
**TO BE, (AN ACCOMPLISHED SIGHT READER) OR NOT TO BE?
THAT IS THE QUESTION!**

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Resolving the Past - The TRUTH about poor sight-reading skills at the keyboard revealed and the CAUSE clearly established. Dispelling the myths, misunderstandings and belief systems of the Harmonic Age in relation to the successful teaching of sight-reading skills at the keyboard. Step, scientific, systematic methodology ever produced that teaches the 'Dual Disciplines' of harmonic reading and its associate skill, playing by touch... Teaching students HOW to create their own G.P.S. system and internal metronome.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind,
To suffer the slings and arrows
Of outrageous fortune to which
Historical conclusion has led us,

Or, to take arms against a sea of
Troubles, forge a new path –
Challenge the Myth – shatter the
Illusion and by opposing end them?

Shakespeare's immortal words (slightly modified) so beautifully express our dilemma in regard to the sight-reading problem.

During my early research I read every article I could find on the subject of sight-reading skills at the keyboard. This was as far back as Johann Hummel and as recent as Howard Rickman. The latter (a performing artist) stated in his book *Super Sight Reading Secrets* "I could play Chopin Etudes faster than the speed of light, but could not read musical comedy tunes at parties". This is not only a clear indictment of the seriousness of the problem but also begs the question - how many more dedicated and committed students have suffered the same fate?

The general consensus throughout musical history in regard to the teaching of this important skill has concluded that acquiring musical knowledge plus practice, practice and more

practice will eventually lead to good sight-reading skills... My research proved that this assumption could not be further from the truth!

Mastery of this skill depends primarily on the ability to keep the eyes focussed on the written music as often as possible. This is the first instruction a student will receive from a teacher, as the ability to 'play by touch' is totally dependent upon training the visual, cognitive and tactile senses to work in tandem, with the mind in charge.

In theory all this makes logical sense, but putting it into practice for the average student has proved to be an almost insurmountable hurdle. For some reason even the most educated, disciplined and conscientious students find this simple instruction impossible to comply with! Why? one asks, would a student take the illogical route of watching their hands instead of the music? This is tantamount to driving a car, constantly looking at your feet – not only dangerous but with very little prospect of travelling very far, very quickly! What fear is so great that it can and frequently does overrule a student's natural common sense? I found the answer to this question when I chose to conduct the preliminary stages of my research with the co-operation and assistance of all my students. I used questioning techniques to view this problem through their eyes, their ears and their hands. The outcome of this collaborative effort brought a totally new perspective to the situation that completely transformed and revolutionized my thinking in regard to the successful teaching of this vital skill.

RESOLVING THE PAST

Research Results

At the root of the sight-reading problem lay the decision to use the semitone as the lowest common denominator of pitch on the keyboard. While the inventors of the keyboard were well aware that the inclusion of the semitone was going to put a great deal of stress on the ear because of the dissonance factor, they also knew that without the semitone there was no way to express the many contrasting emotions of the human condition. It was generally assumed that with time and indoctrination the negative effect of dissonance and its ability to panic the senses would gradually dissipate. Unfortunately, this has turned out to be wishful thinking on our part.

It appears that the ear can't live with dissonance and WE can't live without it!

Further contributing factors were found to be:-

- Many centuries of ego centred lateral thinking prior to the Harmonic Age.
- A lack of knowledge of human psychology...our thoughts, feelings and fears.
- The effect of SOUND (particularly harmonic sound) on the human psyche.
- Treating the keyboard as two one line melodic instruments instead of one two line harmonic instrument. This mindset has caused us to teach students to read and practice separate hands instead of both hands together.
- A conscious belief that musical knowledge plus practice, practice and more practice will eventually lead to good sight-reading skills, when in fact only correct teaching techniques will achieve this.
- An unconscious belief that the musical language is simply an extension of a language we have already been taught (our mother tongue) and as such it has been assumed that we already know how to read. This has stopped us from comparing and contrasting the English language with the Harmonic Musical language (two totally different mental processes)...One far more complex than the other!

The main cause and missing piece of the sight-reading puzzle was found to be 'Lack of Know How'. While we are certainly teaching students an abundance of musical knowledge, what we are NOT doing is teaching them how to apply this knowledge successfully i.e:

- How to maintain eye contact with the music so that they learn to feel, what they see, and
- How to read the vertical Grand Staff successfully.

Without these two essential skills there is very little prospect of students becoming proficient sight-readers. These two weaknesses were found to be at the heart of the sight-reading problem and are mainly responsible for the huge drop out rate of young piano students during the early years of training.

Further investigation proved without a doubt that:-

- The term 'Sight-Reading' is ambiguous and not a true reflection of the multi-faceted nature of this complex art or representative of the special skills required in order to master the 'Dual Disciplines' of 'harmonic reading' and its associated skill 'playing by touch'.

- These two vital skills have never been taught successfully.
- NO amount of past or present repertoire will solve the problem.
- The missing piece of the sight-reading puzzle was 'Lack of Know How'.
- This problem can only be resolved with Teacher re-education and Parent co-operation.

It was during my investigation into the 'Harmonics of Sound' and its effect on the human psyche that the first weakness was diagnosed.

I discovered that the ability to maintain eye contact with the music would be easily accomplished if it wasn't for the intimidating effect of five profound fear factors:-

- The human ears' innate fear of dissonance (sounds that disturb the ear).
- The movement of the hands distracting the eyes.
- The basic human instinct of fear of failure, rejection and lack of approval.
- Not knowing what keys are under your fingers at all times (tactile insecurity).
- The complexities of the reading procedure for Harmonic Instruments (which is totally contrary to the accepted principles associated with language skills.)

As a combination these five profound fear factors are formidable! Any one of them can totally destroy a student's ability to concentrate on the music. Add to this the fact that for centuries we have been placing music in front of students that they cannot possibly read and play (both hands together) at sight without constantly looking at their hands and you have a recipe for disaster.

It was during my investigation into the role of the six senses involved in the sight-reading process, their relationship to each other, behaviour, hierarchy and synchronicity that the second weakness became crystal clear.

It is an accepted fact that in all forms of learning success depends entirely upon the MIND being the dominant sense. 'Think before you act must be the motto!'

In the case of Harmonic Sight-Reading skills the Hierarchy of the Senses should be:-

VISUAL	We See	*	(Dominant Senses) *
COGNITIVE	We Think	*	
KINAESTHETIC	We Move		
TACTILE	We Feel		(main weakness)
AUDITORY	We Hear		(the only receptor of sound)
MEMORY	We Remember		(decisions, decisions!) Sight-reading, keyboard memorization or both?)

If the ear and hands are constantly at war because a student is producing too many note errors that the ear cannot tolerate, the fear experienced will panic the senses changing their behaviour and hierarchy. If this occurs and the auditory Sense becomes the dominant sense it will make it practically impossible for students to keep their eyes on the music. It is easy then to see why students having one half hour lesson per week, with little or no informed supervision at home become frustrated with the reading process and turn to keyboard memorization as a substitute.

In the case of harmonic reading skills the lights came on when I visited my students during their home practice. I was devastated to find out that very few students (no matter what their age or experience) ever attempted to read and play a new piece of music both hands together and were spending at least 80% of their practice time trying to find the notes under their hands. I also discovered that many of my “good” students, the ones that came back every week with all their homework completed and without a note out of place were using keyboard memorization techniques and not sight-reading skills to accomplish this.

Throughout my musical life this was something that I had never done! I learnt to read from a Hymn Book so always played both hands together and read harmonically from Bass to Treble. It had never occurred to me to read or practice separate hands. I simply isolated the bars that had reading, fingering or technical difficulties for special practice. I thought everyone read piano music the way I did, including my own students! I couldn't believe how naïve I had been. How could I have missed this vital clue?

I had always assumed that once a new piece had been thoroughly analysed theoretically and fingered during the lesson that students would go home and do exactly what I had always done and that was to read and practice both hands together... I was sadly mistaken! I found out the hard way that the majority of my students were reading and practising separate hands during their home practice. This penchant for taking the safe option (one that constant note errors, a critical ear and poor tactile security will force you to take) has led students down a very treacherous and futile path for centuries.

The only way to prevent this from happening and give our students a fighting chance of acquiring this skill is to protect the EAR in the early years of tuition by controlling these fear factors and eliminating as many note errors as possible, so that students can gradually build up confidence in their tactile and kinesthetic senses.

In order to accomplish this it has been necessary to slow down the learning process and return to a skill building philosophy. We have been moving hand positions far too fast for the average student. Before they know it they are out of their depth and never recover.

Harmonic reading skills demand that we read both vertically and horizontally at the same time (a combination of literal and intervallic note reading skills) as it is impossible for the eyes and mind to read two melodic/horizontal lines simultaneously. As this unique mental process defies a natural rule of nature (gravity) in order to accomplish this students need to be trained to read this way from a very early age.

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

The Solution

Once the cause of the problem was clearly established it was simply a matter of developing a teaching formula with which to teach this skill successfully. I have devoted the last ten years of my life to this task and continue to refine and add to the program.

The 'Say & Play' Sight-Reading Training Method is a six year apprenticeship for piano students six to twelve years of age, or beginners of any age and is (I believe) the first step by step, lesson by lesson, scientific, systematic methodology ever produced that teaches the 'Dual Disciplines' of 'harmonic reading' and its associate skill 'playing by touch' at the keyboard.

Its main objective is to train students how to create their own internal GPS system, one that will give them total control (both physically and mentally) over the middle three octaves of the keyboard.

This is accomplished by training students:-

- How to create a successful working space between themselves and their instrument.
- How to maintain eye contact with the music so that they learn to FEEL and not FEAR what they SEE.
- How to use their senses in a behavioral pattern that will lead to good sight-reading skills on harmonic instruments.
- How to read the vertical Grand Staff with ease, efficiency, speed, fluency and accuracy (mental agility).
- How to visualize the keyboard beneath their hands.
- How to think in Keys, Chords and Hand Positions.
- How to develop their peripheral vision.
- How to keep their hands in a five finger position, extending and contracting the hand for larger intervals.
- How to use the thumb and little finger as guides when moving over the keyboard.

Teaching aids used in the 'Say & Play' method are:-

- A cover for the keyboard (3 octaves in length) and covering all the notes within the compass of the Grand Staff is used to promote and train tactile security.
- The keyboard chart is placed flat on the keyboard cover and used to teach students HOW to visualize the keyboard beneath their hands...Poor visualization skills are far more prevalent than we think and is a major contributor to the sight-reading problem.
- A magnetic staff enables a student to transfer the moveable notes directly and physically from the staff to the keyboard and vice versa, teaching the concept of keyboard geography in direct relationship to the written music.

Emphasis is on simplicity, sound reasoning and a success-oriented program that allows a student to proceed at their own pace, in a non-threatening environment where realistic and achievable goals guarantee steady progress and eventual success. Based on the same harmonic principles as the Hymn Book (in a simplified modern form) students learn to read (out loud) from bottom to top (Bass to Treble) very early in their training and always play both hands together. All seven hand positions are visualized and trained individually and then extended to the octave. Note errors are avoided at all costs in the early years of training in order to protect the ear so that students can build up confidence in their tactile and kinesthetic senses.

The Rationale is that if a student's learning strategies and practice habits are totally transparent, then any weakness in the reading procedure will be very evident and therefore easily monitored and controlled by the teacher.

The Objective of the 'Say & Play' method is to provide teachers and students with a balanced, comprehensive sight-reading training program in which the practical, theoretical, aural and psychological aspects are all given equal precedence – one that will lead to complete control of the instrument both mentally and physically.

A dream come true for both students and teachers... it teaches reading strategies and practice habits that will ensure that every student has an equal opportunity of achieving a high level of sight-reading proficiency at the keyboard.

Having had this method in operation with my own students for the past seven years (without one solitary drop-out) and witnessed first hand its remarkable success and the subsequent ease with which examinations are accomplished I realize that with an open mind and a willingness to change, the problem of poor sight-reading skills at the piano will be a thing of the past – making the study of this wonderful instrument more enjoyable, rewarding and meaningful for all concerned.

About the Author:

Joan Bevan: When I arrived in Australia in 1964 from Wales in the U.K. I brought with me a musical legacy that has been with me throughout many happy years in my adopted country. My ability to sight-read piano music with ease and efficiency was my greatest asset and yet despite all my sincere efforts over nearly 40 years of teaching I had failed miserably to pass this skill on to my students. In the mid- nineties I decided that 'enough was enough' and after many years of research and experimentation I now have the answer to the successful teaching of this valuable skill.