

Sight Reading Practice Routine

by Jan Vinci
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Growing up, I was spacey by nature. Consequently, I was not a good sight-reader. My senior year of college, I was accepted to the Blossom Festival School (my first summer festival experience - and only, because I spent most of my summers working). Needless to say, I was really nervous about not having it "together" in the sight-reading territory. So, I set up a process that would tackle it once and for all.

For one month before the festival I practiced my scales and thirds 3 hours a day. As I played I concentrated on my sound and fingers, of course. But, for the first time, I forced my brain to keep an eye on every single note I played, even if I was playing 16th notes at quarter = 152. This not only told me how much I was drifting to la-la land, but also helped me train myself to focus consistently and intently.

Then, I would practice sight-reading another 3 hours. I devised a routine that took time at first, but as I practiced it became almost instantaneous.

I took the "Modern Flutist" book with orchestral excerpts. This has many other excerpts besides the main solos. I started at the beginning of the orchestral excerpt section and worked through to the end of the book. I would only take only one phrase or section that I knew I could play correctly the first time (after I had prepped my mind). Initially, it was often just one phrase or a few bars. Eventually it was entire sections.

First, I looked at the expression mark and looked for the most complex rhythm(s). This told me what speed the composer most likely intended and gave me a chance to mentally play the most difficult rhythms.

Second, I looked at the key signature(s). I tried to think of playing in a language, instead a key. And, I tried to figure out the harmonic function of any accidentals, giving logic to them, instead of randomness. I made a mental note of areas that modulated or were complicated.

Third, I mapped out the dynamic and expression marks that were within the music.

Fourth, I would play in my mind the first bar or so and the last bar or so. Everyone knows first and last impressions are the most effective. And also, this gave me more confidence knowing that I could start and end with no problem.

(I didn't do this in my practice, but... I tell me students, if they are in an audition, and they've been through all the steps 1 - 4, just start mentally playing the entire excerpt until the judges ask you to begin.)

Fifth, I played the excerpt only as fast as I knew I could in order to play everything right. I never let myself "restart." I had to know my sound, tempo, and expression all before I played the first note. If I missed a note, I kept going. And when determining the speed of the next excerpt, I took into account my experience on the previous excerpt.

The trick is, you never want to sight read something incorrectly in practice. That way every time you sight read, whether in practice or in a professional situation, you play everything "correctly" every time.

Sixth, I played the excerpt a second time. This time it was as if I were on stage performing - a very different mindset than the fifth step. This builds confidence and teaches one the difference between playing something "correctly" or playing from the heart for an audience.

I know this process sounds like a long arduous process. And for me initially, it was. But it built such a strong foundation that I was able to sight read extremely complex music without any trepidation. I can remember playing the first violin parts to string quartets on gigs and transposing parts of phrases to octaves up or down without hesitation.

Having said all this, that was a number of years ago. And, I guess my reading skills are still quite good due to all that practice. But, sight reading skills do need to be practiced to maintain a certain level. So, I do practice it myself from time to time.

Hope this helps.

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