Learning to read music

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

The ability to read music is an essential skill for students taking instrumental or vocal lessons, yet for many students reading often lags well behind technical and aural ability. This can lead to teachers resorting to teaching pieces by rote, thus making the discrepancy between performing and reading even worse.

In this resource I'll be looking at how learning literacy can provide a useful model for learning to read music: teaching music should take a holistic approach in which reading, listening and understanding are inextricably linked.

What is notation?

Musical notation is a set of written symbols that represent different sounds. It has its roots in early medieval times, when, around 1,000 years ago, plainchant melodies were written down in order to standardise the liturgy. Since then, it's evolved into a complex but completely rational tool, enabling composers to write sounds very precisely, covering a wide variety of parameters. Standard notation is versatile enough to cope with any virtually any genre of music, from lavish film scores to complex contemporary music, from pop songs to jazz.

Written language acts in the same way as musical notation: symbols represent different sounds that, when linked together, impart meaning. The word 'phrase' is, of course, applicable to both language and music. Both literature and music can transport you to different worlds and express the deepest human emotions, and it's significant that some writers have conceded that music is more expressive than words. Victor Hugo said: 'Music expresses that which can not be said.' Hans Christian Andersen said: 'Music speaks when words fail.'

Why learn to read?

Early schooling is dominated by learning literacy skills, as it enables children to access infinite amounts of information. It acts as a gateway for learning in *every subject*. No rational person would argue that there are benefits to not being able to read.

I have, however, heard people lauding musicians who can't read notation, arguing that reading music stifles creativity and restricts developing the musical ear. They point to a handful of successful musicians who couldn't read music.

The fact is, however, that an overwhelming majority of musicians and composers have been able read music. Lionel Bart, famous for writing the musical *Oliver!*, was apparently unable to read or write music, and had to dictate all his songs for someone else to notate. I can't help feeling that it would have been a far more efficient use of his time to just learn musical notation. It's not that hard. Although learning things aurally can work for short pieces, such as a three-minute pop song, it makes planning the structure of longer-term pieces extremely problematic. Imagine if Mahler had to dictate one of his symphonies to someone else. The whole thing would have to be fully formed in his head, and it would be virtually impossible to make revisions and amendments. The same applies to literature: how would Shakespeare have been able to write any plays? Does being illiterate have any advantages for an actor?

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Here are some of the key advantages of being able to read music:

- It enables composers to make a record of their work. They can jot down, refine and amend their ideas, and plan the architecture of their work.
- It allows the composition of music of greater length and complexity.
- It enhances musical understanding: by studying written music, you can analyse it more effectively and gain a deeper understanding of the content.
- Performers can access any music that has ever been written anywhere in the world – music is a truly international language (giving it an advantage over literature).
- It facilitates easy ensemble playing – anyone can play music with anyone else.
- It allows musicians to be far more versatile and play genres of music with which they're not familiar.
- Musicians can show up to a performance or recording having not seen the music in advance (a common occurrence for professionals).
- It's a good educational tool for students. They are learning to decipher a code, using a variety of mainly mathematical skills and pattern recognition, and even learning some foreign (mainly Italian) words to boot.

There's a school of thought (espoused, for example, in the Suzuki and Kodály methods) that you should learn aural skills before learning to read music. After all, we learn to speak before we learn to read. I would argue that this is only true of your first language. When you learn a second language, the method is very different – usually speaking and writing go hand in hand. It's much more economical to be able to record, refer back to, and expand upon the written word – you don't have to memorise everything straight away. Once you have learnt the concept of symbols encoding meaning, learning in all subjects is based on this approach. For young children who can't yet read, however, an aural approach is more appropriate.

How do children learn to read?

If you have children who have gone though early-years schooling, you'll be familiar with phonics – the sounds that letters and groups of letters make. Gradually you join these sounds together to make words, then words are joined together to make sentences. Understanding the *meaning* of the sentences is crucial in the process. If a child can read every word of a sentence but not understand the meaning, the book is obviously too hard for the child. There is a huge amount of repetition and consolidation as the child moves through reading schemes (commonly the books on different levels are colour-coded).

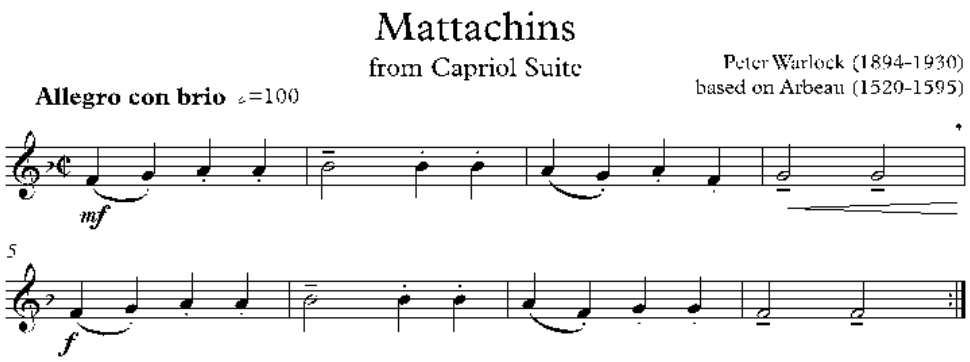
I remember when my children were learning to read, there was some competition among parents about what colour books their children were on, and some parents would complain when their child hadn't been moved up a level when they could clearly (at least in the view of the parent) read fluently. In reality, there's a very high threshold for moving through the levels, and it's far more beneficial for children to read lots of easy books fluently, than to struggle through more difficult ones when they don't know particular words and can't comprehend the meaning. Even when they appear to read something fluently, further consolidation may be required.

Teaching music should follow the same principles. At every step of the way, students should be understanding the relationship between the pitches on the page, how they relate to playing them on an instrument (or singing them), along with comprehending how to play a rhythm over a steady pulse. Reading musical notation with *understanding* means knowing how a piece should *sound* from how it looks on the page.

Just as children might do many pages of maths problems, each dealing with the same principle but in a slightly different context, so we need lots of repetition in order to consolidate musical material. Students frequently learn a rhythm correctly in one tune, but then find it difficult in another – essentially, they're remembering the tune rather than actually reading it. If a child can read a particular word in one story, it stands to reason that they will read it correctly in a different one. However, there will be many students who can, for example, play the dotted rhythm in the second bar of the National Anthem, yet be unable to play the same rhythm in the first bar of 'The Skye Boat Song'.

What information does notated music give?

Let's take an example, which illustrates just how educationally rich a very simple piece of music can be:



Here is a summary of the information this extract contains:

- Title, giving a hint of the character of the music ('Mattachins' means 'Sword Dance'). Its source – the *Capriol Suite* – gives a suggestion for listening to the original work.
- Composer: knowing when it was written and by whom gives some historical context and allows for further exploration of the composer's output and that of his contemporaries. In this case, Warlock's reworking of Arbeau's Renaissance dances could lead to further listening of pieces such as Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, based on music by Pergolesi.
- Metronome marking, indicating beats per minute.
- Tempo marking, another indicator of speed and character.
- Treble clef, indicating the pitch of the notes on the stave.
- Time signature, indicating the pulse and the strong beats.
- Key signature, indicating the key of F major.
- Note lengths, which, when played over a pulse, dictate the rhythm.
- Pitches, which follow contours and link together to make coherent phrases.
- Articulation – slurs, tenuto and staccato marks – which dictate how each note is attacked and how long to sound it for (within the length provided by the rhythm). In this instance, the articulation gives the music its dance-like character.
- Dynamics, which add further shading and expression.
- A repeat mark.
- A breath comma for wind players. There may be instrument-specific marks on other music, such as bowings for string players.

That's a lot of information to untangle in a short extract. While we take most of it for granted, don't assume that your student will. As I've said, some things, such as the composer, can provide useful background and context, but the rhythms and pitches are more critical in terms of the immediate performance.

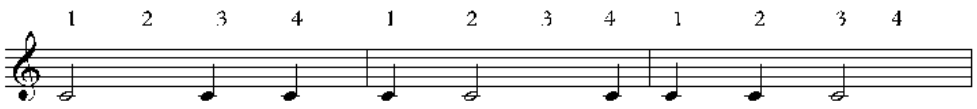
We need to teach students how to mentally filter the music into simple components, and teach them which to prioritise, otherwise the information overload can be overwhelming. What use is playing the correct dynamics if the pitches are wrong? A frequent mistake students make is thinking that slurred notes go faster, resulting in two slurred crochets being played as quavers.

Rhythms and pitches should be our priority, and although students tend to prioritise pitches, it's vital that a piece starts with a solid rhythmic foundation.

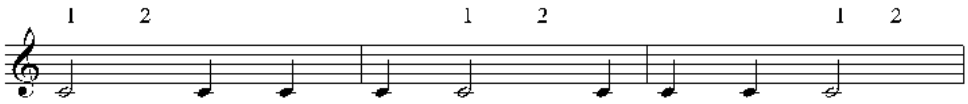
Reading rhythms

Always start with a pulse and a time signature, and work out how the rhythms fit over the framework of the beats of bar, rather than focusing on individual note-lengths. Counting the beat out loud, and tapping the beat with your foot to reinforce the pulse, gives a strong physical feeling of the beat. Once this has been established, try clapping rhythms over the top.

In this example, we stick rigidly to the beats of the bar, regardless of which beat the minim appears on:

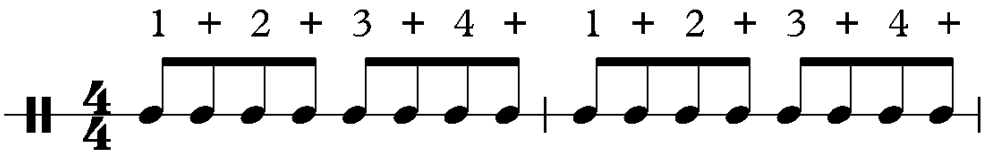


I've seen some teachers count '1, 2' from the start of each minim, as in the example below. This encourages the bad habit of focusing on individual note lengths, rather than how they slot into the overall beats of the bar. Things can easily become muddled, and we lose the feeling of four beats of the bar, with the first being the strongest.



Clapping rhythms before playing them is essential, and rhythmic understanding can be consolidated by clapping the same rhythms in different contexts – on different beats of the bar, or in different time signatures.

When subdividing the beat, thinking 'and' on the half beats is a useful way of evenly spacing out the quavers:



Students often think quavers just go as fast a possible, or compress them into semiquaver-dotted quaver rhythm. However, if you can get them to count out loud '1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +' this helps to space them out evenly. Physical movement, such as walking on the spot for crotchets and jogging on the spot for quavers can reinforce this. You can also get them to think of word-rhythms, turning a piece into a chant or rap. Obviously, if it's a song, the words are already provided to outline the rhythms. Find out what your student is interested in. Can you turn rhythms into football scores, animal names, favourite foods, etc?

Reading pitches

Learning about pitches is a dynamic process, and not just about learning the names of the notes on the stave, though this is important too. When reading a book, being able to read each individual word does not guarantee that you understand the overall meaning. When reading music, the crucial element is being able to make aural connections between the *shapes* of the notes on the stave and how they *sound*. Do the notes move up or down? Do they move in steps or larger intervals? Are students following the general shape of the pitches? Asking students to sing note-patterns is very useful.

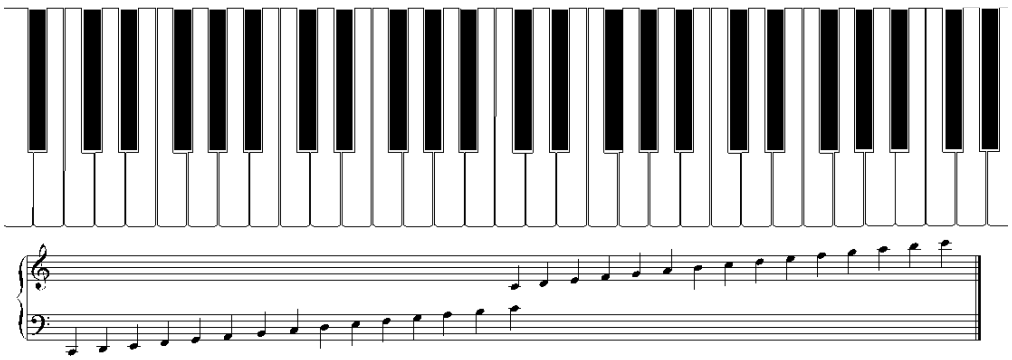
Look at the stave as a big staircase, in which the notes go up in alphabetical order. I liken different octaves to different levels in a tower block: you might start on a low A, go up the steps to G and then land on the next A, the next floor up in the building.

The use of mnemonics is great for reinforcing the names of the notes on the stave, for example in the bass clef spaces 'All Cows Eat Grass' and on the lines 'Grizzly Bears Don't Fear Anything'. Your students are more likely to remember something they have come up with themselves, so see if they can think up their own examples, however bizarre they may be. Instead of the rather stereotypical 'Every Good Boy Deserves Football' how about continuing the animal theme with 'Every Good Baboon Deserves Fruit'?

There are many apps available to make learning notes fun and to keep a record of progress. My favourites are:

- Flashnote Derby (**https://flashnotederby.com/**)
- Staff Wars
- Read Music

If possible, make a map to illustrate how the notes on the stave relate to the notes on your particular instrument, helping to make visual and aural connections. The piano is an easy example, as the notes are all laid out in front of you:



Sightreading

The term sightreading always strikes me as a rather curious one. When reading a book, there is no distinction between 'sightreading' a paragraph and reading it subsequent times. It's usually assumed that it will be understood on first reading. Occasionally you will need to read something more than once to fully absorb its meaning, but you'll usually have got the gist first time around.

I am, of course, being slightly facetious: when playing an instrument, there may be certain difficult physical actions that prevent a perfect performance first time round, and that will need to be practised. However, the fact remains that all pieces that are presented to a student should be fully *understood* at first sight: students should be able to recognise all the pitches and work out all the rhythms for themselves.

For some teachers, sightreading is a rather peripheral activity. In my own teaching, we are constantly playing new pieces and exercises, so there's no need to pigeon-hole it as something separate. Students don't need to buy a 'sightreading' book, because they have lots of books of pieces and exercises that they're reading through all the time.

The exam boards publish the parameters for sightreading at each grade, which are useful for knowing what a student should be able to read and understand.

As a guide, I would suggest the following:

- Pre-Grade 1: semibreves, minims, crotchets.
- Grade 1: quavers.
- Grade 2: dotted crotchets and quavers.
- Grade 3: compound time. This may be a good opportunity to introduce swung rhythms.
- Grade 4: semiquavers, including dotted quaver and semiquaver rhythms.
- Grade 5: mixed metres.
- In terms of pitch, the sightreading will probably be in one of the keys of the scales set for a particular grade, so these need to be thoroughly understood.

This means that students should be able to play rhythms reliably, using the note lengths listed, on any beat of the bar, at sight, without any assistance, in any of the specified keys. If they can't, you need to keep giving them different exercises until they can. You should not be giving them pieces using these rhythms until they can read them fluently.

MTB (Music Teachers Board) offers fully digital recorded exams, and therefore cannot offer any unseen tests. Their 'Reading Skills' tests require clapping rhythms over a metronome, which is a very useful free resource, available on their website (**www.mtbexams.com/reading-skills/**).

Rote learning

I once took on a piano student who turned up for their first lesson with a Grade 6 book. 'What other books do you have?' I asked. 'None, except my previous grade books.' There was no supplementary material, no other books of tunes. Nothing. I asked to hear an exam piece from the Grade 3 book that had been learnt some years ago. 'I can't remember how it goes,' was the response. I gave some Grade 1 sightreading, which was a faltering effort with numerous rhythmic mistakes and wrong notes. One sequence of notes in which the notes went *up* on the page, was played going *down*. This despite somehow having passed the sightreading section in a Grade 5 exam (an exam mark is not always a true reflection of reading ability – there seems to be a low baseline and you'll get marks for trying, even if you play a series of completely random notes).

Imagine if a class teacher, instead of teaching your child to read, just spent a year teaching them to recite three short stories by memory, with barely any of the written words actually being understood. You would probably be outraged. Yet it seems to be a common practice to spend a whole year learning three short exam pieces by rote, pass the exam and go straight on to the next grade's three pieces. I frequently see students in schools going to their lessons week after week holding a lone book of exam pieces. Even worse, I have seen students working from three photocopied sheets for a whole year.

The limitations of learning by rote include these issues:

- Learning a piece is a long and painstaking process.
- None of the skills are transferable – when you start learning a new piece, you are essentially learning from scratch, rather than building on notes and rhythms you've previously learnt. If you could train a monkey to play a piece on the piano, you would be back to square one when it came to teaching it a second piece.
- It is very difficult to correct any mistakes once they become ingrained.
- The student is completely reliant on the teacher – there can be no independent learning, and students can't explore repertoire off their own bat.
- Ensemble playing is going to be very limited.

Rote learning can often happen inadvertently, with teachers not realising that they're giving too many cues. Writing in fingerings, for example, can be well intentioned (and sometimes very useful), but the student often reads the fingerings rather than the actual notes. Likewise, playing or singing bits to a student results in them copying what they hear, rather than reading the notes on the page, especially if they have a good ear. Don't assume that students will develop any connection between hearing a piece being played and seeing the notes on the page.

If you're learning a new language, writing an English translation over every word of a short foreign text and then reciting it repeatedly for a year will not lead to developing a varied vocabulary and fluent speaking and reading.

Developing repertoire

As we've seen, learning literacy fluently requires a continuous turnover of books, and we need to take the same approach with teaching music. An exam piece should take no more than a few weeks to learn, and should be learnt alongside a high turnover of pieces and exercises.

Although there are many excellent tutor books for all instruments, by their very nature they have to take a 'one size fits all' approach and do not usually cover material in sufficient detail. There may be a couple of lines devoted to, say, dotted rhythms, when in reality a student needs many pages. If a tutor book is like a road map suggesting a general course, various detailed street plans may be required to explore places en route. If you can't find the resources you need, write your own. If you identify a gap in the market for such a product, try sending your material off to a publisher.

Quantity over quality is key, and this can help to introduce a range of genres far beyond three exam pieces and refine students' own tastes in music. You can ask them why they like or dislike a piece, and what they would do to make it more interesting. Many children's books are not particularly well written, but that doesn't matter. In fact that's a good thing: if children are reading a wide range of different things, they become more discerning in their tastes and will build up a list of their favourite authors.

Encourage students to buy lots of books of non-exam music, and to look online for music they'd like to play. Get them to learn *all* the pieces in books of exam pieces and then choose their three favourites for the exam.

A good way to keep music circulating is for a teacher to build up a library of second-hand books, which can be lent to students. When a student has played every piece in one book, they can swap it for a different one. If they particularly like a book they've borrowed, they can buy themselves a copy to keep.

Monitoring progress

We should be continuously monitoring progress on reading. I was once horrified when I pointed to a note on the page and asked a student what letter name it was. 'J?' was the tentative response. The was nobody to blame but me – I'd been teaching them for two years.

Here are some ideas to check that your student is reading fluently:

- Rhythm games: clapping notated rhythms and getting students to write down rhythms that you clap.
- Note-naming games using apps or flashcards.
- Can a student start playing in the middle of a phrase? Students who have learnt something by rote often need to start at the beginning of a phrase, or even from the beginning of the whole piece. When reading words, of course it normally makes more sense to start from the beginning of a sentence, but there is no reason why you can't start halfway through, even if the meaning is lost. Indeed, for efficient practising, the ability to intensively practise a short section out of context is essential.
- Play a short piece with a mistake and see if they can identify it by looking at the music.
- Ask them to play a familiar piece that you've notated with slight alterations. Do they play how they *think* it goes, or actually *read* the notes on the page?
- Can they still play a piece that they learnt a year or two ago? (Could they read a book they last read a couple of years ago? Of course they could.)
- If you set a new piece, don't play it to the student first – always get them to have a go. I often set a new piece at the end of a lesson, so they can have a week to figure it out for themselves. And if, the following lesson, they say, 'I couldn't play it – I didn't know how it went,' my standard response is, 'If your English teacher asked you to read a story for homework, it would make no sense if you said "I couldn't read it because I didn't know what happened." You read the story to find out. In the same way, if you read the notes, you'll find out how the tune goes!'