



Strategies for Successful Sight-Reading

Ideas that Cultivate Independence & Musical Thinking

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Assumptions:

- There is no single best way to teach sight-singing.
- Sight-singing is not the end itself...it's the result of the application of students' music theory knowledge to any score and their previous experience in learning how to sing a new piece of music
 - The "Farm System": Plow, Plant, Cultivate, Weed, Water, *then* Harvest.
 - This is where students can "come alive," but it's also a tricky area where there are glorious disasters and tentative successes. That's the point, though, to learn from all past experiences and above all, KEEP TRYING!
- This list isn't exhaustive; there are many different approaches available.
- The information listed below is culled from a variety of sources, including printed materials, discussions with colleagues, and information from various ACDA/MENC workshops.

Teach Scanning/Marking Music: Establishing good habits

- Teach scanning as a first reading experience – Teacher sings, students follow (What measure were we in when I stopped?); Everyone sings in their head, then identifies the stopping point; clap/snap/step only the quarters, eighths, etc.
- "Box the do's, Circle the sol's" – teacher can sing everything else, gradually add more student sung syllables
- Always: have a pencil, write in measure numbers, mark your part on each system, circle problem spots, star practice spots, mark half/whole steps, triads, counting, solfege, etc.

(from *Jenks/Swiggum*)

Example 1: Pre-Reading Activities

- Curwen Hand Signs
 - "You do, they do" – teacher first introduces hand-signs with major scale; then teacher signs scale & class follows; then teacher signs random patterns and students follow (variation: use row 1, 2, etc, men/women, other combos)
 - "Secret songs" – teacher models hand signs in rhythm of "secret" song & students guess; students try for extra credit
 - "Modulation/Changing Do" – teacher gives a pattern (DRMRD) & students follow, then teacher signs DRM— and replaces ("wipes out") the old "mi" with the new "do," students then follow and then have to sign/sing the old pattern in the new key; (variation: choose 2 different patterns, advanced: non-stepwise, move to close keys)
 - "2-Handed" Director uses both hands, one for the syllable to be sung, the other for the pitch to audiate *while singing the first pitch*. When the two hands match, the class goes to the new pitch. (Begin with stepwise pitches; constantly refer back to "Do," add larger intervals after some time; be sure include lower intervals beneath "Do" as well)

Example 2: Beginning Reading Activities

- Establish the Power of Do – when singing simple exercises, stop on a non-Do pitch and have students find "do." Reinforces tonality & keeps "Do" established in their aural memory
- Teach line vs. space (not always intuitive!) – careful w/words "on a line," etc.

- “Up a Step, Down a step” (Improvisation Strategy) – Teacher asks students to select “Do” for starting pitch (on staff). Going around the room, students can choose to go up a step, down a step, or stay the same. Every once in a while (for a special treat) a different interval can be chosen (start small – 3rd, etc). When the piece is “finished,” class reads the piece they created together.
 - Extension: “Change card” – a small group of students can be selected to change a set number (2-3) of pitches & class reads again w/changes
 - “Rest card” – add quarter rests
 - Inner ear – intrinsic motivation
 - Questions: Did you like these changes? What makes this easy/hard to sing?
- “Simon” (Improvisation Strategy) – Teacher sings any 2 or 3 beginning pitches (do sol mi), a student is chosen to supply another pitch (if they choose “re” the pattern is now “do sol mi re”) and everyone sings this. The next student chosen adds another pitch and the pattern continues until 10-12 pitches have been accumulated. The last person who added a pitch goes to the board and notates the newly composed pattern. EVERY student goes to the board 1x/semester. Students begin to understand the tendencies of certain pitches (“ti” wants to go to “do”, avoiding “do” keeps melody from feeling finished, repeated notes can be humorous/tension-creating, etc); Ear-training skills are honed, students begin to understand what constitutes a good melody.
- Solfege Floor Staff – Make giant staff using painter’s tape, students (as “notes”) create patterns, notate, and sing intervals
- “Sing Where I Point” – teacher writes solfege pitches vertically on board, students sing pitch that teacher points to (variation: draw a staff and point to pitches already on the staff=establishes which line/space is what in any new key=very helpful!)
- “Sing Where I Draw” – teacher draws a pitch on staff (establishing “Do”), then adds another note which students immediately sing (leave out rhythm, just draw note heads; vary speed/intervals)

B Basic

I Intermediate

A Advanced

B **Problem:** Students have trouble remembering solfege, especially for descending patterns.
Solution 1: Use solfege warm-ups to reinforce & memorize

Example 1: Stepwise

←
(challenge: minor)

Example 2: 3rds

←
(challenge: minor)

Example 3: 4ths

←
(challenge: minor)

Other Examples: (from *The Choral Warm-Up Collection*)

1. #79 – Major scale (at two-beat canon)
2. #80 – Subvocalization – omitting one or two pitches, continuing scale
3. #85 – Add 1 Note – “Do, do re do, do re mi re do, etc” up and down the scale

(from *Jenks/Swiggum*)

4. “Scale Canons” – sing scales in canon beginning at the 3rd, progress to canons at 4th, 5th
5. Sing scales that do NOT start/end on “do:” re – re, etc. or students choose

Games (from *Musical Games for the Musically Minded*)

1. p. 7 – Curwen Hand Signs – Individual students lead the class in singing hand signs (the leader must be able to sing whatever he/she leads the class in); or divide the class in half and each half follows the teachers two hands as they show different hand signs

(from *Building Choral Excellence*)

2. p. 88 – Bingo #2 (Based on the song, where certain notes have to be left out or filled w/claps) – Students sing a scale or simple melody and leave out (audiate) certain notes; can play in teams

B Problem: Students can sing quarter notes in stepwise solfege, but begin to struggle when half notes, whole notes, and eighth notes are added in.

Solution: “Writing helps Reading” – Take the pitch completely out of the equation; focus only on reading, writing, and dictating rhythms only.

Example: I have created rhythm worksheets that increase in difficulty. I copy the sequential examples for each student, and we discuss/practice how to read (and write in the counting) for each example. Depending on your desired outcome or pre-existing level of your ensemble, you may wish to try the following:

1. Clap a measure (or line) and have the class repeat
2. Teacher claps line w/1 measure wrong, students ID
3. Part 1=exercise A, then on to part Part 2=exercise B, then on to part Part 3=exercise, C, etc. (successively)
 - a. OR Part 1=A, Part 2=B, Part 3=C (concurrently)
4. Partners: 2 students together
5. In a circle: each student takes a successive measure
6. Competing teams: most measures correct (great for freshman boys!)
7. “Kinesthetic Reading” – class reads (rhythms 1st, then add pitch) simple exercise using quarters, eighths, & limited 16ths; then “puts each note” in a motion: quarter – feet, eighth – clap, 16th – pat on lap.
8. Rhythmic Dictation (series of exercise & quizzes)
9. Harmonically: on a chord
10. Melodically: Up/down any scale, 1 solfege pitch/measure.
 - a. AND try different scales: natural minor, melodic minor, harmonic minor (for upper level students)
 - b. Stepwise on solfege scale (challenging w/harder rhythms!)
 - c. Sop. read “A” on Mi, Alto read “B” on Do, Ten-C-Sol, Bass-D-Do, etc.
 - d. Move up/down/stay the same, each successive measure, then return to “Do”
 - e. Move up/down/stay the same, each successive note, then return to “Do”

Games (from *Musical Games for the Musically Minded*)

1. p. 22 – Rhythm Poison – Teacher claps/sings/plays a series of rhythmic patterns, and students repeat; if any student makes a sound after teacher has performed the “poison” pattern, they are out & teacher gets 1 point; if no one makes a sound, class gets a point.

(from *Alfred’s Essentials of Music Theory – Rhythm*)

2. Double Bingo – Four sequentially graded games of 1 measure rhythmic patterns (winner gets a Jolly Rancher – never underestimate the motivating power of sugar ;-)

B Problem: (Same as above) Students can sing quarter notes in stepwise solfege, but begin to struggle when half notes, whole notes, and eighth notes are added in.

Solution: “Isolate Parameters” – When you add pitch, first focus on quarter note only exercises, then gradually introduce half notes, whole notes, eighth notes, and any rests.

Example: Among the many sight-singing method books and series available, I have found the *Steps to Harmony* series by Masterworks Press to be incredibly effective. This series presents many different exercises in a sequential, graded format for multiple voicings (SSA, TTB, SATB). Here are some of the activities that students can do:

- Write in solfege for each line (@ beginning, check w/your neighbor)
- Sing each line in unison (with/without piano help)
- Sing 2 part combinations (1 & 2, 2 & 3, 1 & 3)
- Sing 3 part combinations and switch parts (i.e. don’t always have Sop/Ten.1 sing top line)
 - How to divide? Don’t always divide S1, S2, A (or T1, T2, B). Instead, try:
 - Birthdays (Jan.-Apr. May-Aug. Sep.-Dec.)
 - Blondes/Brunettes, Even/odd street numbers, Tall/short, Coke/Pepsi, etc.

Games: (from *Musical Games for the Musically Minded*)

1. p. 42 – Melody Mix Up – class sings 4 measure melody comprised of 1 measure phrases in different combinations
2. p. 43 – Melodic Multiple Choice – class chooses a melody performed by the teacher from a series of choices on the board (or on large notecards)

(from *Melody Bingo*)

3. Great for entry level students in beginning choral groups

I Problem: Students have trouble getting “anchors” or “guideposts” in their aural memory.

Solution: Utilize warm-ups, activities, and games that require encourage “audiation” or “subvocalization.”

Example 1: Warm-Ups

- Exercise #80: omitting one or two pitches, continuing scale. (from *The Choral Warm-Up Collection*)
- Any warm-up you use regularly can be “subvocalized.” Practice omitting certain tones, omit full measures, or even a whole exercise, and have the class modulate up/down in their head
- Audiate (turn on/off switch) with this exercise:



(challenge: minor)

- Challenge your upper level students by “turning the switch off” for longer durations (ie. 1-2 examples at a time) OR through key changes (up 1/2 step, then somewhere in the next exercise!)
- “Snap in the Space” – sing any type of scale & leave out 1-2 syllables (& snap in their place=audiate them)
 - i.e. – do re (x) fa sol la (x) do (x) la sol fa mi (x) do, etc. (More challenging=leave out more syllables)

Example 2: Aural Activities

- “Neutral Syllable Solfege” – after establishing “Do,” sing pattern on neutral syllable, students fill in solfege
- “I sing, You sing” – teacher sings one solfege pitch, students hear it and sing another (“I sing “sol” you sing “mi”, “I sing “ti” you sing “do”)
 - Intermediate step: “I sing “sol,” you sing “so” then “mi”

- As you're working in rehearsal, challenge students to occasionally find "Do" of the piece you're working on (by audiating the pitch and then singing it). If this is too easy, ask them to audiate/sing "Sol" or "Re" etc.
- Mini-Quiz: ask students to search their music and find all the "Do's" in their individual vocal line; ask them to tell you the number ("box" the Do's, "circle" the sol's, etc)
- After singing for a while in one key (ie. working on a piece for 1 class period in D major), teacher sings a certain pitch on a neutral syllable, and the students identify the solfege name of that pitch (ie. do, sol, etc.)
- Great for keeping all students on track and accountable, especially if they have to hand in their answers for an impromptu quiz grade!

Games: (from *Musical Games for the Musically Minded*)

1. p. 9 – Solami Poison – same as Rhythm poison but using a melodic pattern instead
2. p. 45 – Melody Relays – teams of students have to dictate a 1 measure melodic pattern sung/played by the teacher

(from *Building Choral Excellence*)

3. p. 85 – Solfege Card Game – students sing solfege random patterns assigned to different cards

Side Note: I love analogies...this is how my brain works. In the course of teaching solfege, I've tried to come up with variations on the theme of "Do"=Home note, emphasizing the power of "Do," and discussing why many melodies begin and end on "Do." One day, after I made the "Do"=Home note schpiel, one student said, "So if Do is the home note, then Sol is kind of like your grandma's house, familiar, but you don't want to stay there forever." (Thanks to Myranda T.)

I Problem: Students can sing any rhythm stepwise, but find it very difficult to leap/skip to and from notes and simultaneously identify the correct solfege names.

Solution: Isolate this crucial skill by 1) defining/identifying steps, skips, and leaps, 2) singing/audiating specific intervals, and 3) constantly questioning/quizzing students on these specific intervals throughout the school year (ie. it's gonna take a while!)

Example 1: Use the 3rds and 4ths Warm-Ups from the beginning of this packet. (Maybe even try 5ths or 6ths to push your choir!?) – AND – "I Sing, You Sing" exercise from above – AND – create interval searches/puzzles drawn from music or created by you

Example 2: Masterworks Press *Steps to Harmony: Volume 2* has activities that focus sight-singing using specific intervals (ie. sol-ti, ti-sol, etc). Find other examples that use a specific interval repeatedly and incorporate those into your daily practice.

Example 3: Mini "Tonal Memory to Solfege" Quiz – after establishing "Do," the teacher plays/sings a short pattern & students sing it back (on a neutral syllable). Then, knowing "Do," in their "mind's ear," students figure out the solfege names of the other pitches

- Start easy: d t d, d r m r d, etc.
- Progress to 1) longer passages (d r m f s f m r d t l t d, etc) or 2) intervals (d m s m d, d l f l d, etc.)

Example 4: If a certain piece you're working on features many of the same intervals (or if your students are like mine and can never quite get the "sol-ti" interval quite high enough) make a game out of identifying a specific interval

- Ask, "How many "Do-Fa" intervals are in the Alto line for pages 1-6?"
- Also: any time during rehearsal the "featured interval" (interval du jour) is sung/played, students can give a thumbs up sign (bonus points if they can ID the interval in the piano or accompanying instrument line!)

Example 5: Revisit an already familiar tune (unison or in parts) and re-learn the solfege to it. This way, students already know the correct interval, and they can begin to connect the solfege names to the right feel of specific intervals in the context of an actual song.

Games: (from *Building Choral Excellence*)

1. p. 87 – Solfege Bingo – Students are handed cards with solfege, rhythmic patterns and key signatures

I **Problem:** While sight-singing, at the first trouble spot, students “freeze up” and can’t get back on track

Solution: Discuss this problem specifically, remind students that this is part of the learning process, discuss how it could happen, give them specific strategies for how to recover

Example: We discuss this concept many times throughout the year; the idea of “don’t stop” is crucial to any musician. A few strategies to help them get back on track:

- Using the “anchor” analogy, once students know where “Do” is on the page, if they get lost, they can try to “hop on” at another phrase beginning or where the next “Do” appears
- When sight-singing, if the solfege names become a hindrance (ie. a stepwise eighth note pattern), temporarily abandon solfege and use a neutral syllable until things slow down and you can get back on

A **Problem:** Students can be disorganized/overwhelmed when preparing to sight-read a new piece

Solution: Use the Song Learning Procedure (as outlined by Demorest, p. 81) and modify it to your choir’s specific needs/situation.

Song Learning Procedure:

1. Rhythm
 - a. Identify the meter and starting beat
 - b. Scan for difficult and repeating patterns
 - c. Set a steady tempo and chant the rhythm while keeping the beat
 - d. Evaluate
2. Pitch
 - a. Identify the key signature, tonality, and starting syllable
 - b. Scan for difficult and repeating patterns
 - c. Establish sense of key through tuning up; perhaps sing difficult patterns
 - d. Set a steady tempo and chant or sing solfege (or other syllables) in rhythm
 - e. Evaluate
3. Other tips (my additions)
 - a. Keep eye moving ahead of the notes
 - b. Be able to sing (ie. practice ahead of time) major, minor, augmented, and diminished triads, and major and minor scales

A **Problem:** How do you really know each student is progressing in their individual ability to sight sing and not just following the strong kid next to them?

Solution: Individual assessment for each student.

Types of Sight-Singing Assessment (Demorest, p. 106-123)

1. Group Assessment – standard, we naturally do this in everyday rehearsal; asking all students for answers/feedback, hearing all students sight-singing together
2. Individual Assessment – 2 types
 - a. Diagnostic – to find out what students have previously learned; written and performance; simpler

- b. Evaluative/Practice – to find out how students have progressed through your instruction
 - i. Taped/Recorded in a practice room or individually with you
 - ii. Use of a rubric to score and give feedback

Helpful Reminders

- Stop playing all of their parts (this was way too hard for me, I didn't want to face the results!)
- Stop always giving them starting pitches (& plan for this)
- Use the piano as little as possible
- Encourage students not to “cheat” by leaning on people around them, but to trust their own brains and ears
 - Find creative ways to “eliminate” your best sightreaders and make students rely on themselves
- Transfer concepts to pieces in rehearsal
 - Pervasive, non-judgmental, always looking to improve

(from *Jenks/Swiggum*)

“Ultimately, we want students to discover what we have already figured out: that a greater understanding of music and better literacy skills deepens their own affective experience.”

References Cited

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