12 Strings
Music School

Sightreading for Piano

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Sight reading

Foreword

Through my experience of many years playing professionally in bands and working as a musical director, I have seen musicians who are naturals at sight reading and others who find it a constant struggle. I have also found a common thread with those people who are natural sight readers.

Generally speaking, their gift is not about note recognition – i.e. knowing the name of the note and then finding it on the keyboard. It's more about positional thinking and that is the basis of the way that I teach sight reading. Each note position on the stave relates to a particular key position on the keyboard.

The way most people learn to read music is to look at the notes on the stave, give each of them a name (A, B, C etc) and then try to find that lettered note on the keyboard. But I see that method as having an unnecessary step. By adding in the middle step, you are translating one language (the written music) to a second language (the letter names) and then to a third language (their position on the keyboard). This middle language is unnecessary and will make your sight reading slower, so why not cut out that step and translate straight from the written music to the position on the keyboard?

Sightreading is all about recognising a note or finding a starting point in the first part of a piece and then recognising the patterns and spaces between the notes to enable you to continue playing the piece fluently. In this book, we will deal with several of the most common patterns, how to recognise them and how to use them to improve your speed and fluency.

When dealing with rhythms, once you understand how they fit together, then counting them out and putting them together yourself becomes easier. But the key is to understand that each note lasts for a certain amount of time. This will be explained in much more detail later in this book.

These methods are gleaned from doing this as a job and being in the situation where you have to find the quickest way to read a chart or to put a chart together. It also draws from all those musicians I have worked with who shared with me their methods and expertise.

Goals

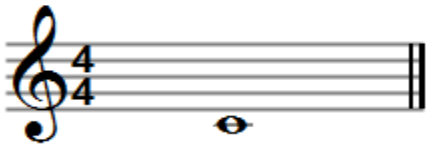
Sight reading goals:

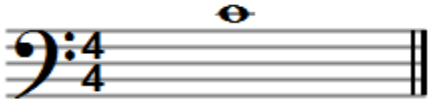
1. To be able to relate each key to a specific position on the staves
2. To be able to relate each grouping of notes to a rhythm or beat
3. To be able to create a mental picture of what keys are to be played just by looking at the position of the notes on the staff

The first thing we need to look at is how a bunch of blobs with sticks poking out of them tell us what keys to put our fingers on. The best way to explain this is to look at the staves as a map that will show you where to put your fingers on the keyboard. The position of the note on the staves will correlate to a particular key on the piano. These notes can be positioned as a dot either between the lines of the stave or with a line on the stave going through the middle of the note.

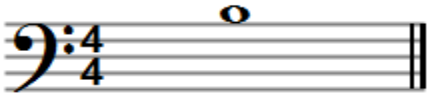
This section is about the white keys only. It is also important that you forget about the letter names for the notes for this section as it will get you used to recognising the notes as a location rather than a letter.

Unlike most things it is best to start in the middle, so we will look at the note that sits on a line between the two staves. This line will be our starting point or, as we will refer to it, the starting note position. The following example shows how this note is represented on both staves. This position on the stave is the 40th key from the far left-hand-side of a standard-sized piano (your left if you are sitting facing the piano).





So to approach this from a logical stand point we need to understand pitch (the highness or lowness if a note) and how pitch relates to both the keyboard and the stave. Now if you were to play a note on the keyboard that is to the left of our starting point, its pitch would be lower than the starting note and it would be represented by a dot further down the stave. For example, the note immediately below our starting point would be placed in the space directly above the top line of the bass clef.



The opposite is also true. If you were to play a note on the keyboard that is to the right of our starting point, its pitch would be higher than the starting note and it would be represented as a note further up the stave. For example, the note immediately to the right of our starting point would be shown in the space below the first line of the treble clef.