exam pieces. Being unable to agree on an appropriate course, we soon parted company.

If a student has been taught to mindlessly recite some Shakespeare by rote for a drama exam, yet can't read a Mr Men book fluently, no right-minded person would think that they should be attempting to read Shakespeare. Just as a student should be able to understand a book the first time of reading, so a student should be able to sightread a piece reasonably well. If they can't, you've given them something too hard. **Consider their 'grade standard' to be the level at which they can sightread**, not the standard of an exam piece that has taken a year to learn by rote.

The art of sightreading

As a keen visual artist myself, I like to find parallels between visual art and music. Ornate Baroque art and architecture is reflected in the elegance of the music from the same period; contemporary music, like modern art, can be challenging to understand with its often angular dissonances, yet can reveal fascinating and often powerful patterns and textures. In addition to gaining insights from the history of art and music, there are similarities in the creative processes. Musicians often use terminology borrowed from art to describe the music we play: we might talk about melodic *shape*, dynamic *shading* and tonal *colour*.

If learning a piece thoroughly is like painting a detailed picture in colour, sightreading is like drawing a quick sketch. While many of the details may be missing, it needs to follow a clearly defined shape. If you're sketching a castle, is it recognisable as such? The better you are at drawing, the more details you might be able to include, but the bottom line is that you need to be able to tell what it is – there's no point in getting one detail accurate at the expense of the bigger picture.

Essential elements

Playing a musical instrument requires a tremendous amount of multi-tasking. Here is a list, *in order of priority*, of the things we should be looking out for in a piece of sightreading. I'm assuming that the student is capable of reading the music fluently and has the necessary technique to play it : if not, these issues need to be addressed separately.

1. **Pulse**: what speed should we play it? Is there a tempo marking? Can we realistically play it that fast, or do we need to compromise? Looking at the hardest rhythm will help to decide how fast to play it. Something starting with minims and crotchets can lull us into a false sense of security if we fail to notice the semiquavers later in the piece. *Clap the pulse.*
2. **Beat**: what is the time signature? How are we going to count it? If, for example, it's in 6/8, do we count in 6 or 2? *Count the beat out loud, stressing the strong beats.*
3. **Rhythm**: are there any rhythmic features that we need to think through or work out beforehand? For example, there may be dotted or syncopated rhythms that we need to subdivide. *Clap the rhythms.*
4. **Key**: what key is it in? Is it major or minor? Does it modulate? Most pieces are made up of chunks of scales and arpeggios – can you identify them in the music? *Play the entire scale and arpeggio in the key of the piece, and then the scale fragments that you have found.*
5. **Melodic shape**: where are the highest and lowest notes? Are there any awkward wide intervals that we need to think through? Are there any repeating note patterns or sequences? *Sing and then play these intervals and patterns. Decide which fingers you will use for the highest and lowest notes – on the piano, for example, the highest note will probably be your right hand little finger.*
6. **Harmonic shape**: identify the underlying chords and harmonies (this is most relevant to pianists, of course). *Can you play the chord progressions?*
7. **Texture**: if we're playing the piano, look at the texture. Are there chords or contrapuntal lines? What shapes do we need to make with our fingers? If playing a single-line instrument, the texture might be an extension of the melodic shape. Is it smooth or jagged, for example? *Isolate these textures and get a feel for the hand and finger shapes that are needed to play them.*
8. **Musical characterisation**: how can the articulation help us link notes together in a coherent musical flow? Are there any important dynamic contrasts? How do we play a 'tune' rather than just a series of random notes? Where are the phrase points? *Sing through the piece, adding as much expression as you can.*
9. **Right notes**: yes, this really is the lowest priority. If we've observed all the previous elements, most of the right notes will naturally slot into place without conscious thought. My own mediocre piano playing is a good example to follow: my students and I frequently sightread pieces together, and my most important job as an accompanist is to provide a strong rhythmic foundation. On top of that, I'm looking at shapes and textures within a particular key, rather than individual notes. If I'm lucky, I'll instinctively find most of the right notes; if not, no matter – the piece will still have the general shape, character and momentum, even if I've made some of it up.

The crucially important thing is to know how the music *sounds* from how it *looks* on the page. Encourage your student to *sing* the music before playing it on their instrument. To practise the connection between *reading* and *hearing*, play a piece to a student with deliberate mistakes and ask them to identify them (this is one of the elements in the Trinity aural tests).

Extra skills

Playing by ear

When sightreading, I often feel as if I'm singing the music in my head and then playing it by ear, rather than playing the notes directly from the score. This is particularly true for transposing, where instead of reading and transposing individual notes, I'm just seeing a pattern of notes in one key and then 'busking' it in a different one. Here are some exercises:

- Sing or play a phrase to a student and ask them to sing and then play it back on their instrument.
- Ask them to sight-sing a phrase, remove the music and ask them to play it on their instrument.
- Repeat these exercises, but ask them to play the phrase in a different key. This helps to reinforce the importance of scale patterns and is particularly useful for anyone who plays a transposing instrument.
- Show a student a short phrase to memorise, then ask them to play it without the music. The general continuity and shape are more important than the right notes.

Improvising

Even professionals don't get things right all the time, but they're usually good at covering up their mistakes. If you're playing a particularly difficult passage in a concert, you might end up improvising a rough impression, rather than playing every note precisely. Invariably nobody will notice. This is a useful skill: encourage students to improvise a general impression of a piece without being bound by the tyranny of 'right notes'.

Music exams

Here are some comments about my own sightreading efforts in ABRSM mark-sheets from my childhood piano and trumpet exams:

- Poor.
- A rather ragged attempt.
- Not free from error.
- A struggle, especially rhythmically.
- Sightreading satisfactory; transposition not.

Today, examiners try to balance the negative with the positive, so comments these days aren't normally quite so forthright. You will gain some marks just for attempting the exercise, so theoretically (and somewhat bizarrely) even a cat walking along a piano keyboard could be awarded marks for trying. This does, however, mean that a mark may be over-generous and give the false impression that a student's sightreading is adequate (as with my piano student mentioned earlier).

It's always worth reading the marking criteria published by the boards. On the surface, it would appear that rhythm and pitch have equal weight – for example, the 'merit' criteria for ABRSM mention 'mainly correct rhythm' and 'largely correct notes'. This is rather at odds with my priorities listed above, which are based on the expediency of sightreading in an ensemble, rather than in an exam situation. However, examiners are also looking for general fluency and the ability to maintain a continuous pulse. It's perfectly possible to get a reasonable mark playing every single pitch incorrectly, but still following accurate rhythms and the general melodic shape. For example, if a string player starts on the wrong string, they might play the entire exercise accurately in shape and rhythm, but a 5th out in pitch. Similarly, a brass player may start on the wrong harmonic, but nevertheless demonstrate accurate rhythms and musical characterisation. These would inevitably gain more marks than playing all the correct notes but with no attention to the rhythm.

You normally get 20 or 30 seconds to prepare for the sightreading in an exam. This time is far more productive if you analytically think through the 'essential elements' listed above, rather than just trying a quick run-through. Remember that you're sketching the general shape and need to *keep going*. It is tempting to stop and correct yourself if you make a mistake – for one thing, you want to communicate to the examiner that you realise you've gone wrong. This will, however, compound the mistake and lose even more marks.

Sightreading books

Most exam boards publish books of specimen sightreading exercises. While these can be useful for a teacher, I'd suggest that there's little point in the student owning the book. Firstly, they can only play a piece once, otherwise it ceases to be sightreading; secondly, if they're playing it at home without a teacher, they will get no feedback and may not know if they've got it right or wrong. There is also the danger that this encourages teachers to pigeonhole the sightreading and think that because they've got the book, they've covered that area of the syllabus. As previously mentioned, by far the most important way of improving sightreading is to have a continuous turnover of easy pieces.

Accompanied sightreading

Remembering that the only time we need to sightread in real musical life is when playing with others, I usually accompany my students when practising sightreading. I have many duet books and also play piano accompaniments or use backing tracks. I might also improvise an accompaniment or just play with them in unison or an octave apart. All these things instil the importance of continuity of pulse.

ABRSM singing exams have accompanied sightreading, and I think it would be useful to extend this to all instruments. The sight-singing tests in the aural tests from Grade 6 are also accompanied.

Summary

As we've seen, sightreading should be firmly integrated into our teaching and not treated as a peripheral activity. It isn't a separate skill, but requires good all-round musical ability: a thorough knowledge of scales, good aural ability, secure technical foundations and, obviously, good reading skills.

- Make sure that *every* element in a sightreading test is understood – set tasks to test each one separately, before attempting the piece as a whole.
- Play the *tune*, not the *notes*. Even a piece played first time needs to have a sense of phrase, character and musical understanding. Playing a series of apparently disconnected notes is akin to reading every word of a paragraph without understanding the *meaning* – it achieves nothing.
- If you can't play something reasonably fluently, it's too hard for you – play something easier.
- Rhythms, patterns and textures are more important than right notes.
- Check that the student is following the music with their eyes – sometimes they struggle to stay focused and may glance around the room. Tracking the notes on the page with a pencil can be useful, to train them to keep their eyes fixed on the music. Piano students should not look at their fingers: if these are in the wrong place, it doesn't matter – keep following rhythms and shapes in a continuous flow. It can be useful to hold a book over their hands so they aren't tempted to glance down.
- Stay in the present: let go of mistakes you've already made and don't worry about a difficult passage that might be coming up.
- Sightreading is essential in group situations, where musical momentum is paramount. Accompanied sightreading helps to prepare for this; also try playing with a metronome.
- **Golden rule: don't stop!**