

LET'S READ!

The keys to successful chamber-music sight reading

By Scott Flavin

Sight reading chamber music is one of the great joys of being a musician. While playing at first sight as an ensemble has its challenges, there are individual and group strategies to greatly improve the experience.

First, you need to scan and prioritize. Before playing, each member of the group should look over his or her part. A key concept in successful sight reading is establishing what is most important in the first play-through. For example, string players all tend to worry about “playing the notes.” However, playing accurate notes should actually be rather low on the list of priorities.

PRIORITY 1: RHYTHM

If the group plays all the notes in a given passage without correct rhythm, there will be chaos; however, if everyone plays even a few notes in their correct place, the effect is much closer. So your first step should be to scan the page for time signature(s), tempo indications and changes, and tricky rhythms. Don't forget to notice rests.

PRIORITY 2: DYNAMICS

Imagine you're a landscape painter—would you start by painting individual blades of grass? Most likely you would flesh out the larger shapes, the hills and valleys. These are translated into dynamics. Before playing, look for high and low points in color and volume.

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PRIORITY 3: STYLE

Usually, the composer and his time period give us an idea of style; you're going to play with a different tone, articulation, and phrasing if you are playing Brahms instead of Haydn. Tempo designations may also help you find the character of the music—separate eighth notes in Allegro will be played quite differently from those in Largo, for example. Articulation markings, as well as any performance indications also can help.

PRIORITY 4: ROLES

What is everyone's role at any given moment? In looking over the music, notice where there are possible solos, as well as accompanimental passages. Some difficult figurations may

not be as important if they're accompanying another voice.

PRIORITY 5: NOTES

Even here, start from the larger gestures and shapes. When scanning the piece, notice the key signature, key changes or accidentals, difficult passages, and patterns.

Next, establish a gameplan. Now that each player has a visual overview, the group should agree on several important concepts:

1 Tempo

Choose a tempo that fits the spirit of the music. This may mean that some passagework is not possible to play at first sight. However, it is more important that you choose a tempo close to performance speed, rather than sacrifice the character.

2 Road map

Will you take repeats? Are there *dal segno* and *coda* marks? Confirm the road map as a group.

3 Maintain pulse

Don't stop! Make sure you all agree to keep going, even if notes are dropped.

4 Default “timekeepers”

A great challenge in playing together is to maintain a group pulse. Choose one or two players to be the “timekeepers.” If

the ensemble becomes shaky, they may need to show or count out the tempo, especially if there are tricky rhythms or tempo changes.

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Now, play! Some of the challenges faced by the group as a whole include maintaining focus when other parts are playing, adjusting your tempo when your partners may have a different sense of pulse, and keeping connected to the big picture and your role in it. Try to keep these three things in mind:

1 Calm

Before playing, make sure you are relaxed, breathing deeply, and have no body tension. This will help focus while reading.

2 Read ahead

If you are reading right where you are playing, you will be in trouble. You must look *ahead* of where you are playing. The key here is preparation—reading ahead gives you time to prepare for upcoming difficulties.

3 Listen

One of the beauties of chamber music is the shared experience; at moments, you may need to be very flexible to accommodate your partners, as well as adjust balance to hear important voices clearly. Constant active listening will help you do this.

Take a moment to assess your reading. After reading, take a moment as a group to reflect on which areas were successful, and what kinds of issues were stumbling-blocks. This will help in your next reading session. Of course, the best way to get better at sight reading is to do it often.

Don't forget to have fun! Remember once again that good sight reading is not about notes, but about finding the spirit and pulse of the piece at first sight. Once you free yourself from feeling pressured to play every note, you can relax and enjoy sharing a conversation in music. You may leave out some words, but the story will remain intact.

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