

How To Improve Piano Sight Reading

One of the reasons that I love teaching adults is because they always challenge me as a teacher, which makes piano lessons interesting. Recently, I had an adult student who already played the piano well, but wanted to improve their sight reading. So, I made a list of skills that I think are the most important for a good sight reader which allowed us to tailor her lessons to work specifically on her sight reading skills.

One of the benefits of being a good sight reader is an ability to open a new piano book and play through the music. Adding some sight reading to your practice can be a fun way to increase your practice time, improve your general music skills, and develop familiarity with a broader range of piano literature.

So, what is sight reading? I like Keith Snell's definition of sight reading from his and Diane Hidy's sight reading book series, "Sight Reading – Piano Music for Sight Reading and Short Study": *"Sight reading" means playing music you have never seen before. In other words, reading music "at first sight." A good sight reader can play accurate notes, rhythms, dynamics and articulations at, or near, the given tempo.*

Even better, Keith Snell also gives a very handy definition of the difference between "short study" and "sight reading":

"Short study" is about the amount of time you spend on a piece (for example, 5 minutes a day for one week), whereas "sight reading" is about the number of times you play a piece (no more than three).

This definition is great for determining the music level for improving sight reading because if you can play the music nearly perfect after the third time through, the music is at the right level for improving sight reading.

Denis Agay in his wonderful book, "The Art of Teaching Piano" has a chapter on sight reading and describes sight reading in this way:

"Reading music utilizes a similar eye function to reading words. The eye does not focus on each individual note. Notes form recognizable visual patterns and musical units much like a group of letters form words. To enable the mind to group individual notes into meaningful patterns, a knowledge of various musical elements, such as notation, harmony, and form, is necessary. A keen ear, quick perception, good muscle coordination, and an intuitive understanding of the logic in the organization of musical materials are assets in achieving sight reading fluency."

So, you need lots of different musical skills to be a good sight reader. Below is a list of the sight reading skills that I think are the most important.

- Quick Note Identification
 - Flashcards
- Quick Rhythm Identification
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 - Use of metronome
 - Rhythm worksheets
- Quick Identification of common musical idioms (this can vary with style of music being played)
 - Scales in all keys
 - Interval Identification
 - Chords and typical chord progressions
 - Arpeggios
 - Typical left hand accompaniments for piano music
- Ability to Read Ahead
 - Concentrate on looking ahead of where you are currently playing
- Improvisation Skills
 - Ability to read common musical idioms and make substitutions
 - Ability to simplify the music by picking out bass lines, melody, and chords and only playing the most important parts
- Familiarity with music ahead of time can help immensely
 - Identify the key and time signature
 - Identify dynamics and tempo
 - Check any other important musical information from the composer
 - Look for the musical form of the piece
 - Identifying the melody and harmony to have good aural awareness of correct pitches

Simply doing a lot of sight reading will help with all these skills naturally, but being aware of which skills you are using will also help with improvement.

Finally, if you have an audience listening to you sight read, they will notice errors in tempo and rhythm more than wrong notes. Samantha Coates has a fantastic write-up of the [seven deadly performance sins](#) discussing this issue. So, keep going at all costs during your sight reading practice and your sight reading will definitely improve.

