



Evaluating Different Paths to Note Reading

by Wesley Schaum

Importance of Note Reading

Students of all ages, from preschoolers to grandparents, take pride in being able to do things by themselves. This is especially true with music. Students get great satisfaction and pleasure in being able to explore new music independently. When you teach your pupils to read notes, they can help educate themselves.

Piano teachers agree that note reading is vitally important to musicianship. As teachers, we strive for effective ways to develop fluent note reading in our students.



Introducing Note Reading for Beginners

Experienced piano teachers have developed their own personal way of presenting note reading to beginners. Some teachers prefer to work without books at first, while others rely on various methods and workbooks from the start.

Piano methods incorporate a variety of ways which lead to note reading. These usually begin with letter names of the keyboard and may include short melodies using letters or finger numbers correlated with letter names of notes on the staff lines or spaces. The method may be middle-C, multi-key, or an approach based on finger patterns or hand positions.

Regardless of your preference, the goal should be to *establish good note reading habits* as early as possible and to integrate the training of eyes, ears and fingers with note reading.

Slogans for Notes in the Staff

“Every Good Boy Does Fine” and similar slogans have been around seemingly forever. Some teachers feel that the slogans are a crutch at best and at worst, an impediment to fluent note reading. Slogans work for some students but may impose an extra mental step for others. If slogans are used at all, they should be kept simple, and their use should be short lived.

Colors, Numbers or Letter Names

Some methods teach music in the early levels using colors, numbers or letter names instead of notes. Learning by color is, in effect, a

different form of music notation that eventually needs to be unlearned. It also limits the student to the amount of music published with a particular color system.

Melodies notated with scale degree numbers or finger numbers have the same limitations. Unfortunately, finger numbers can easily become associated with certain keys on the keyboard. This is another habit that has to be unlearned later.

Letter name melodies offer a correlation to key names of the keyboard. This can be useful when it is part of a logical progression to letter names enclosed in the note head and eventually to normal notation.

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Letter Names Enclosed in Note Heads

More and more beginner method books now utilize notes with letter names enclosed in the note heads. This is a very helpful visual aid that correlates letter names and note locations. It works better when the note heads are sufficiently large so that the letter names are clear.

Rote Teaching

Teaching music by rote is teaching the student to play an instrument or to sing without reading notes. This type of learning relies on ear training, imitation, repetition and memory. Over many years, various systems of rote teaching have been developed. *Solfeggio* is an effective way to train the ear to recognize intervals. It also facilitates transposing by ear. It is commonly used, especially by vocal teachers and in college level ear training classes. It can, however, be problematic for students with perfect pitch, since the solfeggio syllables may cause confusion with the letter names of notes.

Another widely known program which uses rote training is the *Suzuki* system. It is used to teach violin and piano to beginners, often at a remarkably early age. This method relies heavily on parent-child interaction which requires special dedication and time on the part of parents. When followed through to completion, Suzuki makes a transition into conventional note reading. However, unless this transition is done correctly and completely, the playing-by-ear aspect of Suzuki may be a hindrance to note reading.

Pitfalls of Learning By Ear

Although ear training is unquestionably valuable to the musician, too much reliance on playing by ear is often a serious obstacle to note reading.

Many teachers have had exasperating experiences with transfer students who have been playing mainly by ear. These students have become so accustomed to playing by ear that they resist learning notes because they view it as an obstacle to playing easily.

In the long run, unless a student learns to read notes, playing mostly by ear will severely restrict the student's access to the vast amount of literature in print using standard notation.

Oversized Staff and Notes

Many method books use various sizes of large staves and notes for beginners. This can be helpful because it enables the student to more easily visualize note movement: up, down and repeat, in the staff. In some cases however, there is a problem when making the transition to normal sized staff and notes. The normal notes, because of their smaller size, may appear more difficult than they really are. This problem, however, can be overcome.

Keyboard Diagrams

Beginning method books usually have short keyboard diagrams to help the student locate letter names of the keys. The diagrams are often part of an illustration showing the location of notes at the keyboard. This gives the student a visual image of the notes and their keyboard location.

CD Prompting and Accompaniments

Currently, there are method books that include a CD with various ways to assist the student in learning notes and to encourage practice by making it more fun. However, care needs to be made to be sure the student is actually reading the notes, not learning by ear.


Flash Cards and Other Note Finding Aids

Musical flash cards have been around for a long time. Some method books have special pages that are in effect, built-in flash cards. In the beginning, flash cards with individual notes are useful. In addition to reciting the note name, it is important that the student *play each note at the keyboard*.

As the student becomes proficient, easier flash cards can be phased out so that only those most needed are used. Using a stop watch and keeping track of the time may be effective in motivating some students to respond to the flash cards quickly.

Flash cards with melodic intervals, harmonic intervals, short note groups and various rhythms are helpful as the student progresses. Again, playing the notes and rhythms at the keyboard gives maximum benefit. Other flash cards may also include musical terms, signs and symbols.

Proficient Note Reading

Although there are many different ways of presenting note reading, eventually the letter names and all of the other learning aids will be phased out. For example, no matter how quickly and accurately a student can identify flash cards, the overriding goal is for the pupil to read the notes on the page and *find them at the keyboard quickly*. 



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