

Thesis for  
Piano Teaching Diploma

# **ON SIGHT-READING**

*Piano onderwijs scriptie*

submitted by  
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*sight-reading, sightreading, sight reading,*

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## Foreword

A top English life coach and author of a best-selling time management book once advised that I must distinguish between *interest* and *commitment*. I am the kind of person who is interested in nearly everything. Curiosity is what lured me to sight-read new pieces. I need to ask myself, of the things I'm interested in, what am I committed to? Those are the pieces I will eventually study and perform. Similarly that is how I should approach choosing a topic for my thesis.

I had at first considered writing about cross-cultural education, for my piano students included a Singaporean boy of 10, two American transfer students, and Dutch students ranging from age 7 to 72. I have personally studied under a Japanese teacher, two Filipinos, two Americans, and two Dutch teachers. But culture is something I reserved for my final exam in composition --- the 30-minute chamber opera "Culture Shock!"

Then I recalled that I was once asked to develop and conduct a workshop on sight-reading in North Cyprus in May 2003. I had begun by collecting material from the Internet, simply printing relevant pages from the websites I found. The two-hour workshop was in the form of a master class, and time flew. Later I met Marian Bolt who was teaching sight-reading at Utrecht Conservatory. After discussing her approach, I realised that I needed to do a lot more preparation before I would be sufficiently ready to conduct another group workshop.

Since I enjoy sight-reading piano duets and playing chamber music with others, I have an implicit goal to find more sight-readers like myself to collaborate with. I began to ask this of my own students by introducing duets at a very early age. I even composed multi-hands on one piano "duets" for them. I am curious why some students become better sight-readers while others struggle.

I learned from conducting research on sight-reading that it's a very important topic for all musicians, not just pianists. And it's also of interest to researchers in computer science, psychology, education, and even neurology. The findings from my interviews with 7 piano teachers converged with conclusions from published literature. Some of these are:

- The more you sight-read, the better you get
- Vertical reading is critical in sight-reading, as well as looking ahead and other aspects of eye-movement
- Good technique helps you recognize patterns and respond more quickly
- Sight-reading requires good concentration and anticipation
- A big part of sight-reading is getting the rhythm right
- Knowledge of music theory and analysis helps greatly
- Good sight-readers are bred not born

Finally, as a composer, I learned that readability of the score is an important ingredient in a player's acceptance and willingness to play the music. Thus editors and publishers also have a responsibility in choosing the appropriate font size, spacing, and notation.

## Acknowledgements

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## **My history of piano study and performance**

### **Piano lessons in Okinawa, Japan**

When I was 8, my parents bought a brand new Yamaha upright piano to our new home on the island of Okinawa, Japan. My 6-year old sister, my mother, and I began our lessons at the same time, from Mrs Yu, now Ms Shimasato. She was the wife of a colleague of my father, who had already taken some lessons at university many years before. My father could play Chinese pentatonic tunes by ear with both hands on the black keys only. I began with Beyer and Hanon, later Czerny. It was a typical Japanese approach while we watched master classes of talented young children on Japanese educational television programmes.

My mother progressed most rapidly. At the age of 8, I could barely speak English let alone Japanese. However, I could write Chinese characters. And that was how my Japanese teacher and I communicated --- through a mixture of Chinese characters (kanji) and nonverbal movements. My poor sister had to stop after several lessons because she couldn't understand. She picked it up a year or two later and became good at playing by ear and from memory.

My first public performance was playing at the Christmas party in our residential area at age 10.5. I merely sight-read Christmas carols for everyone to sing to and also extras as background music.

Just before or just after that, if my memory serves me correctly, I went to study under Miss Aurora Ventura at the Camp Kuwae Music Academy. This was a private music school organised and headed by Professor Panganiban, who eventually became my teacher. This was a busy music school with regular recitals.

My piano lessons taken during high school ended with the American teacher Mrs Betsy Hermann, who lived an hour's drive away. She taught me music theory, which led me to write my own pieces around age 14. I continued to compose from that age onwards.

### **Page-turner, accompanist, keyboardist, organist, and piano teacher**

I consider my music career starting around age 12 when I was asked to be a page turner for the accompanist of my school choir. The following year I took over my teacher's place and became the choir accompanist.

My teenage years were filled with music-related activities in high school, such as keyboard player in stage band, accompanist of concert choir and stage choir, bell player in concert band, and pianist in various talent shows. I also joined a local rock band called "Funky Caravan." I learned how to improvise because I was called to do solo's during sessions with the various bands. So frequent were my piano playing that I became the defacto pianist --- *if you needed a pianist or accompanist, just ask Anne.*

Outside of school, I was busy with accompanying church choirs and giving private piano lessons at home. I inherited students of an older classmate and neighbour when she graduated from high school. As a result, I began giving private piano lessons, counting a total of 20 in two years, ranging from age 4 to 18.

After a season with the Okinawa Choral Society, an adult choral production, in which I was the youngest member at age 16, I began to play the organ as well as the piano for local church services. This eventually grew to five regular services a week plus choir rehearsals during the week. Christmas and Easter saw additional services. The position of chief organist of several churches meant that people looking for an organist for a private service such as a wedding or funeral must ask me first. In effect, I had a monopoly on music on that American air base, which brought me good pocket money.

As soon as I was able to, I accepted requests to play the piano and the organ for weddings and memorial services in Okinawa, North Carolina, California, London, Hertford, Limerick (Ireland),



Series from our home in Utrecht, holding two regular concerts a year of music including either the piano or the guitar.

In September 2007, we joined forces with Korean violinist Naeon Kim to participate in the Chamber Music Marathon at the conservatory. We got permission from Florida-based Paul Richards to premiere a commissioned work of his in the Netherlands, not only in the marathon but in several violin recitals and the Open Day. After the Amsterdam-based composer Gijs van Dijk wrote a piano guitar duo piece for us, we asked him to write a piece for our trio. We played “Rendering 7” at the second marathon. Playing in a trio has opened up new possibilities for making music with our duo. I hope to continue exploring chamber music with the piano.

## **My philosophy and approach to teaching piano**

Before I studied at the conservatory, I taught piano the way I've been taught. "It works so why change it," I had thought.

After taking courses on piano methodology, technique, history, and literature, I have adopted a different point of view. There is a plethora of piano teaching books out there, many different approaches, which means that the way I was taught might not have been the best or be suitable for someone else. I have gone from teacher-centred approach to student-centred.

### **Every student is different.**

Or rather, every student is unique. Take the very first beginner. She knows nothing about the piano. Where do you start? How do you get her comfortable at the piano? How do you build confidence? What if her legs are too short to reach the ground? How do you get her to identify middle C?

Take the student who has learned another instrument. He knows how to read notes but doesn't know where they are on the piano. His other instrument may help or hinder him, depending on how fast you take him through the lessons.

Take the adult student who, despite the responsibilities of a full-time job and family, has committed to taking piano lessons. Adult students have longer attention spans and reason well. But their hands and fingers are not as pliable as their younger equivalents, and they may easily ache from straining or sitting wrongly.

### **How do I teach sight-reading?**

Why do people accept that many pianist cannot sight-read (play the right notes upon reading the score for the first time) yet can read letters and newspapers?

I use pattern recognition and relative association to get students to learn to read notes. Before they play a piece, I ask them to find out how to simplify the piece --- that is, reduce the piece to its simplest components. He may identify that there are only three notes in the right hand and that the left hand repeats itself after two bars. This builds confidence in the student, a key part of sight-reading. I also stop the student during a piece and ask him to start somewhere else. This prevents them from merely recalling the piece and not really reading the piece. I like to introduce new music not in their books. I regularly supplement their standard method book with additional pieces.

### **How do I teach rhythm?**

Kids these days grow up to the 4/4 beat of pop music. Not surprisingly anything other than a symmetrical or even beat is difficult. A simple waltz, for example, is counted as 1, 2, 3, uh. 1, 2, 3, uh. How do you get them to drop the "uh" and count to a real 3/4 time?

I use duets for this purpose, for after all, rhythm is what keeps a duet, a duo, or any chamber music group together.

There is so much to digest in one go that sometimes it's good to just focus on one thing at a time, e.g. the rhythm. Get them to clap to the beat, dance to the waltz. Or prescribe only pieces in triple meter for awhile.

### **Variety is the spice of life.**

Learning to play piano is about learning to press the right keys to produce the sound you want. I consider it equally important to read music and play it, to hear the music and play it (play by ear), to improvise (produce new music on the keys), to memorise (play from memory), and less important, to be able to compose and transpose (play the same passage in another key). Playing the piano is multi-

tasking --- you have to get the rhythm and tempo right while playing and reading the notes. When you're just starting, you also need to make sure your posture is right.

How do you get everything right? Variety. If you only play music from a single era or written by a single composer, you would not learn enough. The love of novelty and my own curiosity and impatience at learning something new led me to develop my sight-reading abilities.

No method book is complete without supplements. I complement my students' repertoire with exercises and arrangements I make for that student. I also like to compose for them.

In general, I believe in variety --- a diverse portfolio, a repertoire that has enough variety to sustain interest and allow exploration. I believe strongly in teaching the Circle of 5ths, scales, chords, chord inversions, and finger drills. I actively include duet playing.

### **The importance of performance**

I aim to schedule a piano recital at least once and at most twice a year for my students who are also invited to play at house concerts and other events I organise. These performances are important for them to overcome stage fright as well as to have a goal to reach. They often break through a difficult milestone as a result.

### **Where do I teach?**

I normally always teach from home. I have an 188 cm New York Steinway Grand from 1909 which has been carefully restored. I live within cycling distance of the central train station and five different busses stop by here. There's also free parking in front of the house. Some students find it more convenient to take lessons from me at the conservatory nearby.

### **Which languages do I use to teach piano?**

My mother tongue is Mandarin Chinese though my English is that of a native speaker, having been educated in English since age 7. As I live in the Netherlands, I also teach in Dutch. Generally I use a mixture of English and Dutch.

### **My students**

At time of writing, I have one adult student who has studied with me for two years (since September 2006) from the very beginning. Inge decided to learn to play the piano on her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, having already 5 years of classical guitar lessons and active involvement singing in a choir. What comes naturally to her are playing musically and with feeling. She reads beautifully and gets through new pieces quickly. Slightly more challenging is finding the right place on the keyboard and coordinating her right hand with the left. It is an ongoing goal to get her to relax and not lose her place on the keys. She welcomes opportunities to perform in piano recitals.

My other adult student is a retired 72 year old who stopped temporarily because of a death in the family. Alexander is keen to play his keyboard, taking it even on holiday, as well as engaging in a variety of other interests. He hopes to resume in September with simple arrangements of classical pieces, having already for the preceding few years attempted only popular songs.

I have taught several teenage students, only one of whom still continues at all. Maartje started to play the piano before she was diagnosed as having dyslexia. Several years later she decided to start again, after the divorce of her parents. Despite language difficulties, we manage to communicate with her Dutch and my English. At first I did not notice any reading difficulties. She prefers to hear the music before attempting to read. Unfortunately, the second year of our lessons have been sporadic due to her increased school work and having no piano available to practise when she visits her father.

I include the lesson plans and evaluations in the appendix. These were the lessons I gave at the conservatory in the presence of Willy Muller and two years later Gerry Muskens.

## On sight-reading: summary and conclusions

- Definition
- Importance
- Problems and challenges
- Pre-requisites: what makes a good sight-reader
- Teaching methods and approaches
- Relationship with memorization, improvisation, playing by ear
- Overconfidence bias

Sight-reading, or sight reading, or sightreading, or prima vista playing is that ability to play from the first reading of a music score, without prior practice. It may be better termed “sight playing” or “playing at sight.”

The ability to sight-read is considered extremely important for accompanists and other collaborative playing (chamber music) and very important for the student to explore new repertoire. The inability to sight-read well or at all is one big reason for students to stopping their lessons.

In general, players of single voice instruments, such as brass and wind, find it easier to sight-read than those of multiple voice instruments, such as the guitar (chords), piano (2-staff), and organ (3-staff). Guitarists have to decide where to position and finger a chord as there are many choices. Pianists have to read two staves instead of three.

Some of the problems encountered by piano students when sight-reading are as follows:

- Having to look at the hands and the keyboard when reading
- Consistently playing the wrong notes
- Using the wrong fingers, which get in the way of a smooth scale or arpeggio
- Losing the beat
- Getting lost in the score (because of having to look down at the hands)
- Getting confused by the notation
- Not comfortable with sight-reading or anxiety about doing it
- Feeling the wrong rhythmic pulse
- Inability to do jumps (landing in the wrong place)
- Forgetting the sharps or flats in the key signatures
- Inability to read the accidentals
- Getting overwhelmed by all that is on the page
- Losing the place on the keyboard because the hands move unnecessarily
- Confusion of clefs, i.e. reading the note as if it's in the other clef

A successful sight-reader is one who can play accurately at first sight. She does not look at her hands or the keyboard unless it's absolutely necessary, such as big jumps. She reads vertically, and her field of vision is wider than that of a poor sight-reader. She can read chunks of information ahead of time while her eyes may zig-zag through. She recognizes patterns and can predict what is to come. She can hold more information than a novice. She is able to respond more quickly than a novice. She has good finger sense from having good technique. That is, when she sees a run without fingering marks, she knows instinctively which fingers to use to make that scale.

There are many ways to become a good sight-reader. In general, the more you sight-read, the better a sight-reader you become. Accompanists, by necessity, have to be good sight-readers. They also go through so much repertoire that they become good sight-readers. Soloists, on the other hand, do not

have to be good sight-readers in their profession and they spend more time studying one piece for performance than accompanists.

Teachers can build students' sight-reading capability by a variety of methods:

- playing duets,
- stopping them in the middle of the piece and starting somewhere else,
- challenging the student with new pieces,
- showing them how to recognise patterns,
- having the students identify and verbalise different parts of a score such as the time signature, key signature, etc.
- using a cardboard with a cut-out space to focus the eyes on the score, moving it along
- use games, such as reading and playing a note on one staff and moving to another staff and up again

The career path of a good sight-reader is very different from one who can memorise well or play by ear well. These skills are not only pre-requisites but also self-enforcing. That is, an accompanist gets better and better at sight-reading. A soloist gets better at memorizing. A jazz pianist gets better at improvising and playing by ear. There is a relationship between sight-reading and memorizing in that a poor sight-reader may need to study a piece so much that she can nearly memorise it. A skilled sight-reader may read "superficially" because there is no need to study it --- and hence memorization may require considerably more effort.

There is a strange phenomenon that I have personally experienced in sight-reading. I call it the over-confidence bias, from my previous studies in decision analysis (in economics). The second or third time I play a piece is often not as perfect as the first time because I am less alert and also I'm fooled to thinking that I have played it before.

The above are my conclusions drawn from my personal experience, review and analysis of the literature, and conversations with sight-readers, including the interviews with piano teachers I conducted for this thesis.

## **My experience of sight-reading and teaching of sight-reading**

### **The person I am**

I attribute my sight-reading ability to two forces: curiosity and lack of patience. By nature, I am a person who likes to try new things and get easily bored with the old and predictable. I need variety to keep me going. Perhaps these traits that caused me to become a good sight-reader also made me a superficial interpreter.

I also like going beyond what is assigned by my teacher. When I discover something I like, I usually try to find something else that's similar. For example, if I like a nocturne of Chopin, I would try his other nocturnes. If I hear something nice in a movie, I would try to find the sheet music and play it.

I am eager to please and keen to belong. These two factors make me want to play in group situations, from duets to chamber music to choir accompanist. The more music given to me, the more I needed to sight-read. The more I sight-read, the better I got. And soon I could depend on my sight-reading. I would eagerly and confidently accept new music put in front of me. This was a vicious circle that boosted my sight-reading ego, until I encounter someone better than I.

### **Sight-reading workshop**

In May 2003, I was asked to develop and conduct a two hour sight-reading workshop in the Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus where my piano guitar duo was to give a performance. It was the first time I gave such a workshop. I selected various pieces, old and new. I asked different volunteers to get up and play the pieces from sight and then I went through the piece and discussed how they should approach it. The workshop was conducted like a masterclass.

### **Individual lessons**

One main way I teach my private students sight-reading is through duet playing. This helps them not only in reading notes but also getting the rhythm right --- a very important and necessary part of sight-reading. In fact, as long as you get the rhythm right, you'll get through the piece.

Another way to ensure my students read well is to stop and start them in different places in a score. This was how I discovered two transfer students could not read music.

I also get my students to recognize chord symbols and chords within a key. I get them to boost their confidence in sight-reading by looking for patterns at the outset. The more familiar things they recognize, such as an alberti bass, a repeating motif, the more confident they get. I tell them that they just have to learn half of the piece (if there's a repeat sign) or two thirds of the piece if it's in ABA form.

I am interested in this topic of sight-reading because I had assumed every good pianist to be a good sight-reader until I encountered seemingly great pianists who had trouble reading new scores, refused or hesitated to sight-read music with me. It's simply no fun to play duets with a bad sight-reader. I also like the challenge of winning and competing. In many ways, sight-reading a duet gives me that opportunity.

### **My questions on sight-reading**

As a result, I am curious whether sight-reading can be well-taught. Is it considered important? As important as memorizing? Playing by ear? Improvising? What is of research interest? What has been researched? What do experienced piano teachers say about it? The other initial research questions were as follows:

- Why are some pianists better sight-readers than others?

- Why are there more wind, brass, and string sight-readers than pianists who can sight-read well? Why are singers not as good with sight-reading?
- On the Internet are many tips and guidelines to improve your sight-reading skills but not how you would teach it. How early should you begin paying attention to skills that will make you a better sight-reader?
- Does the inability to sight-read contribute to the early abandonment of piano studies? Pleasure in playing as an adult?
- What are the factors that contribute to better sight-reading ability?
- Does language matter? In other words, is there any evidence that knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean languages (which read vertically from top to bottom and then right to left) improves your music sight-reading ability --- or that these folks do better than readers of European or Arabic languages?
- Why is that children who have reading difficulties in school often have none in music reading and vice versa?

These questions and more were answered in the literature I gathered via the library, Internet (articles and youtube.com videos), and academic journals which are listed in the bibliography at the end.

My thesis focuses on sight-reading the piano (descriptive) and the teaching of sight-reading at the piano (prescriptive). My main contribution is the introduction and review of various sources of information available through the Internet, academic journals, and select interviews with experienced piano teachers.

## Early mentions of sight-reading

There is an interesting account of how **Liszt sight read Grieg's piano concerto**. The latter had considered it an impossible task. Liszt asked Grieg would play it to which he replied that he couldn't. Liszt then said, "Well, now I'll show you that I can't, either." Grieg wrote about Liszt in a letter to his parents in February 1870, "You see, he doesn't merely play; no, he converses and criticizes at the same time. He carries on a brilliant conversation, not with one person, but with the entire audience, distributing significant nods to right and left, mainly when he is particularly pleased with something."

An article by **Fowles (1930) in the Musical Times** first mentions the question of sight-reading. He lists 6 reasons why sight-reading is important, the last of which "Poverty in reading power is largely responsible for the relinquishment of music study by numbers of young people." He believes that true reading power comes from the mental study of notation before any attempt is made to reproduce it at the instrument. This clearly is a contrast from the Suzuki Method of teaching a student correct posture, correct hand position, identification of keys on the piano, and rhythmic training before any attempt of note reading is made (author's interview with Huub de Leeuw and Efrain Flores, 2008).

There is controversy surrounding whether students should learn to read notes before playing the piano (Maxwell Kanzell, Calvin B. Cady, and Jacques-Dalcroze of the eurhythmics method) or to introduce music symbols only long after piano lessons have begun (Suzuki, Satis N. Coleman).

The subject of sight-reading at the piano is next mentioned in the **September 1948 issue of the same publication in Letters to the Editor**. Nowadays such queries are hosted online in discussion forums. Different advice are given by readers, such as "the student should be able to hear the music mentally on seeing the notation," a skill referred later to as audiation. A process identified and defined by the music learning theorist Edwin Gordon, audiation refers to the ability to hear and understand music through recall or creation. One method that was tried was to cut pieces of cardboard to the size and shape necessary to cover and uncover a chord. This method of reading and learning notation is later described at length in Lawrence's (1964) book on remedial sightreading.

**Lawrence (1964)** conducted a survey in 1946 that found more than 80% of piano students give up lessons in the first 2 years of study. This high dropout rate is largely attributed to difficulty in reading and playing. He cited Kuersteiner's survey in 1944 of college students studying the piano both as music majors and as secondary study. They ranked solo playing as least important while "accompanying and playing at sight" were the skills fulfilling their greatest need and serving the most useful purpose in the most important areas of 1) accompanying, 2) playing at sight, 3) avocation playing, 4) ensemble playing, and 5) improvising.

Lawrence classifies sight-readers into three groups:

- 1- above average readers read music as fast or faster than they could play, that is, they sight-read at least their grade level of performance
- 2- average readers in the majority have no trouble with notation but they read music at a level lower than their ability to play it
- 3- problem readers are confused by simple notation or other problems such as the relationship between musical symbols and the keyboard.

He laments that all pedagogic literature and teaching techniques (at that time) focus only on hands, ears, and the mind --- not on the eyes. His own method Eye Focus Drills trains the eye to read vertically on both staves and then increasing the eye span to greater chunks and then moving horizontally to the right. He discovered that the above average reader thinks vertically as well as he does horizontally whereas the average reader drifts into the habit of reading music horizontally and sees both clefs as separate lines instead of one unit. There have been many scientific studies since then of how people read music, see Truitt et al (1997) and Hu et al (2007).

## Literature reviews of sight-reading

Several important reviews of sight-reading are worth mentioning here. The most recent is **Johnson's (2008) summary of Wristen's (2005) literature review of cognition and motor execution in piano sight-reading** of 20 articles from books, doctoral theses, and academic journals such as *Psychology of Music* and *Music Perception*. The research studies fall into four broad areas, described verbatim below,

- 1- cognitive/perceptual: the way we physically look at and think about the score
- 2- factors affecting successful sight reading such as differences among pianists
- 3- education/pedagogical approaches: how to successfully teach sight reading
- 4- motor skills: the finger control and comfort with the topography of the instrument needed to be able to sight read with any success (particularly true for pianists).

By studying expert sight readers and comparing them with poor sight readers, one can quickly discover the necessary skills to acquire for sight reading. When expert sight-readers see a scale or broken chord pattern, he/she knows immediately how to finger it and how it will feel in the hands. Skilled readers read and digest greater "chunks" than unskilled readers. This chunking relates to both melodic and rhythmic units. Skilled readers not only look forward but also look back --- a kind of zig-zag reading approach. They read up to the so-called "eye-hand span" or "perceptual span" and fixate on specific locations in the score for shorter periods of time. This latter aspect is discussed at length in Truitt et al (1997).

Audiation, as mentioned earlier, is the ability to hear the note when reading the note. Several studies found that good internal audiation is important in good sight-reading. One way to achieve this is to expose the student to a variety of styles and sounds.

As consistent with my interviews of experienced piano teachers, collaborative music making (duet-playing, accompanying, chamber music playing) has a great influence on sight-reading, both as an incentive for better sight-reading and a requirement of better collaborative playing. This led one researcher to conclude that sight-reading ability "does not correlate with overall musical talent, nor does it represent a specific type of innate talent." Instead, this expertise results from long-term, deliberate engagement in sight-reading activities.

The literature definitely supports the unanimous consensus of experienced teachers of sight-reading: that the more one sight-reads, the better one gets.

However, there remain many outstanding questions, such as:

1. Can a student somehow be "coerced" into reading in chunks of melodic patterns and rhythmic units?
2. How can a teacher instill the ability to reap the greatest possible information from a chunk in a fraction of a second?
3. How much of good reading is intuitive
4. How much can be taught to the non-intuitive reader?

Contrast the above review with an article from the **March 1976 issue of Music Educators Journal**, in which Robert J. Garofalo observed that teaching sight-reading skills has been extremely neglected with little published on the subject. The two sources he recommends are pamphlets from 1963 and 1968 on six tried-and-tested commandments for students. They are:

1. sight-read more, i.e. learn by doing
2. develop the proper attitude, i.e. every new piece is an opportunity

3. develop your powers of concentration: reading at sight requires total concentration
4. don't stop. Good sight-readers are always reading ahead. Don't stop until you reach the end.
5. Know your instrument. Technical proficiency (scales, arpeggios, intervals, articulations, etc) is paramount.
6. Analyse the music before playing it.

**Hardy (1998)** cites several research findings in her three-part essay on teaching sight-reading at the piano. I list below useful insights from her review.

1. Students need to read patterns and phrases rather than perceive notes individually.
2. Successful sight-readers fixate all areas of chords simultaneously and group patterns or melodies into fewer chunks than poor readers. As a result, they are able to retain more information in their short-term memory.
3. The research findings suggest that the study of music theory should be included in piano study because a good sight-reader always draws upon past experience in recognizing music symbols as long as they are familiar.
4. 70% of sight-reading errors are rhythm errors. Pitch errors are usually accompanied by rhythm errors, especially at the barline. Sir Ernest MacMillan said, "Good sight-reading is nine-tenths rhythm and one-tenth notes."
5. Students taught by note naming (absolute note recognition method) usually have a more mechanical note-for-note sound in their performance, while pianists taught by intervals (interval recognition) possess a greater sense of musical flow in playing meaningful groups of notes. Many authors cite the advantages of interval over note-name in the development of sight-reading ability.

Hardy (1998)'s review of commercial sight-reading books includes paragraph summaries of 17 books or series which teach sight-reading. After the above reviews, Hardy introduces her own "diagnostic / prescriptive sight-reading programme" which consists of a sight-reading test of 30 pieces to put them in one of 5 reading levels, depending on the type and frequency of their error.

A well-written but unpublished paper (used for presentation for a pedagogy conference) by **Zhukov (2005)** reviews and focuses on three main areas in sight-reading: accompanying, improvement of rhythmic errors, and structural analysis. She cites research that sight-reading experience has more to do with sight-reading ability than deliberate practice. Existing research, she notes, focus on eye movement, error detection, and teaching strategies. She concludes there's an urgent need to develop effective means of teaching sight-reading and teaching resources.

As a result of her literature review, Zhukov suggests practical strategies for teaching of sight-reading in piano lessons. Teachers should try to provide students with accompanying opportunities, e.g. beginners with teachers, intermediate students with other students, and advanced students to accompany other instrumentalists. To improve rhythm in sight-reading, the following should be applied in piano lessons: consider the time signature, discuss the choice of tempo, scan through the music together, work through the piece together by vocalizing the rhythm, let students play through the musical example.

Finally, Zhukov suggests several practical strategies for piano lessons with respect to structural analysis:

- Discuss style characteristics prior to reading, e.g.
  - Baroque style: polyphony, independence of hands, imitations between hands, both rhythmic and intervallic, linear motion of voices as opposed to vertical reading of notes, use of sequences, a more detached articulation

- Classical style: right hand melody with stationary accompanying left hand, pattern recognition of major/minor chords and scales, symmetrical 2- and 4- bar phrases, modulations to the dominant and back to tonic
  
- Point out these stylistic features in the practice example
- Discuss key signature and time signature
- Analyse the overall structure and phrase length
- Play through the example
- Spend several weeks on each style to gain the understanding and experience necessary to acquire pattern recognition and prediction skills

Bernstein (1981) along with others points out that “deficiency in processing musical notation” often deters them from exploring music, and thus the “correction of this deficiency must take top priority in music education.” This sight-reading ability trains the memory and sharpens the powers of concentration. The author reflects that he is able to “analyse complex musical situations at a glance and reduce them progressively to their simplest elements.” Most importantly, he is able to anticipate what is to come: repetitions of motifs, rhythms, and harmonic progressions. Thus he believes that the ability to predict musical events as the major skill for sight-reading is rooted in the power of retention ---- the link between memorization and sight-reading.

He offers standard tips as follows:

1. Before playing, study the music silently, taking special note of the key and time signatures.
2. Clap the rhythm
3. For pieces in a distinguishable key (tonal), play the scale in which the piece is written to fix the tonality in your ear.
4. Keep your eyes on the score at all times.
5. Read from the bass upward.
6. Look ahead.
7. Move your hands only when necessary.

Bernstein summarises that sight-reading serves three important functions:

- 1- it allows for a spontaneous response to an entire composition, which is critical in the initial stages of learning
- 2- it assists the tactile and kinetic memory by developing a sense of the keyboard
- 3- it activates the musical memory – that raw material from which all our responses, comprehension, and musical associations are fashioned.

In conclusion, there is now plenty of research methods available to study sight-reading capability and test the effectiveness of teaching approaches and conditions under which sight-reading skills can be improved. It's a ripe area for research as computer scientists join forces with psychologists to study an area largely considered to be exclusively musicians' territory.

## Review of sight-reading teaching material

There is a lot of teaching material with the words “sight reading” in the title. These fall into the category of guided teaching of sight-reading. They are no better or worse than compiling your own material yourself, other than ensuring that a student follows a “prescription” correctly. Dianne Hardy (1998) reviewed 18 such books with respect to content and critique.

Teachers of sight-reading, such as Marian Bolt at Utrecht Conservatory, prefer to select their own pieces for group lessons. Marian does make use of one book, **“Blattspielen vur Pianisten” by Vlastimil Tichy, Universal Edition**, which contains 91 exercises and extracts from different composers over 63 pages, covering a range of skills, such as counterpoint, chords, touch and rhythm, and harmony. Please see appendix for samples of interesting exercises from this book.

I use the ones I’ve collected over the years as guidelines to assess the correct level of a student in individual lessons. But the exercises are not very interesting compared to extracts from actual compositions. I review them here.

### **Guided Sight-Reading Book One by Helen Lockhart, published by Forsyth, Manchester**

The series continues to Book Three and prepares the student for the graded examinations of the Associated Board in England. There are 30 short exercises from one-hand only on a single staff without barlines to two-staves with 8 bars. In the Foreword, it reads “In sight-reading at the piano, the pupil is faced with the need to recognize immediately a variety of “units” of musical knowledge (e.g. durations of notes and rests, pitch, intervals between notes, key-signatures, etc.), either singly, or in combination, and having recognized them, to respond accurately and without hesitation. Ability to do this, especially in the early stages, depends to a great extent on adequate practice of suitable material. The exercises in this book are designed to introduce the various “units” one at a time, and to give special practice to each step on its own, before combining it with other steps which have already been practiced.”

### **Sight Reading for Today by Joan Last Grade 2, 3, 4 (3 books), published by Bosworth London 1987**

The series runs from grade 1 to 8 and diploma level, paralleling the graded examinations of the Associated Board in England. Book 2 and 3 each consists of 48 exercises of 8 bars for both hands. Book 4 consists of 32 exercises of 12 bars for both hands. As expected, the exercises get longer and more difficult with increasing grades. On the first page, there are messages to the teacher and to the pupil. For the latter, it says “Look through each test carefully before attempting to play it. Note its key and time signature; note the accidentals. Make a special point of feeling the opening rhythmic figure. Keep a steady pulse. Even if you think you have played wrong notes, NEVER go back to correct them. Keep your eyes on the music and try to avoid looking down at your hands. Try to make something of the expression marks.”

### **Sample Piano Sight Reading Pieces, Grade 5 to Grade 8 (one book), Trinity College of Music London**

This series is available for all grades, not just for piano but other instruments as well. The first exercise in Grade 5 has a pick-up to 14 bars in Allegretto, A major key, in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. Next exercise is an Andante in  $\frac{6}{8}$  time. The last piece in Grade 8 has 35 bars in Allegretto e leggiero tempo, f minor key, and  $\frac{3}{8}$  time, substantially more difficult with a range of dynamic indications. There are no instructions or foreword, just a collection of short pieces or extracts with no composer named.

### **Read and Play New Series by Thomas A. Johnson, Grade 2 and 3 (two books), Hinrichsen Edition, London, Frankfurt, New York**

This series is available in all grades. Grade 2 book consists of 57 exercises over 24 pages, with plenty of instructions and guide questions preceding each of the first 26 exercises. The last page is a glossary of Italian terms. Grade 3 book consists of 71 exercises over 32 pages, with instructions preceding the

first 26 exercises. These questions include “Can you name the key? Locate all the F and C Sharps. What is the time signature? Are there any broken chords? How many beats are there in a bar? What does C mean as a time signature?” In the beginning, the author wrote, “Sight-reading is one of the most important areas of musical training. The pieces in this volume have been devised to help the student foster the ability to capture small musical phrases at a glance and immediately transfer them with accuracy from memory to keyboard. Hints are provided for pieces 1 to 26 to encourage awareness of notation, interpretation and technique, the benefit from which may be applied to the remaining pieces in the volume. The Read and Play volumes are graded in accordance with the examinations set by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music.”

### **Specimen Sight-Reading Tests, Piano, Grade 3, The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music**

This book by Alan Ridout consists 41 pieces from 8 to 14 bars with no instructions. This title is available for all grades and various instruments.

### **Improve Your Sight-reading! A workbook for examinations, Piano Grade 3, Paul Harris, Faber Music, 1991**

This 31 page book is part of a series that begins from pre-Grade 1 to Grade 8, inclusive for piano, violin, viola, cello, double bass, descant recorder, flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, and voice. Nearly all examination grades are covered in this series. The introduction spans over the entire first page, including how to use the workbook. There are four different types of exercises: rhythmic, melodic, a prepared piece with questions, and an unprepared piece. It also says, “The ability to sight-read fluently is a most important part of your training as a pianist, whether you intend to play professionally, or simply for enjoyment. Yet the study of sight-reading is often badly neglected by young players and is frequently regarded as no more than a rather unpleasant side-line. If you become a good sight-reader you will be able to learn pieces more quickly, accompany your friends, play piano duets and chamber music, all with confidence and assurance. Also, in grade examinations, good performance in the sight-reading test will result in useful extra marks!”

### **Eyes Off the Keyboard: A New and Easy Method of Learning Sight Reading, by Henry Geehl and Kenneth Simpson, J.H. Larway, England**

This is a 24-page book I bought in a second-hand music bookstore in London which seems like a one-off book (i.e. not in a series). It's focused on how to not look at your hands or the keyboard while playing. It says in the beginning, “The art of reading at sight is a matter of constant practice. A part of your daily study should be devoted to this important branch of music. Remember these three things: 1) Read upwards from the bass. 2) Read ahead – a bar at least. 3) Correct location of position on the Keyboard.” There are such instructions throughout the book. After the last piece “A March Tune” of 8 bars, it says, “When you have worked through this book, you will find that you are able to tackle more difficult music as The Bach Easy Preludes and Heller Studies, Op. 47. Don't neglect duet-playing. Start with Book 2 of Henry Geehl's Progressive Duets and go on to the Haydn and Mozart Symphonies. Make it a rule to read some new music every day. Transpose simple Hymns. Remember that it is constant practice that makes the good reader.”

### **Sight-Reading Made Easy: A complete graded course for the pianoforte, Dorothy Bradley & J. Raymond Tobin, Joseph Williams Limited, 1948**

This series contains Book 1 (primary) to Book 8 (final), with the objectives in the foreword, as being “to train the student 1) to observe essential details; 2) to cultivate the power of concentration and the ability to remember; 3) to develop skill in snap-shotting small sections and phrases; 4) to form a habit of preparing the fingers over their keys in readiness for any fingering group likely to occur in the particular grade; 5) to read by interval and to play by feel; to be independent in keyboard location and confident in attack.” The Book VI includes 34 exercises from 16 bars plus repeat to 26 bars over 24 pages. There is a paragraph of instructions, suggestions, and guidelines before nearly every exercise, such as “Keep the forearm lightly poised, so that you can play the second note of slurred couplets shorter and softer than the first,” and “Let the melody in both hands sing sweetly. Keep the accompaniment quiet.”

The inside cover outline details of the “Sight-Reading Made Easy” series, as follows. These are good guidelines to how the skills develop over the 8 levels of the Associated Board for sight-reading assessment, but not necessary level of performance.

Book 1 (primary)	To cover simple keys of one and two sharps and flats – simple melodies of 2, 4, 8 bar basis, distributed between the hands on piano score, chiefly within five-finger range.
Book 2 (elementary)	Simple keys – not more than two sharps or flats, a few accidentals, easy melodies of 8 or 12 bars with hands playing together, independent movement, a few small intervals (together) not exceeding the minor 7 <sup>th</sup> , easy examples in compound time, bigger keyboard range achieved by arm movement, easy expression marks.
Book 3 (transitional)	More examples in keys of 2 sharps and flats, including minor keys with inflected 6 <sup>th</sup> and (or) 7 <sup>th</sup> , and easy modulations, greater diversity in rhythms, semiquavers in various subdivisions of the beat, more variety in easy compound time, detail in touch and phrasing, 8 16, 24 bars.
Book 4 (lower)	To cover keys to three sharps or flats, more detailed melodies with free keyboard movement, very simple part-writing, LH detail, melody and small accompaniment in same hand, phrasing, touch variants, a little pedaling. 16 – 24 bars.
Book 5 (higher)	Keys include sharps and flats, melodies with greater complexity of detail, broken chord figures, syncopations, part-writing and easy antiphonal movement of parts with independent phrasing between the hands, phrases beginning on quarter-beat, subdivisions of quaver in compound time, pedaling. Guided tests train eye to follow independent parts and give each its due time and tone value. 16 – 32 bars.
Book 6 (intermediate)	To cover keys, four sharps and flats, free use of minor keys and modulations, a few chromatic accidentals, quicker movement of notes, more sub-divisions in compound time, independent treatment of inner parts, legato against staccato, couplets of slurred notes in different guises, broader phrases, finer detail within the phrase, varied touches, fuller harmony – chords include octaves, suspensions, easy ornaments. 16 – 32 bars.
Book 7 (advanced)	Keys to include a few in five flats and sharps, more difficult passage and scale work, more antiphonal detail, sustained inner or lower voices, pedal notes and wider skips in LH, melodies and counter-melodies, melody and accompaniment shared by hands or working independently, tests of interpretative skill and pedaling devices. Graded tests show how to reduce horizontal harmonies, to connect melodic lines, spot key changes, pedal for different effects.
Book 8 (final)	Will deal with more difficult pulse divisions, greater detail in requirements of touch contrasts, octaves moving against arpeggios, scale figures against chords, more complexity in part-writing and antiphonal movement, melody in both hands above or below accompaniment shared by the hands on half or quarter beat, more artistic use of pedal required. Guided tests show how to read progressions in block harmony, to balance melodies in proper proportion, to recognize ornamental notes, cadences – inverted and decorated, and “spot” essentials. 12, 16, 32 bars.

**Tests in Musical Perception (Sight-Reading, Phrasing and Interpretation) by James Lyon, Edwin Ashdown Ltd, London**

Another probably out-of-print book I bought in a second-hand music bookstore in London, this 22 page book IV (Advanced) is part of four books (preliminary, elementary, intermediate, and advanced) of 20 pieces (one page each) without any tips or instructions except in the foreword, which defines the

objective as “to prepare the candidate for the requirements set forth in the new Syllabus of the RAM, and Associated Board, Trinity College, etc, where the subjects of Sight Reading, General Musicianship, Musical Intelligence and Initiative are required.” The only mention of step-by-step guidelines in the foreword is “the student first of all should look at the *style* of the music (rhythmic outline, character, *etc.*) *away from the keyboard* and examine carefully where the cadences occur, the harmony, the kind of phrasing suitable, and decide what touch movements are required before playing it. He should also make a mental note of the correct fingering and be able to describe the various touch movements necessary.”

## Review of sight-reading lessons, products, and advice on the Internet

Nowadays you can find nearly anything you want on the Internet. By the same token, learning how to sight-read on the piano can be found in discussion forums such as Piano Pedagogy Forum, commercial websites, and video's on youtube.com Because sight-reading is such a sought-after skill and the Internet offers an efficient way to reach audiences world-wide, I expect the trend of providing sample lessons, advice, tips, and other useful information to continue over and above the written text, i.e. in video, audio, podcast, interactive webcast, and other innovative methods and formats.

### Discussion forums

Various interest groups on yahoo, hotmail, and google make available question and answer opportunities that are easily searchable as FAQ's (frequently asked questions). There are also specialist groups such as the Piano Pedagogy Forum and Piano World Forum. Below are some examples of content of these forums.

**Yahoo! ANSWERS** at <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/>

#### **Music sight reading. Am taking piano lessons, but can't seem to 'get' sight reading?**

Can anyone suggest any tips, or is there game or some such that may help? Thank you.

#### **Best Answer** - Chosen by Asker

you should learn the notes on the staff first. Get some flash cards to read on the bus or the train. You have to be able to recognise the dots and their names without thinking about it. Then you have to learn where the notes are on the piano. Just sit down and play a scale by memory, slowly, and say the notes in your mind as you watch your fingers. By doing it this way you have broken the act of reading music into two parts : (1)reading the dots on the page (2)knowing the notes on the piano. When you know both sight, reading will be so much easier for you.

#### **Other Answers** (10)

It is purely practice. When i was a kid i really struggled to sight read.....but as i practised more and got older my sight-reading improved;to the extent that very often i play better sight unseen!

There really is only one way to get used to sight-reading, and that is very simply, practice.

I know it's a horrible thing to say to someone who is probably working very hard to get it sussed.

Another good tip is to relax more. I find I'm focussing too intently on one line of music, and forgetting to look at the stave as a whole.

You could check you're sitting as comfortably as possible, and just relax when you're reading. Force yourself to look further ahead, and trust your memory. If you've read it once, what you read was probably right. Just play what you think it said, rather than going back and reading it again.

It's a great skill, especially for a pianist. Good luck!

**Piano World Forums** at <http://www.pianoworld.com> has a lengthy section on Adult Sight Reading Practice. As with other discussion forums, you have to register before you can contribute a question or answer. It starts with one question which generates an entire series of feedback and discussions.

Having recently started up with a new piano teacher I've been increasingly bothered by my absolute lack of sight reading skills while reviewing new pieces during lessons. I've decided to add serious attempts at sight reading to my daily practice sessions to hopefully improve my skills on that point somewhat.

Does anyone have any particular advice regarding how to best go about practicing sight reading? Any and all tips welcome. I'm thinking along the lines of how long to spend practicing sight reading per day to have any noticeable effect, anything in particular to think about while doing it etc.

I don't have huge amounts of material to practice with so I'm thinking I'll start off with old pieces that have been more or less completely forgotten, hopefully enough muscle memory will have disappeared that the pieces will be more or less 'new' for short sight reading sessions.

6 minutes later, one respondent wrote:

I'm guessing this question has been asked dozens of times on this forum and will be asked a dozen more times. I'm sure you will get some good answers here but I asked the same question on a thread on the pianist forum you might want to check out. Jerome and some others gave some good answers.

<http://www.pianoworld.com/ubb/ubb/ultimatebb.php?topic/2/13094.html>

Practice, practice practice was the biggest answer.

## Commercial websites

**Key Piano** at <http://www.keypiano.com/> is a commercial website which explains on its home page the definition and importance of sight-reading. They explain that sight-reading is all about identifying patterns and recognizing what you know. They have developed a range of products, which are interactive software to help you with recognizing notes, intervals and chords (the NAME IT series); playing notes, intervals and chords (PLAY IT series); and piano playing related software: Tips and Tricks; Midi Checker; Chord Practice buddy. In the future they plan to develop a HEAR IT series to train your ear in recognizing keys, notes, intervals, and chords.

**Piano playing for busy adults** at <http://www.playpianocatalog.com/> offers a range of CD and books to help you learn specific skills, including "Seven Magic Steps to Speed Sight Reading." It guarantees that you will be able to double, triple, or quadruple your current speed of sight reading by the time you finish this self-taught course.

**Mozart's Flashcards** at <http://www.musicalflashcards.com/> are "are a set of musical flashcards that can allow a student's skill at the craft of reading and playing music to grow much faster than using the conventional approach to learning music alone." Peter Krauss first developed them for his own students and has made them available to others. He shows examples of what they look like and how they work with positive testimonies from some of his customers.

**The Bach to Basics Music Education Podcast Station** at <http://bachcast.com/> offers a range of lessons using online podcast. The host is a Canadian-born musician whose voice is aired over the Internet like a radio station. You need to subscribe to get the feed. "The concept behind Bachstudio.com is that students can listen to the podcasts, have access to many more exercises, and continually hand in assignments for instructor marking and feedback just as they would if enrolled in private music lessons with Bach To Basics."

## Youtube video's

At time of writing, a search on the youtube.com website for "sight-reading sight reading piano lesson" gave three pages of results. They range from a very basic display of simple notation and the sound of the associated pitch to short lessons with an instructor on a particular aspect of sight-reading. The advantage of these video's is that you can play them whenever and however many times you want. The relevant ones are listed below with a brief description and duration of the video clip.

### **Sight Reading Piano Music -- Exercise 1**

This is an exercise I pulled from my book "The Secrets of Sight-Reading Piano Music". If you would like to download a ... (more)

**00:19**

**How to play piano: Piano Lesson #17 Sight reading**

In this lesson i talk about sight reading. Please go check out my website and sign up on my forum. Join the music ... (more)

**22:01****How to read music and memorize piano song effectively**

Reading music with 'traditional' score from the very beginning is not giving beginners ability to FOCUS and SEE music ... (more)

**05:24****How to Read Sheet Music for Piano: Piano Chords and Chord Progression : How ...**

Learn how to read piano chords and chord progression in piano sheet music - free video. ... how-to read sheet music piano ...

**01:59****Sight-reading lesson for piano - Notes**

A quick lesson how to easier sight-read single notes on either the bass or the treble clef. ... Sight-reading sight ...

**03:08****How to Read Sheet Music for Piano : Piano Lessons : How to Read Sheet ...**

Learn how to read sheet music for piano, in this free video. ... how-to read sheet music piano key signatures chords play ...

**01:45****advance sight reading lesson 1 piano**

advance sight reading on piano ... learning to play piano video sight reading ...

**05:00****Sight-reading lesson for piano - Key Signatures**

A quick lesson how to easier recognize major key signatures. ... sight-reading sight reading piano lesson key signature ...

**01:50****How to Read Sheet Music for Piano : Intervals and Sight-Reading : How ...**

Learn how intervals help you to read piano sheet music, in this free video. ... how-to read sheet music piano key ...

**02:53****Sight Reading Music**

From <http://www.sightreadingtips.com> If you are interested in improving your piano sight reading skill, please visit <http://www.sightreadingtips.com> ... (more)

**01:39****Piano Lessons: Sight Reading**

From <http://www.sightreadingtips.com> Piano lesson on how to sight read piano pieces music. Need to improve your sight ... (more)

**01:56****Get Piano Lesson 3 (Part Two) Beginner's Sight-Reading**

For this lesson, make sure your piano and computer are sitting next to each other. With your eyes focused ONLY on your ... (more)

**07:39****Learning to read music**

In order to teach student to read we use different presentation of Grand Staff ... Piano teaching music learning early ...

**05:01****Classical Piano Music Lessons : Sight Reading Tips: Classical Piano Lessons**

Learn tips on sight reading & playing fast piano songs in classical music in this free piano lesson on video, with ... (more)

**01:05****Get Piano Lesson 5 (Part Two) Left Hand Sight-Reading**

PLEASE NOTE: YouTube rejected Part One of this lesson because it is over 11 minutes long

**08:04**

**[How to Read Sheet Music for Piano : How to Play Chords from Reading Piano ...](#)**

Learn how to play chords from reading piano sheet music, in this free video. ... how-to read sheet music piano key ...

**01:37**

**[How to read music](#)**

This is an instructional video about how to read music, the most common notes used in music and their respective time ... (more)

**01:55**

## Interviews with piano teachers

### Liesbeth Spits, Dutch pianist, Utrecht, Netherlands

A graduate of Amsterdam Conservatory, Liesbeth currently has 60 to 70 students between ages 4 and 75. She has taught piano for the past 30 years. She considers herself a good sight-reader as she had grown up in a musical family and wanted to belong, through 4-hand playing, chamber music.

Liesbeth does not have sight-reading as a teaching goal, simply because she does not have enough time to devote to teaching sight-reading separately from everything else, other than quatre-mains playing as a kind of sport. "If you make a mistake, try to continue nevertheless." She does spend a good deal of the first year on interval reading.

Similarly, memorizing is also not a goal for her teaching, just a challenge. It is not a regular part of a lesson. She prefers to teach the vocabulary and terminology to describe what a student sees, thereby getting him/her to recognize chord and patterns (that are useful to sight-reading). She herself started sight-reading at a young age but did not know the terms to describe what she read.

Great artists are able to sight read not just the notes but the meaning behind them. Sight-reading is about seeing patterns and having finger sense.

In the first year, Liesbeth teaches the students to see intervals such as seconds, thirds, fourths, and chords in root positions (triads) etc. There are ways to look at music so that the patterns go into the hands. You combine things – see greater chunks of music. Don't forget the role of analysis while playing.

Liesbeth agrees with my hypothesis of the dichotomy between sight-reading and memorizing. Good sight-reading is a prerequisite for accompanying and ensemble playing. On the other hand, being good at memorizing opens the doors for soloist playing and improvisation. She agrees with the "over-confidence bias" where the second time you play, you're not as good. Sight-reading is, however, superficial, whereas when you memorise, you go into the depth of a piece and really understand it. By the time you're able to perform by heart, you truly know it.

She added that people used to always read from score until they saw how impressive it was to play from memory --- Liszt the virtuoso. Of course, Mozart knew his own music.

## Martijn van den Hoek, Dutch pianist, Utrecht and Vienna

The only Dutch first prize winner of the Liszt Piano Concours, Martijn has 10 students aged between 18 and 40 years old. He has taught piano for the past 20 years. He does not consider himself good at sight-reading.

On teaching sight-reading, he says

First, the student must become very familiar with the topography of the keyboard. This requires practicing three kinds of technique: scales, arpeggios, and chords, all over the piano. There are, what he calls, exercises of courage, in other words, blindly throw your hands on the piano to get an interval or a chord and then replicate that one or two octaves higher or lower without watching your fingers or the keys.

Second, the student must have some basic ideas of harmony so that he knows what to expect. If it's a Mozart sonata, for example, he should be able to expect a IV or V after the tonic I. If it's a Brahms piece, then a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord is more likely.

Third, there is a connection between sight reading and memorizing. The more you rely on the score, the less you are able to let go and enjoy the freedom of playing. It works the other way around too: the less you let go, the more you rely on the score. Good sight-readers get bored with a piece quickly, whereas those who cannot sight-read as well have to investigate and get greater insight and depth in a piece. Many sight-readers are simply too lazy to memorise.

Some tips on what happens when you sight-read.

- 1.) Vertical reading: from the bottom to the top, i.e. from the bass to the treble
- 2.) Horizontal reading: learn scale passages to have a better prima vista fingering
- 3.) Look ahead: good sight-readers, such as Liszt, are able to overview half a page. There are exercises to help you do this.
- 4.) Leave out the unnecessary notes and rhythms.
- 5.) Allow yourself to mess around, that is, go on and play the entire piece without paying attention to mistakes and other detail. Know the sketch – the big picture – then fill in the details.

## Nicola Meecham, English pianist, Bath, England

A graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London, Nicola has taught piano for 32 years and currently has 24 students aged between 6 and 39.

She considers herself quite a good (by not exceptional) sight-reader by professional standards. How she became good at sight-reading: "When I was young, I was hopeless then I improved a lot firstly when I was a teenager and then again when I was in my twenties. I put this down to two major factors: an increased ability to be able to predict the harmony, both in the chords I was actually playing and in the harmonic make-up of the piece I was playing (i.e. overall harmonic structure); and, possibly allied to this, an ability to recognise notes more quickly. An added factor is that in those periods when I improved I was in a situation where I had to play/accompany at sight e.g. in duos, accompanying choirs etc."

Some reasons why she was hopeless at sight-reading initially:

1. A very good ear and the ability to reproduce immediately what I heard, thereby obviating the need to read music and avoiding what I already found difficult.
2. The standard of my playing far outstripped my general knowledge of music, so that my ability to understand overall harmonic structure relative to my playing ability was poor.
3. My early teacher didn't teach me the skills I needed to overcome my difficulty in reading notes.

Nicola considers sight-reading important as a skill but she generally doesn't implement it in lessons for practical reasons, because there isn't time after hearing scales, technical exercises, pieces etc. She considers it important because it gives the student the freedom to learn pieces quickly and on their own and because it is one of the tools which will allow them to become musically self-sufficient. She runs a piano workshop class in which sight-reading is taught as part of a range of skills which include keyboard harmony and improvisation.

Helpful tips to become good at sight-reading:

1. practise, practise, practise using specific manuals - or anything else
2. increase general musical knowledge
3. learn the rudiments of chord structure and keyboard harmony
4. form a duo so that you are "forced" to read quickly

On the link between memorising and sight-reading, she says, "It has been my experience that good sight-readers don't always make good memorisers, and vice-versa. My own theory is that bad sight-readers commit everything they read to memory in as short a time as can be managed so that the visual images are converted to aural "images" as soon as possible. Good sight-readers don't need to do this because they already read the notes well and are able to convert the visual into the aural without needing to resort to this strategy. The downside of this approach is that good sight-readers spend less time learning a piece than bad ones, not only in the overall time spent but also in the tempo at which they play (bad sight-readers read things at a slow tempo). This second reason also contributes towards poor memorising.

Problems of playing at sight include:

- Slow or inappropriate tempo
- Lack of continuity (frequent stopping and starting)
- Lack of understanding of chordal and harmonic structure and therefore an inability to guess either the harmonic make-up of the chord they are playing or predict what is coming next
- Poor understanding of rhythm - an inability to subdivide rhythms within a beat/maintain a steady pulse
- Inability to grasp the musical intention of the piece because grappling with working out notes

### **Marian Bolt, Dutch pianist and accompanist at Utrecht Conservatory**

A graduate of Utrecht Conservatory, Marian has been teaching since she was 16. She elaborates, “Only part of my lessons were piano lessons: to amateurs during a number of years and as a secondary subject in the Conservatory during two years. The rest of my involvement with piano students has been either teaching sight-reading specifically or duo and accompaniment lessons and ensemble lessons.”

She has 14 students this year for sight-reading lessons, ranging from 17 to 23 years of age.

She considers herself a very good sight-reader now, but she only discovered it around the time she graduated. By chance she grew up in an environment where she had a number of good sight-readers around her. She thought that it was absolutely normal like reading a book after you have learnt to do so. Wanting to play together all the time helped her to use sight-reading a lot, and later the coach/accompanist job demanded it.

Her sight-reading lessons have that as their single goal, but she thinks she was asked to teach this as a subject because she’s known to sight-read a lot. She adds, “I think it is extremely important for a musician to be able to sight-read, especially for a pianist, but also for others. In many cases the pianist is the only person who has the whole score, who can have an overview. Sight-reading in this context consists of more than only playing the piano notes. Also for one-staff-readers it is important to get hold of a complete score. In practical sense, pianists become much more useful animals when they are able to sight-read and accompany sight-reading. Lots of jobs depend on it.”

She realized that part of good sight-reading is simply genes. She can only help people to improve their natural abilities. At the same time she knows that nearly all the great classical composers were good sight-readers, partly because music practice was a reading practice until the last century. Only pianists, singers, violinists and cellists have become used to playing by heart in solo pieces.

Marian advises: “Rule one to ten for me are: do it, do it, and enjoy it. As a main principle I consider recognizing patterns (rhythmical, melodic, harmonical, structural, etc.) essential. In my lessons for pianists I try to use material from real composers, not sight-reading books, though less known pieces in general.” She also uses many duo pieces and some games.

On the link between sight-reading and playing by heart, she sees them as almost two opposites: nearly everyone does only one by nature. The other one can be achieved. Though playing by heart is not the same as memorising (where one can develop skills) it can be obstructive to sight-reading. Some people play by heart very easily and are thus able to avoid regular sight-reading (though sight-reading is not the same as reading a piece for the third time, they both help develop sight-reading).

She sees problems in sight-reading very often consisting mainly of difficulties deciphering rhythms, less frequently deciphering pitches, lack of ear checks, lack of oversight and overhearing, and losing the beat.

Much of sight-reading discussions surround tonal material. Marian sees a big difference with atonal music, especially those that appear to be tonal but isn’t. She believes that one should sight-read without prejudice and attempt to finger atonal like tonal and disregard whether they should follow the rules. Having said that, one should be able to spot mistakes in the edition.

She disagrees that one reads from bottom up. She tends to trust her eyes more than her brains. One exercise she uses is for students to find the mistakes, such as a wrong accidental.

Marian believes that sight-reading can be taught and learned provided a person has the right attitude and is eager to learn. She cites one student who improved tremendously in one year, to a level higher than someone else in the beginning.

**Betsy Hermann, pianist and school choir director, Virginia, USA**

A graduate of the Indiana University School of Music, Betsy has taught for about 20 years, though she is not teaching currently.

She considers herself a good sight-reader. This came about through learning to read music at an early age, accompanying choirs in high school, having a personality that likes a challenge and puzzles, making herself practice reading pieces. "To be honest, no one made a concerted effort to help me learn to sight-read at the piano. It just *happened*."

Sight-reading is a goal both for her private students and her students at school. It is an important skill for any musician to have. "In my private teaching, many of the young piano students didn't want to take the time to read the notes and tried to rely on the hand position they were in or wanting to hear the song played so they could play by ear or copy what I did. Reading became a real issue! For my singers at school, it is the only way for them (if they don't play piano and most of them don't) to become at all independent in learning their part. I don't like feeling I am the "keeper of the notes", so we use solfege exercises every day and ear-training experiences. I think the main goal of any music teaching is to make the student an independent musician and what better way than through sight-reading?"

Betsy gets her students to become better sight-readers by practising reading at sight and building confidence in it. The key is to be able to see patterns and to constantly be looking ahead rather than just at the note you are playing. She doesn't have any special methods and sees that some people have more of a natural ability for it.

She is not sure there is any positive link between sight-reading and memorizing. "Sometimes I think that good sight-readers are less likely to be outstanding at memorization. The dependence has become reading the notes and there is less confidence when they are "taken away". (At least that's how it feels in my case, although I wasn't required to memorize until I got to college! I'm sure that including memorization as part of the routine from an early age would make a difference.)"

Some of the problems she sees in her students when trying to sight-read: it takes a lot of concentration to sight-read and to many students it seems hard and unnecessary. They are content to work things out slowly and don't see the importance of being able to read a piece at sight. The problem is one of motivation!

Betsy thinks that the more music theory a pianist knows, the better sight-reading becomes since the player is able to identify chords and scales rather than just individual notes. The more that you can grasp from the page in a glance, the better!

There may be a negative connection or relationship between reading and improvising, in that the better a sight-reader you are, the less good you are at improvisation. The answer is a balance on all things from the beginning: reading, sight-reading, scales, theory, memorizing, improvising, etc.

### **Heleen Verleur, Dutch composer and piano teacher, Amsterdam**

A graduate of Hilversum Conservatory (The Netherlands), Heleen Verleur has long written music for her own pupils, and also gave composing lessons to children. Among other works, Verleur has composed for piano trio, violin and piano, baritone sax and piano, and for voice and piano. She has taught piano for more than 20 years and currently has 29 students aged 4 to 70.

She considers herself a good sight-reader. She learned to do so by playing a lot of ensemble pieces accompanied by piano, and by gradually developing more insight about structures of pieces.

On whether or not teaching sight-reading is a goal, it depends on the level of the pupil. When the pupil is very young, sight reading is not a big issue. One has to speak the language first, before reading and writing. For grown-ups, it is more important. She considers it much more important to develop musical skills and ear training / solfege. She believes that everybody can learn sight reading (if you're not dyslexic or lazy). But developing musical insight is the big challenge.

Heleen teaches her students to sight-read by trying to get him or her to play together frequently with other musicians, playing easy pieces by sight, and gradually more difficult ones. She introduces chords, patterns, and theory to recognize music. She shows how a composer works and encourages the pupil to compose himself and notate this. She gets students to focus on the feeling of movement in the hands, not looking at the hands while sight-reading, and to recognise intervals in the hands, to avoid looking at the hands and keyboard, i.e. to trust the hands more than the eyes.

The problems her students have in sight-reading have largely to do with lack of knowledge of music theory. There is often too little time to do both theory and practice. She adds, "They don't recognize patterns because they don't recognize chords so quickly. And, of course, the students have too little experience with chamber music and playing duets together."

Heleen has written a delightful set of duets for children with interesting rhythms. The cycle "Onderweg" has to do with how to get there, e.g. by foot, by bicycle, by the train, by the plane etc. More information available on her website at <http://www.heleenverleur.nl>

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### **Olga de Kort-Koulikova, Russian pianist and organist, Brabant**

A graduate of Utrecht Conservatory, Olga has 2 piano students that she will give up soon. She has given piano lessons regularly to 6 students for two years and irregularly for the past 18 years. The two current students are aged 11 and 20. She considers herself a good sight-reader.

As a piano pupil she preferred to play the pieces she didn't know at all instead of studying what was assigned in her piano lessons. She has never stopped doing this, that is, play everything from the beginning to the end and then decide whether it's worth studying or not.

Olga thinks sight-reading is important, but she has no chance to teach it at this moment. Her students are the beginners, and she prefers to introduce a piece playing it herself, and then look together with her students on the right hand and the left-hand separately or at the small passages. Of course this process has the elements of sight-reading, because her students see the piece for the first time, but they discover it "in pieces."

### **Tim Sharp, English jazz pianist, London**

A graduate of the Guildhall School of Music in London, Tim has been giving piano lessons for 10 years, and currently has 18 students, ranging from age 8 to 72.

He does not consider himself a good sight-reader because he does not do it very much.

Sight-reading is only a goal when he teaches classical but not much of a goal when he teaches jazz.

To get his students to get good at playing from sight, he assigns one line a day - from a variety of different books that design the exercises to be progressive and diverse.

He has never really thought about that the link between memorizing and playing from sight. To memorise, he looks at the notes on the piano not notes on the staves and also make sure he understands what is going on harmonically and then look at the shapes he makes on the keyboard

His students generally like to get on and learn pieces. He struggles with them to get to do it (sight-read) everyday.

He asks the parents to write down the date and time their children have done their 'line a day.' He also asks the kids to write down how many times they played a given line before they could play it properly. They can then see their progress and hence realise the importance of doing it everyday.

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# MY DIDACTIC COMPOSITIONS and ARRANGEMENTS

I composed and arranged music for my students and others learning to play the piano out of necessity, desire, and curiosity. When I can't find suitable teaching material, I compose or arrange my own. This is also a great way for me to improve my composing and arranging skills.

## Notation:

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*Premiered in Cortona, Italy in July 2007*

# MY MUSINGS ON SIGHT-READING,

or rather,

## my adventures in sight-reading

Sight-readers seek new music and other musicians to play with. Here are my writings on my adventures in hunting for second-hand sheet music, sight-reading scores by myself and with others, and my ideas about sight-reading.

<b>Sightreading piano duets, 29 June 2000</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d000629.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d000629.htm</a>	198
<b>Improvising piano duets, 16 July 2000</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d000716.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d000716.htm</a>	199
<b>Sightreading Scriabin, 26 January 2001</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d010126.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d010126.htm</a>	200
<b>Klavierspielen den ganzen tag, 17 February 2001</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d010217.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d010217.htm</a>	201
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<b>Piano ritual, 24 April 2001</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d010421.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/diary/d010421.htm</a>	203
<b>Dueting in Amsterdam, 27 May 2001</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/journal/j010527.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/journal/j010527.htm</a>	204
<b>Sheet music in Amsterdam, 23 January 2002</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/journal/j021023.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/journal/j021023.htm</a>	205
<b>On sightreading, 28 August 2002</b> <a href="http://www.analyticalq.com/journal/j020828.htm">http://www.analyticalq.com/journal/j020828.htm</a>	206
<b>Sightreading unknown pieces, 7 July 2004</b> <a href="http://bonjournal.com/entries/j040623.htm">http://bonjournal.com/entries/j040623.htm</a>	207
<b>Duelling duo's and duets, 23 June 2006</b> <a href="http://bonjournal.com/entries/j040707.htm">http://bonjournal.com/entries/j040707.htm</a>	208

## RELATED LINKS

If you found this thesis interesting, you may want to visit the following websites:

- Anne Ku's official website  
at <http://www.anneku.com>
- Piano Guitar Duo of Anne Ku and Robert Bekkers  
at <http://www.pianoguitar.com>
- Monument House Concert Series  
at <http://www.pianoguitar.com/concerten/>
- Articles on music by Anne Ku  
at <http://www.pianoguitar.com/articles/>
- Reviews of concerts and more by Anne Ku  
at <http://www.bonjournal.com/reviews/>
- Le Bon Journal, on-line publication of Anne Ku  
at <http://www.bonjournal.com>
- analyticalQ Presents, the first website of Anne Ku, including free sheet music  
at <http://www.analyticalq.com>

Your feedback and suggestions are always welcome. Bedankt!

Anne Ku  
Utrecht, 2 July 2008