



Making Sense Of Reading Music As A Beginner

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

Why were so many adults turned off to taking music lessons when they were young? The most consistent factor that I've observed is that there was such a heavy emphasis on reading music. If they were lucky enough to have experienced a more holistic introduction to music in which reading is *very gradually* integrated (e.g. Orff-Schulwerk), chances are good that they had a positive initial experience with learning music. But this in no way represents the majority of people in this country. (Though Orff-Schulwerk is European in origin, it closely resembles the way that music is traditionally taught in West Africa — group classes that integrate singing, dancing, acting, and playing simple wind instruments, and tuned & untuned percussion well before any notation is introduced).

The issue of reading music too early is especially true of any youngster taking piano lessons. Sure, there will always be a small minority of children who can read two different sets of notes, in two different clefs, in two separate hands without difficulty. We're talking about a *very* small minority . . .

Students learn most effectively when they work on one skill *at a time*. This is because each skill is multi-faceted. For example, reading even the simplest music involves two entirely separate abilities: locating rhythm and locating pitch. We're not even talking about different rhythms in different hands, more than one part in a hand, or that reading music is the only language that involves reading an alphabet forwards AND backwards! This combination of challenges is just assumed to be "normal" for a young person to take on.

Each skill needs to become solid enough to become a platform for other skills to anchor onto. Consider that we as humans have only had the written word for a relatively short amount of time compared to oral communication. This is why asking any beginning student to attempt reading, technique, and hand independence simultaneously is so counter-productive, and frankly disrespectful of how the brain and body absorb new skills.

It is far better to begin someone's reading skills by *just focusing on rhythm*, starting with combinations of whole, half, and quarter notes, and then graduating to more complex subdivisions. The best system for this is called "rhythm notation", which is a hybrid of drum notation and traditional notation. Rhythm notation is ideal because there's absolutely no reference to pitch, so a student isn't distracted by pitch (or words, if they're reading songs or choral scores). Why work on rhythm first? It's because rhythm is so much more challenging than pitch to learn at first. The other advantage to getting exposed to this rhythm notation is that it prepares students for working with rhythm figures found in jazz and other non-classical styles.

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And how should students learn what the pitches are on the staff? This should also be done *separately*, without the distractions of pitch or text/lyrics. Typically, students learn how to identify notes by using an antiquated (and rather sexist) series of mnemonic phrases that represent each line and space of our five-line staff. This challenge is compounded by the fact that piano students need to learn *both* the treble and bass clef. For example, the traditional mnemonic for the treble lines (E-G-B-D-F from bottom to top) is **Every Good Boy Does Fine**, while the spaces mnemonic (G-B-D-F-A from bottom to top) is **Good Boys Do Fine Always**. Why are we *still* using these ancient mnemonic devices? It is far better to have a student make up their own, personally relevant (and therefore, more memorable) phrase to learn the notes on both staves. When this is done separately from reading rhythms, then combining these two skills later is far more manageable and results in less stress and frustration in students.