

Piano Sightreading: Technical Tips

by Miriam Blatt, September 2006

For satisfaction with piano sightreading, setting reasonable expectations is critical.

Reasonable expectations when performing are that one will be distracted and have things go wrong that did not happen in rehearsal - hence the large number of reminder notes I write to myself on music I am preparing for performance.

With piano sightreading, reasonable expectations are that one will drop masses of notes on the floor, and that certain difficult passages are just not going to work the way you could make them if you had been given time to practise. To help set yourself reasonable expectations for piano sightreading, volunteer to turn pages for other sightreading pianists, and pay attention to how many notes they actually get.

After setting reasonable expectations, your next task is to set reasonable goals and do your best to achieve them. The most important things to focus on are musical expression, rhythmic integrity, and playing the "right notes," according to the piano sightreading definition of "right notes." If you do a good job on these, you will have happy chamber music partners.

Musically expressive lines make listeners and chamber music partners much happier. To play them while sightreading, sacrifice any and all notes that get in the way. Consider it a success if you are able to play a musically expressive line, even if the cost is dropping every note in the other hand, and turning octave passages into single lines.

Rhythmic integrity means fitting the key rhythmic support points with other players. Playing with rhythmic spirit requires listening and bending with chamber music partners when they have the tune, and providing a clear and consistent beat in the left hand where that makes sense. Fast runs, especially accompanying ones, can be rhythmic approximations, provided one makes it to the next bar on time. Rhythmic integrity is needed to ensure that the subset of notes you are able to play while sightreading make musical sense within the context of the piece.

"Right notes" are also key to keeping your group happy. The piano sightreading definition of "right notes" is notes that match the written harmony. They are fine in any octave, with chords in any inversion. It's far better to play a quarter of the

notes in the right harmony, than to play 100% of the notes with a single note that does not harmonize. Others notice the presence of wrong notes a lot more than the absence of right ones. Your groups will be happier when you get better at picking out which quarter of the notes are most critical - keeping the tune going where the piano has the tune, or the bass line where the piano does not have the tune.

Sightreading mistakes are of course inevitable. But changing your focus from "get as many notes as possible at any cost" to "getting the right subset of notes to create music" can make a huge difference to the happiness level of your chamber music partners.

What kind of exercise is the most beneficial for sightreading when practising alone? I was surprised to discover that the answer to this is to practise with your eyes closed. The number one mistake made by struggling piano sightreaders is to allow their eyes to stray from the page to guide their hands when finding notes. Unfortunately, sightreading does not allow time for such luxuries - in the time it takes for your eyes to find their way back to the right part of the page, you will lose notes, and risk losing the rhythm as well. If you can find notes with your eyes shut, then you will no longer feel the need to look at your hands.

My path to practising with eyes closed began by observing the attendance at CMNC of blind pianist Linda Baron from Sacramento. I was surprised to learn that Linda not only played the piano, but taught it as well. One day while struggling with jumps in both hands in a Brahms cello sonata piano part, I thought of Linda and decided I had no excuses for missing my notes. I practised the section with my eyes closed. I found that such practise helps not only the particular passage practised, but also my general ability to find intervals by feel, which makes a huge difference when sightreading.

One of the strongest piano sightreaders I have met is Leo Marcus. His recommendation is to regularly practise anything, especially arpeggios, with your eyes shut.

One more suggestion: voice the piano part to bring out the most important line. 90% of the time, it will be the bottom line of the left hand, to support the rest of the group. Only when the piano has the tune does it make sense to bring out the right hand. Listen to whoever has the tune, and if you can't hear it, reduce your dynamic level until you can. Use these voicing guidelines to prioritize which notes to focus on for the "right notes", and which notes to drop on the floor.

If you succeed in adjusting your attitude and self judgement to accept the many approximations everyone makes while sightreading piano parts, then sightreading can become fun. Best of luck with finding your way to enjoying piano sightreading!