Foreword

The ability to sight-read is an essential skill for any musician, but something that is too often neglected as part of the pedagogical process. The reasons for this can stem from perceptions that as a skill it cannot be taught, that it will evolve organically as part of the learning process, or that it is something that the student simply can or cannot do. Paul Harris' book dispels these myths by providing a systematic approach for both tutor and student that conceptualises sight-reading as being at the heart of the overall learning process – an accessible skill that everyone can acquire and develop with confidence.

Whether it is about learning new repertory quickly and efficiently or playing or singing in an ensemble context, it is clear that being able to sight-read accurately and fluently with an appreciation of style and interpretation brings significant advantages. The first time a student plays any new repertory at any level can be critical to the final outcome, as mis-readings in the initial learning process are generally more complex and time consuming to address retrospectively. When playing in an ensemble, this can be especially frustrating for others, whose experience is inevitably compromised by the time taken for everyone to reach the same stage in the rehearsal process.

Historically the compartmentalised nature of music examinations has arguably reinforced the stereotype of sight-reading as an 'added extra': a separate detached component that carries a proportionately smaller number of marks to the pieces, so tends to have a negligible impact on the overall result. Unfortunately, this embeds the view that being able to sight-read is an option rather than it being central to the holistic process of developing into a skilled and rounded musician. This is a central theme of this book, which emphasises the importance of being able to sight-read and seeks to encourage all teachers and students to adopt a more practical and engaging approach.

Quality pedagogy is of course founded on supporting the individual to fulfil their potential and musical aspirations through a personalised approach. This recognises different starting points, challenges and end goals, all of which need to be addressed in a bespoke and individualised way. On this basis, Paul's book should be viewed as an essential source of advice and guidance to complement other resources and something that can be adapted and customised as appropriate to meet the needs of the individual learner. As such, it is a valuable and timely addition to the existing literature, presented in an highly engaging and accessible way.

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4.2 Sight-reading in exams

> 'You've got an exam coming up – I guess we'd better do some work on sight-reading…'

This is a scenario we've all probably encountered at some point or another. If we are teaching in the manner described in this book, this situation should not arise. Students will understand notation and the sight-reading element of an exam should become one that is keenly anticipated, with students *knowing* that they will be able to read and play or sing whatever comes along.

In the weeks before an exam it may be an idea to begin preparing appropriate pieces in a particular way, in order to make the exam experience totally familiar and secure.

Below is a series of activities in the Simultaneous Learning style that will instil a disciplined, thorough, enjoyable and entirely confident approach to the sight-reading element of an exam. And the process is virtually the same whether it's the first or the final grade level that you're preparing for.

If you and your student have been working systematically through all the techniques and activities in this book, the sight-reading element of an exam should hold no fears at all. But you might like to focus your work as the exam approaches. There are two journeys outlined below. The first is more comprehensive and might be undertaken (as many times as you wish) from about a month before the exam for about two weeks and the second will then take you right up to the exam.

So let's go on these two journeys, which will ultimately arrive at real sight-reading confidence. They set out appropriate logical and sequential activities and make appropriate connections from the *Simultaneous Learning Musical Map of the World.*

Journey 1 – taken about a month prior to the exam

Repeat this as often as you can, each time with an appropriate exam-style practice piece.[40] You don't need to follow the sequence below too strictly – it's a flavour of what you might do. See what feels right for you or your student. Miss out any activities you don't feel you need to have a go at.

So, with the piece you are preparing to sight-read:

[40] There are many appropriate pieces in the *Improve Your Sight-reading!* books or you can use specimen sight-reading pieces published by exam boards.

3.3 Brain processing speed and pattern recognition

There is quite a body of research showing that we can develop our brain processing speed. The playing of certain video games has now been proven to reduce reaction times without reducing accuracy.[21]

In one way or another our brains are processing an enormous amount of information at an enormously fast speed. Consider the huge number of tasks demanded by our bodies in everyday living; the process of breathing for example – which happens without any *conscious* processing – together with all the other things we may be consciously doing or experiencing at any one moment. In fact, the human body can send about 11 million bits per second to the brain for processing.

Without going into too much detail (although the details really are fascinating!) information is received by and subsequently stored in the brain in the form of 'bits' which is the most basic measure of a piece of information. Eight bits form a byte – a unit we know well from computer terminology. The human brain has, on average, the capacity to store about 2.5 million gigabytes of information in the memory. That's a lot! Recent research suggests that the human brain *actually* processes about 126 bits per second which is considered to be the *speed of thought*.[22]

That's more than enough for successful sight-reading!

Maybe even more important to know is that the brain continually has the ability to learn and grow, a process known as brain plasticity.[23]

The actual processing speed is the rate at which you input information, make sense of it, and then make your response. It is a central requirement of sight-reading technique and, like all matters of technique, it is entirely possible to develop. As we've seen when discussing eye movement (which is a sequence of saccades and fixations), our eyes work rather like a camera – and the more we can absorb during each fixation (or snapshot) the more fluent our sight-reading will become. What we do see sometimes will be an instantly recognisable pattern (maybe based on a scale or an arpeggio) or it may be a less familiar shape. Learning to improve our speed of recognising patterns and processing them: i.e. the journey from input (seeing) to output (playing or singing) is one that is very important and can be developed.[24]

[21] If you're interested in the science do read *Increasing Speed of Processing With Action Video Games* in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2009.

[22] sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/what-is-the-speed-of-thought

[23] Recent research has found that neuroplasticity (the scientific term for brain plasticity) doesn't necessarily decline with age, especially if the brain is kept active. Processing music is a very good way to keep it active. For more information see *The aging mind: neuroplasticity in response to cognitive training* Denise C. Park, National Library of Medicine, 2013.

[24] This is known as the *eye-hand span* which is in effect the distance in time between the eye's reading and the hand's playing. In some research (see[22]) the eyes were about two beats ahead of the fingers.