

Sight Reading---The Good, The Bad, The Ugly Paul Copenhaver

Let's discuss one of the most overlooked, yet important, aspects of a successful school band program. Please note that I didn't say high school band program, but said band program. Good sight reading habits should be stressed from the outset of instrumental instruction, continued through intermediate levels of instruction, and reinforced throughout the high school years.

So, why do we have sight reading at our festivals? The latest version of the MSHSAA *Music Manual* states the following:

PURPOSE OF SIGHT READING: *The interscholastic evaluative music program, of which sight reading is an integral part, shall serve as a supplement to the secondary curricular music program. Sight reading provides additional evaluative opportunities to apply the fundamentals of music literacy.*

Earlier versions of the *Music Manual* presented a somewhat more detailed explanation. That statement was: *Aside from concert performance, sight reading provides additional criteria to evaluate and opportunities for students to exhibit an understanding of the basic fundamentals of music. The importance of teaching the fundamentals of music, the skills of accuracy in reading music, and overall musicality shall be reinforced by sight reading at the evaluative music festival.*

Sight reading guidelines have changed over the years. **Be sure you've read and thoroughly understand the current guidelines as stated in the MSHSAA Music Manual. If you don't understand what you can or cannot do, contact an MSHSAA Rules Interpreter.**

If your students are well-prepared, sight reading is not something to dread. However, something happened recently when I was judging that might sum up the feelings of many students and directors in regard to sight reading. During a break between bands a new student assistant came to my room to help with distributing and collecting music. In my absence she had drawn a large skull and crossbones on the blackboard with the caption in large letters of "Welcome to Sight Reading." When the next band entered, some of the students immediately saw the drawing, and began to laugh. The director did likewise when he entered. After I discovered what they were seeing, I immediately erased the drawing. But, I do think that both the fact that the student assistant drew such a picture, and, further, that the students and director were amused and made comments indicating their agreement with such an implication, says something about the feelings many have about sight reading.

Another thing that comes to mind about sight reading in our state are the differences among some of the contest centers. Some of these differences have to do with the location of the sight reading room, the physical set up of the room, and the atmosphere created by the personnel in the sight reading room.

Years ago in Cape Girardeau the bands remained in their performance area, and the judge came to them. At other festival sites the band moves from their initial performance area to a nearby room for sight reading. At Mexico the band must negotiate stairs to get to the sight reading room. Still another site required the band to go down some stairs, through a hall, up some stairs, down another hall, around a corner, and so forth. There have been bands lost on the way to sight reading! And, there may still be some contest sites that require the bands to go outside to get to the sight reading room. These variations mean that some bands may relax while waiting for the judge to arrive, and that they may use their own percussion equipment, while others have to move their equipment to another area, possibly packing it up stairs, or that they use the dreaded "provided percussion equipment."

Obviously the bands that move must deal with setting up chairs and stands. Are there enough chairs and stands? Or, are there too many chairs in the room, requiring you to sit wherever. Do you have time to move them? Is there a set up crew to help you? When were those timpani purchased, and what to what notes may they be tuned? Where did they find that bass drum, and why does it have that sparkly finish? Or the dreaded student question, "You mean I was supposed to bring my snare drum?"

Another difference is the atmosphere created by the adjudicator and other personnel in the sight reading room. As the "skull and crossbones" incident mentioned earlier exhibits, there are many things that determine the atmosphere in the room. Is it a stuffy, "we're going to get you" atmosphere? Or, is it relaxed, yet businesslike? Does the adjudicator try to ease the tension with some friendly comments, or does he or she look "ready to attack?" After observing sight reading procedures in four or five different locations, I can report to you that there are vast differences.

Finally, here's another difference among locations. Does the sight reading judge sit in front of the band or behind the band? The location of the adjudicator determines to some extent what you, the director, are able to "get away with" during your instructions and the performance.

So, with those things said, let's talk about the importance of sight reading, and some ways we can all improve our sightreading scores at contest, but, more importantly, make our students better musicians and our bands better ensembles.

Many of you have written or are in the midst of writing curriculum in your districts. Some mention is probably made of sight reading in your curriculum by such phrases as "read at sight simple melodies in the treble and/or bass clefs" or "sightread accurately and expressively," with these outcomes being tied to key skills and the Show-Me fine arts standards. Are you covering those standards at any time other than the day of contest?

Sight reading is, of course, a requirement as part of our large group evaluative festival performances. Did you ever stop and think about the fact that the sight reading judge's score is one fourth of your overall rating? Can you really afford to do poorly in this aspect of performance, and still expect a top rating? Have you ever played a professional dance job, show, or even a park concert? More than likely, most, if not all, of the music you played was being read/performed at sight. So, you can see that sightreading is an important part of our curriculum, our festival experience, and preparation for many of the performances in which we and our students may be involved.

College bands, exceptional amateur bands, and professional groups do not have the luxury of spending two or three months preparing for performances. Many of these groups would be overjoyed to have two or three rehearsals. Where else but in our school bands do students perform the same three or four tunes from August to October under the guise of really "getting into" and "perfecting the chart?" College bands, good amateur bands, and professional groups are highly dependent on players who can read. What better way to prepare our students for the future and/or show them what "it's really like" than to help make them better readers.

In my opinion, sight reading is nothing more than a check of fundamental training. Most contest sightreading selections are not much above the second level or "blue" method book in regard to meter, key, and rhythm. Yet, the same students who can successfully perform the exercises in that second level method book cannot transfer that knowledge from one venue to another. Students who are "rote taught" rhythms in marching, jazz, or concert music can rarely transfer those same rhythms to other compositions. A whole note gets four counts in the method book, and also in the latest sight reading composition. Students seem to lack the individual and group confidence to transfer knowledge gained in their method book instruction to successfully perform relatively easy music at sight.

There are various approaches that will successfully prepare students to be better sight readers. Many directors use method books, rhythm pattern books, and self-generated rhythm sheets. Others stress scale and arpeggio work, and apply that knowledge to the reading of music at varying degrees of difficulty. Any such approach that works for the director in his/her particular situation is valid. The key is to have a systematic approach, and stick with it.

The primary key to the development of superior sight reading ability is a solid background in music reading fundamentals, particularly in the area of rhythm. Students or groups with severe rhythm problems cannot become successful sightreaders until, or unless, those problems are addressed. As long as the student is preoccupied with rhythm, he/she can't be expected to give adequate attention to key signatures, meter changes, and articulations. Additionally, there will be no attention given to intonation, phrasing, and tone quality.

Good sight reading habits can and should be taught in beginning instrumental classes, and should be started during the first year of study. Instruction should constantly make students aware of the importance of observing key signatures, meter indications, repetition of rhythmic figures, listening for similar parts, etc. As students progress, the director should reinforce these items, and begin to make students aware of accidentals, dynamics, phrases, and to continue to work on ensemble listening skills. This work can, and probably should, start in the band method book itself, and, later, progress to reading new band compositions.

Above all students should be taught not to stop if they make a mistake. Again; students should be taught not to stop if they make a mistake!

Most teachers assign scale and arpeggio exercises to individual students, and work on scales and arpeggios with their bands, especially when they're included in the method book. However, not all teachers and even fewer students are aware of why scales are supposed to be so helpful. One answer is that scale and arpeggio practice helps develop sight reading skills. The experienced sight reader learns to read extended rhythmic patterns rather than isolated notes and rhythmic figures. The same is true of reading melodic passages---students who have learned to play diatonic scales and chromatic scales along with scales in thirds and straight and broken arpeggios in at least the principal major and minor keys will find that they are able to read extended melodic passages with greater ease than those who have not.

Unfortunately, many bands fall short in the area of sight reading. Many bands perform admirably on their prepared numbers, but fail miserably when presented with the problem of sight reading a composition. In his book, *Handbook of Rehearsal Techniques for the High School Band*, Richard Weerts states that good facility in the area of sight reading is surely one of the major performance aspects that "separates the men from the boys." Further he states that perhaps two interrelated reasons for this are [1] comparatively little emphasis is given to sightreading throughout the entire instrumental program, and [2] students simply are not taught how to develop good sightreading skills. It is true that individuals and bands become better sight readers by doing a great deal of sightreading practice as part regular practice and rehearsals. It is also true that "how" the student and the band director go about the business of sight reading makes a big difference. It often seems that bands do as little sight reading as possible, and that the directors have convinced themselves that sightreading is "no problem." It is difficult and can be ego deflating to attempt to read through a challenging piece of music with few mistakes! The easy way out is to avoid this uncomfortable activity as much as possible. Some directors do sight read on a somewhat regular basis, but do so in such a way as to ingrain many poor habits in both themselves and their students. In other words, they do not approach sight reading in such a way that would tend to develop proficiency at this skill.

We all know that common sightreading practice is to look at meter, key signature, repeats, and accidentals, and to make suggestions regarding style, tempo. The band then reads through the piece without stopping. This is where many directors and students fail in the development of sight reading skills. Too many directors stop to correct

mistakes while practicing sight reading. At this point sight reading has ceased and rehearsal has begun. The principal reason for this may be that from the onset of instruction most musicians have been taught to stop whenever they make a mistake to correct the error. Musicians have been conditioned to do this. Probably it can be said that the more a conductor stops a band to correct mistakes, the more mistakes are made. Another common error when sightreading is attempting to read the composition at too fast a tempo, thus setting up for more mistakes than would normally be made

When preparing for sight reading at contest the director should make every effort to read at least one new selection during each rehearsal. These selections should be varied in regard to style, tonality, tempo, meter, and composer. Choose music that will build competence and encourage musicality [in other words something with a melody], while at the same time reading music with unique problems. Read old style transcriptions, unusual forms, unusual repeat situations, and even contemporary compositions. To help instill confidence start easy. Go to your junior high or middle school library, and choose your sight reading materials there. Before you give those new selections to your middle school band, have your high school groups sight read them. Check your high school music library. Borrow music from your friends.

As the actual festival date draws near, begin sightreading under the actual contest situation---distribution of parts, timing, score and part study, and explanations. Develop a routine that everyone understands and follows.

Consider taping the sightreading portion of your rehearsal. You may not want to record the actual playing of the music, but you can record your comments to check their effectiveness. You may find that you are wasting time in score and part study, or that the comments you are making about the music really aren't that valuable to performers about to play a piece for the first time.

Don't forget the percussion section! Repeat; don't forget the percussion section. I've observed that many directors give little or no instruction to the percussion section, or wrongly assume that "you'll get it." We all know that there is going to be a four or eight measure percussion solo somewhere in the sight reading music, and you'd be surprised at the number of directors who fail to even point that out to the students. The percussion section will be largely responsible for establishing and maintaining the tempi you establish. Don't put your weakest player on bass drum; that's asking for trouble. There is probably no individual section that can cause the total collapse of your sight reading performance as easily as the percussion section. Did I say "Don't forget the percussion section?"

Also consider your conducting. Besides tempo, the conductor's style must clearly convey the musical style at all times. Large gestures should be reserved for cues, phrasing, and indicating rehearsal letters or numbers. Eye contact with the players in the band prior to entrances can be reassuring for them, and you. Don't bury your head in score. Above all, the conductor must maintain control when the unexpected happens. And, it will!!!

Think about the psychological effect of your band's discipline of the sightreading judge. Obviously, if the band enters the room in an orderly, organized manner, this will have a positive effect on the judge. Additionally, if the conductor's comments and explanations are clear, concise, and thorough, this, too, will have a positive effect on the judge. After I returned from judging sight reading at one of our contest sights I was asked by a colleague, "How were the bands?" I replied that most of them were all right, but I'd given two V's. My colleague said, "How did those bands manage to get V's?" I replied, "Let's put it this way, a band that had to stop twice and restart got a IV." Again, he inquired, "So, what gets a V?" I said, "Well, obviously they played poorly, but then they laughed about the whole thing. That gets a V."

Also, consider a sight reading demonstration as part of a public performance. This provides students the opportunity to sight read under pressure, and makes an interesting addition to the concert. You will find that it helps parents and administrators to better understand the festival process, really shows the educational value of

our instructional process, and helps the students recognize that the sight reading process is a legitimate part of performance.

As stated earlier, there are many approaches to preparing students to be good sightreaders, and each individual director must choose the way that works best for him/her and the situation he/she is in. Starting to stress the importance of reading music straight through without stopping needs to be stressed at the earliest stages of instruction. Teach students to "hang in there."

One of the biggest problems with sightreading at our contests is a lack of understanding of the rules. Many directors don't know what they can and cannot do. Many seem to be so intimidated by the rules that they do very little. I've observed directors who did not say anything to their band during their allotted time span. Also, I've been asked many times, "Can I talk to them?" Others seem to get caught in some minor details while the whole picture eludes them. Many spend too much time discussing the piece at the beginning, and never make it to the end of the piece.

Not only do students need preparation for the experience of sight reading, but so do we as conductors. We need to learn time management. We need to learn how to convey our instructions in a precise and clear manner.

I have observed Bob Dooley from Clark County High School who conducts the entire sight reading selection while students sit and execute the proper fingerings and slide positions, and the percussionists play "air drums." Bob talks about many of the things that occur, such as fermatas, crescendos, style changes, during this process. His students are very attentive, and certainly understand the process. Bob has a plan!

I've seen other conductors use some time for score study, talk to the band about some of the major issues, and then conduct some key areas of the piece. Make comments like "it's going to look like this." and conduct a few measures to show the ritardando, fermata, tempo change, dynamic changes, etc. There's another plan!

Also, I've observed conductors who simply talk through the major points; ask for any questions, and play. I do think that trying to cover every aspect of performance verbally is a waste of time. Students can only remember and comprehend so much. Again, we have to go back to fundamental training for success in such areas.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, I've seen conductors spend their entire six minutes studying the score, not say a word to the band, and then play.

Some things that work well for various conductors are relating a rhythm to something previously played. Boonville High School conductor Steve Litwiller recently pointed out the "Declaration Overture" rhythm to one of his bands. I heard an orchestra conductor describe a two beat triplet rhythm as the 'Leonard Bernstein rhythm.' That is legal, and works very effectively. Others have related tempo and key signatures to previously played selections. All of these things help inspire confidence in the band members. This helps them to know that there is no great mystery in what they're about to do.that it is something they've done before, just slightly different.

Much of what occurs in the sight reading room is psychological, and the director must strive to create a proper attitude in his/her students. Students must be made to realize that this aspect of the contest is just as important as the performance of the prepared selections. The sight reading room is not a place to relax after an all-out effort on the stage. The performance and attitude must be just as intense as that of the concert performance.

Solid fundamental training will take much of the stress out of the sight reading experience, and, of course, will help all other aspects of performance. Also, since sight reading is most likely a part of our curriculum, we need to

incorporate it as such. And, finally, if we are really preparing students for "the real musical world," we'd better prepare them with the ability to read and perform at sight.

References:

The Complete School Band Program

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Handbook of Rehearsal Techniques for the High School Band

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Instrumental Music Pedagogy

Daniel L. Kohut