



Becoming a Better Sight-Reader at the Piano

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

Learning to become a better sight-reader is a completely learnable skill. Just like any other skill, it takes time, patience, and coaching. You might have seen (or heard about) pianists who can just sight-read virtually *anything* you put in front of them, even though they had very little training in this particular skill. Kind of amazing to watch, but this represents a very small subset of players.

Try asking yourself this fundamental question — “Why do I want/need to become a great sight-reader?” Being super facile at this skill doesn’t necessarily make you a deeper or more worthy musician — there are many great players and composers who are not great sight-readers and they get along just fine. In fact, some very accomplished artists find that they absorb new repertoire more deeply by having to learn the score more slowly.

So again, ask yourself what is your true motivation here? After all, sight-reading is a slow [!] skill to build for most pianists. If it’s important to your job as a vocal or ballet accompanist, or studio musician, then by all means *work on this skill*. If you simply enjoy being able to get a quick idea of what a work sounds like and you’d rather not go to the internet, that’s certainly a valid reason for working on it, too. But if you’re doing this to try to impress people (or yourself), that’s going to be a bottomless hole to try to climb out of . . .

With that in mind, here are some essential things to consider before you tackle sight-reading:

- *Does your technique need work?* You can’t sight-read something that you can’t physically play.
- *Is your theory knowledge strong?* Sight-reading is largely dependent on your background with harmonic & rhythmic structures.
- *Is your lighting and vision at the piano ideal?* Lighting, along with optimal bench height and score placement (if you’re playing a digital keyboard), plus good vision hygiene, is vital to absorbing lots of notes quickly.

There are three fundamental tools that my students find very helpful for improving their sight-reading. The first is what I call “Bar Hopping”. It’s a game where you force yourself to only play the events on every downbeat, and then a beat later hop to the next measure and briefly play the events on that next downbeat for the whole piece (or section). Then, take this same approach of playing the events on beat 2 and then hop to the next bar’s beat 2 event. Do this for every major beat (and subdivision, if you are up for that). Whatever you do, *don’t sustain!* If you do, your brain will slyly try to figure out the context/purpose of each event, and that will very likely slow you down. This game is really more like being at an amusement park shooting gallery vs. trying to “make music”. It’s very important to do this at a workable tempo that won’t completely frustrate you — not ultra-slow, but not at the performance tempo — so somewhere in between that feels like a manageable challenge.

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The second important concept that will make a difference with your sight-reading is to never stop when you make a mistake. This is a completely human thing to do. However, if you try to correct yourself when you know you've made an error you will surely disrupt the flow of your tempo and completely miss the point of the exercise. The object is to *be with* and *fully accept* that a sizable portion of your notes won't be correct. Over time, the ratio of your correct notes-to-incorrect notes *will* improve. When I sight-read, I like to imagine that I'm at a car test track, laughing every time I knock over a road cone! You can see how using a metronome would be very helpful for getting a reality check on your skill level; (remember that you can finely adjust the tempo to track not only your main beats, but also your subdivisions, too).

Finally, it's a very good idea to spend at least *some* of your time sight-reading music that's outside the standard 4/4 and 3/4 meters. I'm not referring to pieces in what are called "compound meters" of 6/8, 9/8, or 12/8 which are simple combinations of duple and triple groups, but rather pieces that are in what our Western culture calls "odd meters" — 5/4, 7/8, 13/8, etc. (Rhythmically complex musical cultures like those in Eastern Europe or the Middle East don't find these meters "odd" at all). The reason for this recommendation is that it will give you insights into asymmetric groupings that are heard within a simple 4/4 or 3/4 meter work. Plus, being familiar with these advanced meters will enhance your musicality and musicianship in a myriad of ways, some obvious and some more subtle.