

Songs for Sight Reading by Phala Tracy

I developed this reading curriculum over a five-year period, composing a new piece almost every week. I wanted my Suzuki harp students to have a constant supply of new material to use to develop their reading skills and I found that I was constantly searching for appropriate pieces for them to play. I needed pieces that were simple enough that my students could be successful in their attempts, but challenging enough that reading music kept their interest. I needed pieces that were written idiomatically for the harp. I needed music that was printed simply with an age-appropriate layout and no fingering or placing indications, allowing me the freedom to mark each piece in a way that could meet the individual needs of each student. I finally realized that it was far easier (and more fun!) to compose my own sight-reading curriculum than it was to be constantly adapting pre-existing music to fit this purpose.

There are four graded volumes of sight reading pieces in this curriculum. Several of the pieces are duplicated in multiple volumes at varying levels of difficulty. This allows students at different levels to play together. It can also be a pleasant surprise for the student to occasionally come to new material that is partly familiar already. These particular pieces are cross referenced in the indexes of the four volumes.

New concepts are introduced incrementally. You can address those concepts in whatever degree of detail works with your student's capacity and curiosity. For example, if the piece is written in the key of G, but there are no F#'s used in the composition, you can use that to spark a conversation about keys and levers and pedals. You can play a G major scale and talk about how E minor is the relative minor. You can look at the last measure and discuss how the piece resolves to its tonal center. Or you can quickly acknowledge that there is an F# in the key signature, but that since you never play the F string you don't have to do anything about it for this piece, and then move right along.

Some of these pieces can be used as "improvisation starters." Students can take some essential idea from the piece and apply it to improvising/composing their own variations. For example, if left hand keeps a steady drone and right hand plays a repetitive rhythm, can you invent new notes for right hand to play? Some ideas are included to supplement pieces that lend themselves particularly well to this kind of exploration.

Songs for Sight Reading Volumes 1 - 4 can be used in a variety of ways. Invite these pieces into your own unique studio and use them to help your students grow from wherever they currently are into more confident, more empowered, more joyful readers of music!

FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE JUST BEGINNING TO READ MUSIC

(Volume 1. And anyone who is discovering a metronome for the first time.)

I encourage my beginning readers to play everything with 2nd finger at first, simply translating the printed note to the string on the harp. I allow them to discover the pitches of each piece slowly and then we add in the metronome once they have built some confidence. Once my student has played the piece all the way through smoothly at a constant tempo in the lesson, I write that tempo on the top of their page and we move on to the next piece.

When we turn on the metronome, I like the “jump rope” image. Imagine two friends swinging a long jump rope around and around. Before you run in, you feel that rhythmic motion with your whole body for several turns. Only after you have internalized that pulse do you run in and start jumping. If you just run in right away, you get tangled up. Treat the metronome the same way. Feel the pulse with your whole body for several clicks and then begin to play. If you haven’t spent much time with a jump rope, this can be fun homework!

FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE GAINING CONFIDENCE IN THEIR MUSIC READING

(Volumes 1 - 4)

Initially, the student and I write in fingering together during the lesson. Students take an ever-increasing amount of ownership in this process. We talk about how the fingering affects the way the musical phrases sound and they interpret the piece in a way that feels both practical and musically satisfying. Eventually I just start sending them home with the assignment to write in their own fingering and bring it back with a proposed metronome marking.

There are no dynamic or tempo indications in these books. Once a student can play a given piece smoothly, adding dynamics and phrasing can be a fun challenge. If a piece has repeats, perhaps explore some ways to make the second time through contrast with the first. Decide which chords sound good rolled. Add in some muffles. Turning off the metronome and keeping a constant pulse or adding some rubato can be satisfying as well. Another option is to simply go through the entire curriculum twice, adding musical indications and exploring the games and challenges (illustrated on the following page) the second time through.

Often students will end up memorizing these pieces quickly. That’s fine. I just ask them to “watch it go by,” and continually bring their eyes back to the page to follow the printed music as they play. Some students move through several pieces in a week. In my studio, they still need to “pass” all of them in the lesson. Sometimes it is fun to work a simple piece up to a ridiculously fast tempo.

GAMES AND CHALLENGES FOR CONFIDENT READERS OF MUSIC

(Volumes 1 – 4)

These pieces can be easily adapted to challenge students who are already reading fluently. The students in the “beginning readers” category and the “gaining confidence” category on the previous page are admittedly not *sight reading* in the sense that I am not asking them to translate the piece from the page to the harp with a pulse on the first try. But more experienced readers can do that!

Often, setting a specific goal for a given piece can bring a student to a place where they can encounter the next skill they need to build. Here are some games and challenges to try:

1. Smooth and accurate on the first try

Choose a piece that feels very simple and look it over. Propose a tempo. Add any markings you might need. Then play the “Look what you won!” game. Choose the imaginary item you would like to win. Turn on the metronome and play it through at that speed! What happened? Did you pick a realistic tempo? Were you able to keep your focus? Did it go smoothly on that first try? If so, you won the pet Koala Bear!! If not, notice what made it hard. Did your fingering get tangled? Was it too fast for your mind to keep up with your hands? Did you panic? Sometimes there will be things you will want to adjust. You can try again. You can try a different piece. Adapt the parameters to meet each student where they are.

This way of practicing can effectively break the unconscious cycle of playing new material quickly, erratically and inaccurately - getting stuck, backing up and correcting errors (or not!) and ending up with habits to “unlearn.”

2. Keep going no matter what

Choose a piece that feels moderately simple and look it over. Rank the following three criteria in the following order of importance:

1. Pulse
2. Rhythm
3. Notes

The image of accompanying dancers can be vivid here. There is a group of people who have choreographed a dance to this piece. They start dancing when you start playing and you all want to end together. You can reinvent most of the notes if you need to, some of the rhythms can come out kind of bizarre, but as long as you keep playing in 3/4 time and they keep waltzing in 3, you will all arrive at the last measure as a unified whole.

With these priorities in mind, propose a tempo. Add any markings you might need. Bring the imaginary dancers to life – what are they wearing? What kind of moves might they be doing? Turn on the metronome and play it through at your proposed speed!

What happened? Did you pick a realistic tempo? Were you able to keep a constant pulse? Did you need to improvise any of the rhythm or the notes? Did your dancers joyfully exit the stage at the end or did they collide and end up in a heap? Again, notice what contributed to it going well and what contributed to it being hard.

This way of practicing can effectively break the paralyzing cycle of perfectionistic misery when faced with the inevitability of playing something “wrong” when sight reading. This can be a particularly helpful way to practice for an audition experience.

3. “You owe me a dollar”

Choose a piece that feels a bit challenging and look it over. Add any pedal markings you might need. Your teacher can put in some fingering to either simplify or complicate the process as they see fit. Make sure you understand how to count in this time signature and how the two hands line up rhythmically, but from there, your rhythm has permission to be fluid and you can give the metronome a nap. Your goal here is to play the notes (and fingerings?) accurately on the first try. You have as long as you want. Pausing is wise. Double check before you play anything. Your teacher will pay close attention and charge you a dollar for every note (or fingering?) mistake you make. In my studio, I keep careful track of accrued debt in this process, but I don’t collect.

The image of writing a poem in ink can also be useful here. Imagine you live three miles from town. You walked all the way there and purchased a beautiful piece of parchment which you have now brought home and it sits white and pristine upon your desk. You are going to write down a favorite poem in ink. If you make a mistake, you will have to walk all the way back to town to buy a new piece of parchment. Best to double check each word before you put your pen to the page.

This way of practicing can effectively break the cycle of reading primarily by ear and intuition until something sounds funny or your teacher complains, turning only as a last resort (and under great duress!) to the visual resource on the music stand before you. It can also bring you up against the curious thing that happens when you try to do something under pressure...disorientation/loss of reason/blank brain/entering a parallel universe/sudden inability to find and identify middle C...and it is good to come up against these inevitable moments of shifting reality in a warm and supportive lesson environment while practicing a reading piece.

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