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## Using the Improve your sight-reading! method

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When we, as experienced musicians, look at music, we understand what we see and we ‘get’ the (musical) point, allowing us to give a fairly (or completely) accurate and musical rendition immediately. Our pupils can be taught to do this too. It takes time but is one of the most worthwhile skills we can help our pupils to develop.

The importance of *understanding* what we’re reading is fundamental to building fluent, accurate and confident sight-reading. We teach this by being really thorough. Whenever anything new is introduced, we ensure that pupils absorb, digest and fully understand, and, at the same time, make strong relevant connections, especially with aural, rhythm, scales and theory. This connected approach is the basis of *Simultaneous Learning*, which is explained fully in *Simultaneous Learning: The definitive guide* (Faber Music, 2014).

Working with the *Improve your sight-reading!* series is entirely self-explanatory, but here are a few thoughts to help support the method. Remember always to prepare carefully, never allowing pupils to do something they don’t fully understand. It will pay great dividends.

Each stage in the nine books that comprise the series is divided into four sections:

**Rhythmic exercises** These should be absolutely understood before proceeding. Make sure pupils really understand the concept of pulse and how the patterns relate to the pulse. The individual books suggest various ways to do these exercises. Try them all – it will be fun!

**Melodic exercises** Look out for and comment on recurring and common melodic patterns (the musical equivalent of words like ‘and’, ‘the’, ‘what’ etc.), especially scale and triadic patterns that can be read in a single glance (or ‘saccade’, to use the official term). Always encourage pupils to hear the patterns internally before playing. Rhythm should be no problem and melody will become more achievable with practice.

**Prepared Pieces** These come with questions to encourage pupils to think about the pieces and help to form an all-round understanding of them. Devise more questions if you feel an area needs further exploration – rhythmic understanding, melodic patterns, markings or character, for example. As with all exercises, recommend pupils hear them internally first.

# Grade 1

- Stage 1  $\frac{4}{4}$  ♩ ♩ C major 12
- Stage 2 ♩ **small leaps** 13
- Stage 3  $\frac{3}{4}$  ♩. **G major** 14
- Stage 4 **F major, mixing left and right hands** 15
- Stage 5 **Tied notes** 16
- Stage 6  $\frac{2}{4}$  ♩♩ **A minor, phrasing** 17
- Stage 7 **Staccato, slurs and accents** 18
- Stage 8 **D minor** 19
- Stage 9 **All ingredients** 20

## Activities notice board

### Time signatures

Make up short improvisations in  $\frac{2}{4}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $\frac{4}{4}$ .

### Rhythm



Play call and response by clapping short rhythm patterns for pupils to clap back, using these note and rest durations in  $\frac{2}{4}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $\frac{4}{4}$ .

Ask pupils to write down one-bar patterns and clap them back from this notation.

### Character

Make up short improvisations in different characters. Choose anything you like – happy, sad, angry, cheeky, witty, energetically and so on ... Include ingredients like staccato and accents.

### Keys

**C, G, F majors and A and D minors**

Make sure the scales of the Grade 1 keys can be played effortlessly. Improvise short patterns in these keys (with either hand) using the note and rest durations and the time signatures for this grade. Choose a different key each lesson.

### Pulse game

An excellent game to develop pulse and counting. Count one bar aloud then continue to count silently in your head. Ask pupils to do the same (1234 2234 3234, etc). Then ask the pupils to clap, for example, on the 3rd beat of the 7th bar. Play this game often, using different time signatures and asking pupils to clap on different beats of different bars.

## Grade 3 Stages 7 and 8

Discuss the implication of the time signature and counting in quavers.  
Try to hear internally both lines simultaneously. 'Play' the two lines  
in the air a little above the keyboard.

**$\frac{3}{8}$  and more  
rhythms in  $\frac{3}{8}$**

### Cheerfully

### Jauntily

### Thoughtfully

### Lightheartedly

### Angrily