

Developing and Practicing Sight Reading Skills

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I: Definition of Sight Reading

For those of you who are unfamiliar with what sight reading is, it can be defined as follows: sight reading occurs when a musician is asked to read notation (whether it be melodic or harmonic material) with very little, or in some cases no time, to look over the material.

II: Why Practice Sight Reading?

Sight reading is a very difficult thing to perform and practice (in my opinion). Many people think that sight reading is a strict academic activity and it is not popularly thought of as a musical activity in which you can properly express your musicality. However, sight reading is a very common occurrence in the modern music scene and it is extremely likely that you will be placed in a situation in which you are not familiar with the material (perhaps seeing and hearing it for the first time) and will need to think on your feet. Like anything else, sight reading is something that needs to be practiced. By practicing sight reading you will also become aware of musical patterns, develop your ear, develop a solid time feel and learn your instrument (i.e. where the notes are) to a point where you don't even need to think about where the notes are located you simply *know* them. In return, this makes you a more articulate and expressive improviser because you no longer have to second-guess what note you are playing.

III: Patience

I'm not going to lie; sight reading is probably one of the most frustrating things to practice. It takes a while for the results of your efforts to manifest themselves in a pressuring situation (a gig or an audition etc.). Sight reading is a lot like learning how to read language. First we learn the letters, what they look like, how they sound, how to actually create that sound with our mouths, then we put the letters together to form simple words, then more complex words, and then finally sentences. As I am sure you are aware this does not occur over night or even in the span of a single year. It takes a lot of time and patience to develop *useful* sight reading skills (i.e. skills that are so innate that you can perform them proficiently in high-stress environments with no or very little thought; much like reading or speaking.). It is highly recommended that you practice the following steps in the order they are presented. It is assumed that you all ready have some form of understanding of music notation.

IV: Reading Rhythmic Material. Steps 1-6.

Before you deal with playing the written notes you need to make sure you can sight read rhythms. If you can't accurately read the rhythms then it doesn't matter if you are reading the correct notes because you will be playing them in the wrong spot! Here are some methods to develop this technique:

NOTE: all of the following steps are to be played with a metronome. Start slowly (around 40 BPM) and then increase by small increments (around 3 and 5 BPM at a time) after you have mastered the material at the initial tempo. You should also start doing this with the metronome clicking on all beats and then set the metronome to only click on beats 2 and 4 (this really forces you to "hear" the quarter note that is not being accented by the metronome and to develop an inner sense of time).

- **Step 1:** Start by practicing the following subdivisions: whole note, half note, quarter note, 8th note, 16th note etc.
- **Step 2:** Work on the dotted forms of each: dotted whole note, dotted half note, dotted quarter, dotted 8th, dotted 16th etc.
- **Step 3:** Combine the material from steps 1 and 2.
- **Step 4:** Work on the triplet forms: half note triplet, quarter note triplet, 8th note triplet, 16th note triplet etc.
- **Step 5:** Combine the material from steps 1, 2 and 4.
- **Step 6:** Purchase a fake book or get your hands on a transcription or simply write a bunch of random rhythms and **ONLY READ THE RHYTHMS NOT THE MELODY NOTES**. Pick a single note on your instrument and play the rhythms. Vary tempo.

V: Reading Melodic Material. Steps 7-11.

After you can read through any rhythm that you are presented with the next step is to work on the ability to play the written notes. Here are some ways to accomplish that:

- **Step 7:** Get a fake book or transcription and read the notes out of time **WITHOUT A METRONOME**. The goal here is to make sure that you are playing the correct notes. This is also where you will begin associating notes on the page with where to put your finger on the fretboard.
- **Step 8:** Play the written notes as a uniform subdivision. For example, play the notes of the transcription as all half notes, and then all quarter notes etc. Do this with a metronome. This is the first step of putting the notes together with the rhythm.
- **Step 9:** Learn a transcription **BUT DO NOT MEMORIZE IT**. What I mean by that is you should read though and take the time to work on tricky parts but

do not get to the point when can play it without looking at the page. The idea here is to learn a solo and play that solo WHILE READING OF THE PAGE. This is important for two reasons. One, it is beneficial to be able to focus your eyes somewhere other than the instrument. Two, **YOU MUST ALWAYS BE READING AHEAD!** By practicing something you “kind-of know” it will allow you to free up some mental space to look ahead (generally you should be 1-2 bars ahead of what you are playing).

- **Step 10:** Read through the melody notes with the written rhythm OF SOMETHING YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN BEFORE at a very slow tempo. It is better to practice slow and make sure you get all of the notes and rhythms correct. Slowly increase the tempo. **TRY NOT TO STOP! IF YOU GET LOST KEEP GOING! (THIS IS IMPORTANT! NEVER STOP!).** You should only read through material once or twice, after that you begin to learn it and it is no longer sight reading. It is ok to come back to a piece after a few weeks of not looking at it.
- **Step 11:** Gradually increase the tempo.

VI: Reading Harmonic Material. Steps 12-17.

- **Step 12:** Play only the root of the chord on the correct beat. Very tempo.
- **Step 13:** Play the full chord strictly adhering to how it is presented on the lead sheet (i.e. no enharmonic substitutions, passing chords, extra tensions etc. Please realize that this is not how you should react in a playing situation this is just a reading exercise.) Do this out of time first and then with a metronome. Don't worry about voice leading at this point. Vary tempo.
- **Step 14:** Do the same as step 13 but now voice lead the chords.
- **Step 15:** Same as step 13 but now add any tensions or use any technique you wish, but make sure the written harmony is sounded. Don't worry about voice leading.
- **Step 16:** Same as step 15 but voice lead the chords.
- **Step 17:** This last step deals with reading specific comping rhythms that are written for the arrangement. First practice playing the chords of the tune with JUST THE RHYTHM of the melody but at the same time maintaining the chords harmonic position (i.e no anticipations or delayed resolutions unless specified in the arrangement. This is again for exercise purposes.) Do this with various rhythms and various tempos.

I hope you enjoyed this lesson! Please visit my website (www.RyanCarragher.com) for more free lessons or if you would like to schedule a one-on-one skype lesson!

Good Luck!

-Ryan Carragher