

Sight-Reading for the Contemporary Pianist

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Helping students to develop fluent sight-reading skills at the piano is an important priority for many piano teachers. While every teacher might provide their own fingerprint, style and approach to teaching keyboard sight-reading, there are certain methods that tend to yield strong sight-reading results in students and other “cure-all” suggestions that are perhaps less effective than teachers realize. This article seeks to bring together several streams of pedagogical thought, from researched pedagogical approaches to teaching keyboard sight-reading, to an exploration of new directions for helping students sight-read music successfully at the piano. Furthermore, the authors will discuss related topics that highlight the varied sight-reading skill set required of the contemporary 21st-century pianist.

Research Studies Focused on Effective Strategies for Developing Keyboard Sight-Reading Skills

Many traditional approaches to teaching sight-reading rely heavily on error detection. As such, sight-reading is focused on note and rhythmic accuracy within the context of maintaining performance continuity. In researching the effectiveness of some of these approaches for developing keyboard sight-reading skills, the findings are interesting. The improvements made by students in their keyboard sight-reading ability, as observed in the various studies cited below, range from speculative to significant improvement. Let’s consider several studies focused on keyboard sight-reading below.

One sight-reading study by Marilyn J. Kostka was focused on undergraduate non-piano music students in beginning-elementary level group piano classes over the course of a fifteen-week semester.¹ Students in the course were divided into three groups, with the first group given preparation practice in error-detection plus instructions to “shadow” (practice silently above the keys without depressing them) before undertaking a sight-reading test. A second group was given only the instruction to shadow, and the third control group was given no instructions. Pretests were administered before and after ten weeks to set up the average level and expectation of performance, and posttests were administered in the fifteenth week, measuring sight-reading ability using the following three factors: rhythmic accuracy, hesitations, and pitch accuracy.² The results of the posttests indicated that while the first group (error-detection practice plus shadowing) showed modest improvement, the second group (shadowing-only) made the most errors on average, and perhaps surprisingly, the control group had the fewest errors on average.³ As the results showed slight but an insignificant improvement of the first group in overall errors made from pretest to posttest, Kostka concluded that the error-detection

¹ Marilyn J. Kostka, “The Effects of Error-Detection Practice on Keyboard Sight-Reading Achievement of Undergraduate Music Majors,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 48, no. 2 (2000): 114-122.

² Ibid., 114, 116-117.

³ Ibid., 119.

approach may result in overall improved sight-reading ability, but that more research is needed to determine conclusive findings.⁴

A shorter study by Pamela Pike and Rebecca Carter focused on a similar group of subjects – first-semester undergraduate music majors in group piano classes – and evaluated the effect of utilizing cognitive chunking techniques on sight-reading ability over the course of several weeks.⁵ The authors stated: “In this exploratory study, the researchers sought to discover whether providing students with drills that encouraged chunking of rhythm or chunking of pitch would result in improved sight-reading performance when compared with students who did not engage in chunking-drill treatments.”⁶ Like Kostka, the study used pretests and posttests for two experimental groups that were given specific preparation activities, together with one control group, and the results were organized using the same categories: rhythmic accuracy, pitch accuracy, and continuity.⁷ This cognitive chunking methodology used preparatory drills that included patterns based on the sight-reading examples for the two experimental groups; the control group was given rehearsal time but no practice drills.⁸ Pike and Carter concluded that “the test data did not result in any significant differences in the overall sight-reading performances between the groups resulting from the experimental treatments.”⁹ However, there were significant score improvements within certain subcategories, i.e. both experimental groups showed improved rhythmic accuracy and continuity when sight-playing, and the experimental pitch group and the control group showed significant improvement in pitch accuracy.¹⁰

A more in-depth study, conducted by Katie Zhukov over two and half years, evaluated three distinct approaches (against a control group) to teaching and developing sight-reading skills in advanced pianists.¹¹ These approaches comprised accompanying activities, rhythmic training, and understanding of musical style, all using carefully chosen materials of an easier level than each participant’s playing level to allow for quick study and to encourage continual, progressive improvement.¹² The aim of this study was to determine which of these three approaches was the most effective in developing keyboard sight-reading skills. The accompaniment training required students to learn two short works for violin/flute and piano per week over the course of a 10-week semester (20 pieces total); in the rhythm training method, students were assigned one or two short

⁴ Ibid., 120-121.

⁵ Pamela D. Pike and Rebecca Carter, “Employing Cognitive Chunking Techniques to Enhance Sight-Reading Performance of Undergraduate Group-Piano Students,” *International Journal of Music Education* 28, no. 3 (2010): 231-246.

⁶ Ibid., 232.

⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁸ Ibid., 233.

⁹ Ibid., 242.

¹⁰ Ibid., 242-243. An interesting speculation by the researchers was that perhaps beginning sight-readers prioritized pitch over rhythm when under pressure, since the rhythm scores did not improve as much as the score in pitch accuracy (241).

¹¹ Katie Zhukov, “Evaluating New Approaches to Teaching of Sight-Reading Skills to Advanced Pianists,” *Music Education Research* 16, no. 1 (2014): 70-87.

¹² Ibid., 74.

rhythmic exercises per week (18 pieces total); the “understanding of musical style” approach used literature from the Baroque and Classical periods that was carefully leveled, and students were tasked with learning two/three short pieces per week (24 pieces total). All three groups were given some kind of instructional preparation to complete: the accompanying group rehearsed once a week with a partner, while the rhythm and style groups were given an ‘analysis checklist’ to identify structural and harmonic components in the assigned scores before sight-reading them. An additional control group was given no specific assignments aimed at improving sight-reading and was asked by the researcher only to continue their regular piano studies.¹³ Results from this large-scale study indicated that the accompanying and control groups improved across all four error categories: “extra notes” (additional notes played that were not in the score), “missing notes” (correct notes that were not played), “beat adjustment” (skipping or missing beats), and “RMS” (‘root mean squared,’ the average number of timing errors per correct note played). The rhythm groups improved in all categories except for the category of “missing notes,” while the style groups improved in all categories except in the category of “extra notes.” According to the authors, the findings suggest that: “rhythm and style training had a more holistic effect on improving participants’ sight-reading skills than mere sight-reading practice.”¹⁴ While this study left out specific details (in particular, the curriculum used), the conclusion was that in general, training sight-reading skills in pianists using these approaches has “a positive impact on sight-reading” although further research is necessary to explore the varied teaching approaches to sight-reading.¹⁵

In short, while the findings of these research studies are interesting and perhaps surprising in some cases, further research focused on keyboard sight-reading will help clarify which pedagogical tools and methodology are best for developing improved sight-reading skills in students.

Lessons on Sight-Reading from a Master Teacher

In addition to these research findings, teachers might also consider the experience and wisdom of a master teacher who has written eloquently on the topic of teaching sight-reading skills to pianists. In *Etudes for Piano Teachers*,¹⁶ Stewart Gordon makes it clear that the process of sight-reading, as with other keyboard skills, is dependent on a student’s basic aptitude for this skill. Some students are more innately gifted readers than others while all individuals exhibit different musical strengths and weaknesses. Gordon advises that teachers incorporate sight-reading activities regularly into students’ lessons from the very beginning.

Gordon also outlines a few popular “cure-all” methods for developing sight-reading skills. According to Gordon, these ideas are often provided to students by well-meaning teachers. They were also suggested to him and include: “sight- read every day,” “read collaboratively,” “keep

¹³ Ibid., 74-75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 83. Interestingly, the control group improved the most across all four error categories. Upon further investigation, transcripts of exit interviews revealed that 8 out of the 25 control group participants were involved in their own self-motivated sight-reading practice activities (77-78).

¹⁵ Ibid., 84.

¹⁶ Stewart Gordon, *Etudes for Piano Teachers: Reflections on the Teacher’s Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 40-43.

going no matter what and “never look at the keyboard.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, none of these well-intentioned ideas helped Gordon improve his sight-reading skills and he goes on to describe why he does not think these suggestions are helpful to weak sight-readers in general. Instead, Gordon details his own sight-reading journey and advocates for a different approach. He suggests that teachers assign repertoire for sight-reading purposes that is easy enough for students to comfortably play with mastery with the following elements in place:

1. [understanding] keyboard positions
2. [achieving] rhythmic flow
3. [managing] up-to-tempo playing
4. [keeping] all the notes in place
5. [maintaining] the eyes comfortably on the score¹⁸

Gordon argues that students can only successfully sight-read with these five elements achieved if they use repertoire that is appropriate for their individual sight-reading level. This might mean starting with material at the beginning level, even if the student’s repertoire and other pianistic abilities are of a much more advanced level, and gradually progressing through subtle gradations to playing sight-reading material of greater difficulty. To this end, Gordon details how he used material, starting from beginning method books and worked his way up, following the parameters listed above. This approach to developing sight-reading skills resonates with Zhukov’s study discussed earlier. As mentioned, the material used in that study for all sight-reading groups was carefully leveled-down, further supporting Gordon’s claim that moving gradually through material, from the most manageable level of difficulty upwards, might be most beneficial for improving a student’s sight-reading ability at the piano.

Additional Sight-Reading Skills for the Contemporary Pianist

In addition to well-developed sight-reading skills, the gigging pianist today is also expected to be well-versed in a variety of styles and settings. It is therefore to our advantage as music educators to not only provide our students with traditional sight-reading material, but also introduce other kinds of sight-reading. Typical gigs for pianists include playing for church services, realizing lead sheets in contemporary music settings, reading open scores for choir rehearsals and performances, as well as developing the ability to improvise in a variety of music genres (pop, musical theater, church music, etc.). As such, the sight-reading skill set of the contemporary pianist needs to be expanded to incorporate the ability to meet these and similar challenges.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

Developing Open Score/Choral Reading Skills in Piano Students

According to a 2009 study funded by Chorus America, by conservative estimates there are as many as 270,000 choruses nationwide in the United States.¹⁹ At many choir rehearsals, a pianist is needed to provide pitch support, a harmonic reduction, and musical collaboration with the conductor, in addition to serving a wide range of other essential roles. Pianists are frequently approached to play for a choir, often filling in on short notice. Yet, unless the pianist is highly experienced in this modality of music, they may feel uncomfortable sight-reading a multi-part score. Examples of the unfamiliar can include transposing a tenor part one octave down, revoicing large intervals between the hands, reducing a large number of individual notes into a single chord, and deciding what types of keyboard support to prioritize during a choral rehearsal. As such, being a successful choral collaborative pianist requires specialized sight-reading skills that are not always emphasized in traditional private piano lessons.

Many pianists already have a good grasp of functional harmony through their study of piano repertoire and music theory training. As such, reducing harmony from two or three staves into blocked chords at the piano can feel quite natural for the well-trained student. On the other hand, reading chordal textures from more than two staves can be overwhelming, especially if the voicing of the chord does not fit well into familiar hand positions at the piano. This is why a successful approach to teaching keyboard harmony should encompass a plethora of contexts in order to develop the versatility needed for playing and sight-reading choral repertoire with success. Very often, there is not enough time to analyze every line of the score. As such, the pianist is required to quickly fill in harmonies when only a few voice parts are provided. While there are many resources available in the study of keyboard harmony, R. O. Morris's *Figured Harmony at the Keyboard*²⁰ is an indispensable text for pianists. This treatise approaches harmony from a figured bass perspective and provides important details about many idiomatic patterns found in cadential and sequential passages, as well as terrific information on suspensions. Teachers might explore this text in lessons with intermediate to advanced students. Another important set of resources for the choral pianist are the Chorales of J. S. Bach (1685–1750), edited by Albert Riemenschneider.²¹ Printed in a two-staff edition, these chorales help pianists understand the fundamentals of choral voice leading and counterpoint in a familiar context. The pianist can then progress to reading similar chorales and motets printed in a multi-stave setting.

A challenge that many pianists face when playing for choirs is the ability to score-read polyphonic repertoire printed on multiple staves, particularly if there is not a grand staff reduction provided underneath the various voice-parts. Developing this skill takes time and practice. A book that is particularly helpful in developing this skill is *Preparatory Exercises in Score Reading* by R. O. Morris

¹⁹ Grunwald Associates and Chorus America, *How Children, Adults, and Communities Benefit from Choruses: The Chorus Impact Study* (2009): 25-26, https://chorusamerica.org/sites/default/files/resources/ImpactStudy09_Report.pdf

²⁰ R. O. Morris, *Figured Harmony at the Keyboard* (London: Oxford University Press), 1960.

²¹ Albert Riemenschneider, ed., *371 Harmonized Chorales and 69 Chorale Melodies with Figured Bass* (New York: Schirmer, 1986).

and Howard Ferguson.²² It begins with two-part reading, with the familiar treble or bass clef in one hand, paired with a less familiar clef (i.e. alto or tenor clef) in the other hand. The book then moves to reading excerpts written for three, four, and five parts, which helps the pianist build intervallic reading skills and develop an awareness of how individual voice parts interact. Surveying the standard choral literature is naturally another good way to develop the skill of score-reading polyphonic textures. To this end, Dennis Shrock's *Choral Scores*²³ is an invaluable music anthology that contains significant choral pieces from every major musical era and can be used effectively for score-reading practice.

Lead-sheet Notation/Chordal Realizations

In addition to the challenge of open score-reading, reading and realizing a lead sheet can be just as daunting for the classically trained pianist. This is because a lead sheet contains very little information compared to a traditionally notated score. In today's music market, pianists are frequently contracted for last minute services or gigs that can encompass musical genres not necessarily rooted in classical music. This includes playing keyboard and/or piano in a band for contemporary church services, collaborating with singers in the pop and musical theater worlds, and various other forums that do not utilize traditional two-staff keyboard music notation. In many of these scenarios, pianists are presented with a lead sheet. A lead sheet can be defined as: "an abbreviated form of music notation featuring just the essential musical information."²⁴ While the challenge of sight-reading from a lead sheet can be overlooked and tossed aside by some classically-trained pianists as only meant for jazz or pop musicians, these pianists might be missing out on potentially financially lucrative opportunities. Moreover, realizing lead-sheet notation offers a great learning experience for the classical pianist, and provides tools to further develop as well-rounded and versatile musicians.

When sight-reading lead sheets, chord symbols consisting of succinct abbreviations, often printed above the melody line must be realized successfully by the pianist. When realizing these chords, the pianist has an opportunity to make creative decisions and essentially improvise. This may include playing the chords as arpeggiated figures, solid or blocked chords, spaced out broken chords sustained by the pedal, combinations of the possibilities mentioned above, and more.

The skill of improvisation and chordal realization also provides an opportunity for pianists to exercise their music theory knowledge, taking theory from paper to the keyboard. An article by Jonathan Feist called "Why Lead Sheets?" is an excerpt from his book, *Berklee Contemporary Music Notation*.²⁵ It serves as a good launching pad for helping students understand how to read and understand lead sheet chord symbols. The article provides a concise chord chart, with clear

²² R. O. Morris, and Howard Ferguson, *Preparatory Exercises in Score Reading* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

²³ Dennis Shrock, *Choral Scores* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁴ Jonathan Feist, "Why Lead Sheets?" Berklee. *Berklee Contemporary Music Notation*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.berklee.edu/berklee-today/summer-2018/lead-sheet>

²⁵ Ibid.

examples of chords of different qualities (major, minor, augmented, suspended etc.) and their abbreviated symbols as they appear in lead sheet notation.

Please see a sample of this chart below:

Quality	Abbreviations	Examples	Notes for C Root
Major	(none, triad only) Ma, Maj, M, Δ	C CMa7	C E G C E G B
Minor	mi, min, m, –	Cmi C–	C E $\flat$ G
Suspended 2	sus2	Csus2	C D G
Suspended 4	sus4, sus	Csus4	C F G
Diminished	dim, ^o	Cdim	C E $\flat$ G $\flat$
Augmented	aug, +	Caug	C E G $\sharp$
Five (Power Chord)	5	C5	C G
Sixth	6	C6 C–6	C E G A C E $\flat$ G A
Seventh	7	CMaj7 C7 C7 $\flat$ 5 Caug7 C–7 Cmin(Maj7) C ^o 7 Cdim(Maj7) C7sus4	C E G B C E G B $\flat$ C E G $\flat$ B C E G $\sharp$ B C E $\flat$ G B $\flat$ C E $\flat$ G B C E $\flat$ G $\flat$ B $\flat$ C E $\flat$ G $\flat$ B C F G B $\flat$

Source: Jonathan Feist, "Why Lead Sheets?" *Berklee, Berklee Today*, June, 1, 2018,
<https://www.berklee.edu/berklee-today/summer-2018/lead-sheet>

Sight-reading lead sheet notation during lesson time can also be a great way of changing up the lesson routine. Moreover, sharpening students' ability to recognize and realize lead sheet chord symbols at the keyboard and improvising chordal figures are wonderful tools for all pianists to develop. There are multiple strategies teachers can use to begin this journey with a student. As a useful starting exercise and introduction to lead-sheet reading, teachers might consider introducing keyboard harmony concepts to early-intermediate students. How-to strategies might include: how to realize basic chords on the piano, (creating major/minor chords, broken and solid chords, 1-2 octave arpeggios, etc.); an introduction to simple chord progressions (I-IV-V-I), (ii-V-I) etc.; playing different chord inversions and more. Utilizing the chart above can also serve as a terrific tool in lessons. Students could use it to help them label certain chords in the music they are playing, or they could choose a chord on the chart, and realize it on the keyboard.

Once students have amassed a basic keyboard harmony skill set, teachers can access a variety of free, public domain resources that contain scores with lead sheet notation. As a starting point, teachers might check out the following websites:

<https://www.pianosongdownload.com/leadsheets.html>

<https://sheetmusicforfree.com/download/jazz/jazz-standards>

<https://sheetmusicforfree.com/download/piano/rock-and-pop-music-sheets-for-piano>

<https://www.musicnotes.com/sheet-music/leadsheet/style/jazz>

<https://www.musicnotes.com/sheet-music/leadsheet/style/pop>

In short, introducing lead sheet sight-reading into piano lessons is a great way to break out of mundane lesson routines, as well as keeping students engaged and challenged in a unique way. To this end, the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) Certificate Program has updated their piano syllabus, 2022 edition to include a new option as part of their sight-reading assessment.²⁶ From level 5, students can choose to either realize a lead sheet, or opt to play a traditional sight-reading excerpt on their exam. This update from the RCM confirms the need for developing lead sheet reading skills in students and the value of incorporating a more varied and inclusive approach to teaching sight-reading skills in general.

Conclusion

In short, sight-reading is an invaluable skill for pianists to develop as it provides a gateway to a lifetime of music making at the piano. Moreover, the contemporary pianist in search of a lucrative career would do well to develop a wider-ranging sight-reading skill set that not only includes sight-playing proficiency of traditional or standard piano literature but also the ability to realize lead sheets and score-read successfully. To this end, Stewart Gordon's advice for developing sight-playing skills of traditional piano repertoire might be applied to reading lead sheets and choral open scores as well. Non-traditional reading activities might also be used in rotation with sight-reading standard keyboard literature. This not only provides a lesson routine change, but these activities may help us prepare our students for a variety of performance opportunities. Furthermore, teaching our students to have a firmer grasp on open score choral reading, and/or understanding and realizing lead-sheet chord notation, also serve to benefit and improve our students' overall musicianship and versatility. And finally, while research has been conducted on how we might best teach sight-reading skills to our piano students, more research in this area is certainly needed, especially with developing an expanded keyboard sight-reading skill set in mind.

²⁶ Piano 2022 Syllabus, *Royal Conservatory of Music*, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2022

<https://rcmusic-kentico-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/rcm/media/main/about%20us/rcm%20publishing/piano-syllabus-2022-edition.pdf>

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Praised by the *Boston Globe* for his "mesmerizing performance," Canadian pianist Dr. [Barry Tan](#) is based in Los Angeles, and enjoys an active career as a pianist and educator. His solo and collaborative experiences have led him to perform at the Tanglewood Music Center, the Primrose International Viola Competition, Interlochen Arts Camp, the Chan Center of the Performing Arts in Vancouver, Canada, and throughout Southern California. Barry recently completed doctoral studies at the USC Thornton School of Music, where he was honored as Outstanding Doctoral Graduate in Keyboard Studies. During his studies, Barry served as President of the MTNA USC Collegiate Chapter for two consecutive years. At present, he serves as a Staff Pianist at the Colburn Conservatory, and as an Adjunct Professor of Music at California Baptist University.



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