

Learning to read music with ease, part 1 by Mary Radspinner

When a person sits down and sight reads a piece of difficult music with ease, it generally isn't something that comes naturally. In my experience, and remembering all the theory taught to me in grade school piano lessons, I have found that sight reading is comprised of several key concepts and processes, slowly and methodically learned.

The main processes are:

- A – reading in columns
- B – picking out chord notes
- C – memorization
- D – playing what you have memorized while you repeat the above steps A, B and C.

Reading in columns

Harpists, and any musician reading or playing from a grand staff (pianists, organists, conductors), must learn to read in columns. Those musicians who play flute, cello, or a melody line instrument read in a linear manner. One note at a time from left to right following basically a horizontal line. This is the same when we read words in books or in the newspaper. Those who read a grand staff must look at each beat, see all the notes, basically commit those notes to short term memory, and play them while simultaneously looking at the next beat.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Flute and Harp. The Flute part is written on a single treble clef staff with a key signature of two flats and a common time signature. The Harp part is written on a grand staff, consisting of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Vertical rectangular boxes are drawn around each measure of the Harp part, spanning both the treble and bass staves, to illustrate the concept of reading in columns. The Flute part consists of a single melodic line of eighth and quarter notes. The Harp part consists of chords and single notes in both hands.

Here are several exercises that may help you to think in vertical terms.

Exercise #1

Try
Reading
A
Sentence
From
Top
To
Bottom
Like
This

Exercise #2

Read the next example from the bottom up.

Top
to
Bottom
From
Sentence
a
Reading
Practice
Then

Picking out chord notes

Here is where theory and a basic knowledge of scales and chords come in very handy. Good sight readers look at a column of music and quickly analyze the harmonic structure.

In exercise #3, as quickly as possible, pick out the word “red”

Exercise #3

Red shoes
Are fun to wear
With **red** socks
And **red** shorts

Exercise #4

Pick out the 8's

7
6
8
2
4
8
3
9
8
1

Picking out the important notes, usually located on the downbeats, will anchor you and give you stability while you are reading music that is new to you. (If you are a composer, arranger or both, it is important to notate your music correctly, because people who read music depend on being able to see the beats and the organization of the notes. It is very much like reading a graph; correct placement is very important.)

What are the important notes? The 1st, 3rd and 5th degrees of the main chords in the key of the song you are working on. If you are in the key of C, your main chords are C, F and G.



Here is an exercise for you to pick out, vertically and as quickly as possible while scanning up and down, the circled C, E and G – the tonic notes of the main chord in the key of C. Feel free to make your own graph of any chord or chord progression that you would like to be able to recognize quickly. **DO NOT PLAY... YET!**



Next: Place your fingers on the circled notes, and squeeze, but **DO NOT PLAY... YET**. We are making a connection between your fingers and your brain. Next: Count out loud or to yourself, and pretend that you are playing the circled notes, but don't play yet – just squeeze the strings. We are adding another element, that of rhythm, to further make a connection to your brain.

Once you feel confident that you know the notes, the rhythm, and how the notes feel at your fingertips, then play the passage. But it is firstly most important to rehearse it in your mind.

In part two we will discuss more elements of composition relative to reading music: melodic contour, interval relationships, technique, and the ever popular placing of your fingers, which will be of great help.

My history:

I began piano lessons at age 7 and remember playing simple linear passages while Sister Mary held a book over my hands, forcing me to look at the paper. I sang in many choirs. When you sing in the choir, you look at the music and not at your instrument. I played string bass in orchestra. One looks at the music and the conductor when playing in orchestra or band, and you learn to play by feel. In addition, you look at the conductor and listen to the rest of the group. This is a great multi-tasking experience. Bottom line – I had many years of training where I had to pay attention to important activities WHILE playing my instrument.

Mary began harp studies with Jeanne Henderson in the Milwaukee Public Schools. She taught public school music before moving to Houston where she free-lanced and subbed with the Houston Symphony and Ballet orchestras. Mary has served as regional director of the AHS, president of the Scottish Harp Society and the ISFHC, and interim editor-in-chief of the Folk Harp Journal. In the 90's Mary and husband John Gill established Afghan Press and Melody's Traditional Music, both named for their beloved hound Melody (1987 - 1998). Active in Afghan Hound and Golden Retriever Rescue, Mary is a certified veterinary homeopath, and advanced Reiki practitioner.