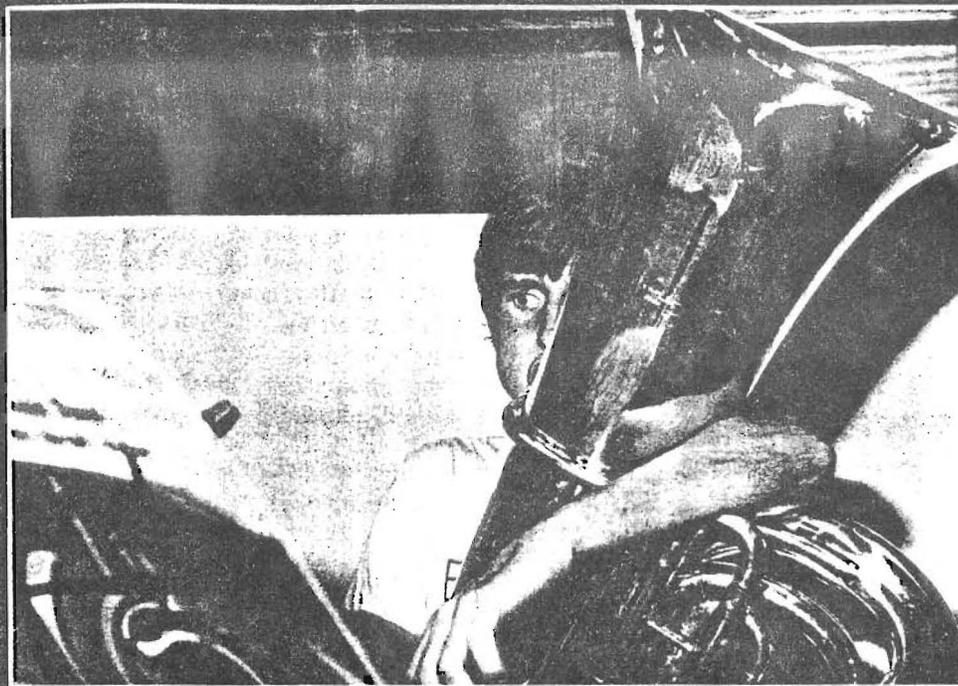


TRICKS, MASKS, AND CAMOUFLAGE:



Photograph by John Froelich

IS IMITATION PASSING FOR MUSIC READING?

Q How many students in a class of thirty-five need to be able to sight-sing a tonal pattern in order for the teacher to hear "the class" sight-singing?

• A. Often, only one.

In music ensembles and in general music classes, our students rely on clues from us and from each other in order to "read the music."

Peggy Bennett is an assistant professor of Music Education at the University of Texas at Arlington. This is a revised version of an article titled "Are We Tricking Ourselves into Thinking Our Students Are Reading Music?," which appeared in the January 1984 issue of Indiana Musicator.

While these clues may help simulate a successful "music reading" experience, they may also mask the fact that music reading is *not* taking place.

With vocal and instrumental classes from early childhood through adult, there are "tricks" that can be used by any individual that create the illusion of music reading for the unsuspecting teach-

by Peggy Bennett

er. It's not that students are intentionally deceiving their teachers: in any problem-solving attempt, using all the clues and resources available is both legitimate and advisable. Therefore, an inquisitive teacher is eager to determine which skills are being used in music-reading exercises and which are not.

Offered here are some typical ways in which music reading can *appear* to be occurring, and four suggestions for promoting independent study during group reading

exercises. The aim is to move the class from responses that are primarily imitative to those that elicit independent music-reading skills.

Imitation in pitch reading

To successfully sight sing, the performer must rely only on his own internal reference points of accurately producing the sound suggested by the written notation. Within a group, however, a sight singer can frequently bypass this individual responsibility by simply listening to those around him or her.

At the next opportunity to listen to a group sight sing, notice the initiative taken by various individuals within the group in singing each pitch. While the ultimate effect may sound like group reading to the teacher's ears, the students may be "sight-reading" by simply listening for each pitch to be given to them. In many groups this sequence of listening and responding takes only a fraction of a second. Furthermore, it is likely that the role of initiating the correct pitch changes frequently from individual to individual during the exercise. Because the *sound* rather than the symbol is generating the sound, students are imitating rather than reading.

Because instrumentalists can avoid the auditory internalization necessary for sight singing, the skill levels of their pitch-reading may be even more camouflaged than those of singers. Young instrumentalists often learn to "read" on their instruments by simply applying a manual reaction to the written musical symbol. No inner hearing of the pattern is necessary. A clear and somewhat common example of the absence of auditory internalization can be recounted by teachers who have witnessed their students' inability to recognize the melody they have just performed when it is later played for them.

While instrumentalists as manual readers can possibly offer more immediately acceptable music-reading performances than singers, the director who is concerned for their continued musical development includes exercises that foster skillful audiation of music notation. The "finger musicians'" performances without comprehension of the sounds suggested by the symbols compare to typists' accurate reproduction of documents without be-

ing able to pronounce or understand the text.

If students never progress beyond the stage of finger musicianship, or if they are not encouraged to balance this rudimentary skill by singing the pitch patterns they are reading, they will probably lack the ability to audiate pitch patterns. This ability is prerequisite to genuine music literacy.

Imitation in rhythm reading

Added to the external aural clues that function similarly to those in pitch reading, rhythm reading is often accompanied by movement. The clapping, tapping, and so on that are often a part of rhythm reading can provide enough visual information to a performer that *reading* is not necessary. Whether students are elementary age or adults, the predictability of the motor response (clapping, for example) can allow the student to shift attention from the reading of the pattern to the aural and visual clues offered by the group.¹ By simply watching and imitating those around him, the student can perform the pattern and appear to be "reading."

Occasionally the "tricks" that pass for music reading can generate from the teacher. With eagerness to lead the class through accurate performance in "reading" rhythms, teachers may sometimes read the patterns *for* their students. An example of this misplaced guidance can be seen when students are asked to read/perform a rhythm pattern from notation written on the chalkboard. If the teacher points to the note stems as the students are to perform them, the only skill actually required from the "reader" is to clap (speak, snap) simultaneously with the teacher's movement. The value of demon-

1. Research is available indicating that not all movements are equally efficient for student performance of beat and rhythm (in selected readings, see Heinlein, 1929, p. 227; Jersild and Bienstock, 1935, p. 97; Rainbow, 1981, p. 69-73; Bennett, 1981, pp. 128-129). In addition to the other factors mentioned, cumbersome movement can also be a deterrent to students' focus on rhythm reading.

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strating *how* to read notation in this way (following only the ends of the note stems rather than tracing the entire configuration) is not being questioned. What would seem imperative for the teacher to realize, however, is the point at which independent reading skills are being required from the students. As with pitch reading, imitation in rhythm reading has the potential to supersede or be misinterpreted as reading.

Instrumentalists may have the advantage over singers of being able to bypass audiation and still (manually) produce accurate pitches, but this plus can become a minus in the context of rhythm reading. Because rhythm reading for instrumentalists also requires translating the "reading" of the pattern into a representative manual configuration, it is possible that a student's abilities in reading rhythms can be impeded rather than aided by the instrument. The instrumentalist must ultimately coordinate rhythm reading with concurrent fingering changes, and it is these changes that may distort teachers' perceptions of students' rhythmic accuracy. In other words, instrumentalists' rhythm-reading skills may actually be better than performance on their instrument would indicate. The potential for fingering changes to mask students' rhythm-reading skills would warrant the differentiation between these two abilities by the inquisitive teacher.

Memory and imitation

Just as a child can "read" the text of a book that has been read to him numerous times, a young musician can easily rely on memory to perform a short piece. When this is the case, the student can so convincingly appear to be reading that he may even demonstrate the subtle expression, confidence, and manner of delivery of his teacher-model. In music reading, the role of memory is an anomaly. Memory can *develop* as well as *mask* abilities in music literacy.

Auditory, visual, and manual memory can be so adeptly employed by some students that the

pattern being performed. Use teacher clues sparingly to nurture student development.

2. Reduce the size of the group the individual is functioning within for music-reading exercises. Working with a partner can be an ideal means of strengthening an individual's competence and confidence in music reading. The time taken in a rehearsal or a general music class to have partners figure out together how to read a passage or a pattern may be time well spent for lasting improvement in musical abilities. Compared to the "partner approach," the common and less time-consuming practice of having a student soloist demonstrate or sight-read a pattern often requires minimal, if any, problem solving from the remainder of the group.

3. For instrumentalists, *singing* tonal and rhythmic patterns can aid in auditory internalization, temporarily remove the fingering requirements, and allow simple phrasing and nuance practice. Instructional strategies that work well for remedying rhythmic difficulties are having the players perform the rhythm pattern by (1) saying/counting the rhythm; (2) adding clapping as they say the rhythm; (3) clapping the rhythm while saying the pattern in their inner hearing; (4) playing the pattern on the instrument using only one pitch; (5) saying the pattern while fingering the notes; and 6) performing the pattern as written. This procedure systematically progresses through the aspects of "putting it all together" in which any one step could be causing the performance problem.

4. Introducing degrees of predictability and unpredictability can play an important role in engaging the learner in the music-reading process. If the reader is familiar with the melody, especially in vocal music, little direct attention is required for reading specific pitches and rhythms. A teaching strategy that works well for beginning readers is to select a simple yet familiar melody and change a small section of the piece. Repetition, inversion,

hearing, seeing, or playing of a pattern only once can disqualify any subsequent performance of the pattern from representing music reading. Singers often become expert at tonal memory because it helps them avoid the struggles of music reading. Manual memory for any instrumentalist can function in a way that allows him to perform groups of pitches without ever making a connection between individual notes and fingerings. Clearly, the goal of developing and honing students' skills in auditory memory should at some point be balanced with skills in independent sight singing and reading.

Suggestions for group reading

It must be stated once again that the descriptions of student strategies as tricks, masks, and camouflages are not intended to demean these processes. Rather, these strategies should be seen as useful teacher or student tools for problem solving in music reading exercises, not as indicators of independent reading skills of the students. Pedagogically, imitation and memory can be accepted as legitimate first phases of any new knowledge. Student initiation in music reading, however, should quickly evolve from these first steps.

What follows are some suggestions for instructional procedures that could aid in nurturing self-reliance in group music-reading experiences.

1. Ensure the students a personal "study" time before reading the notation as a group. By using inner hearing ("Say the rhythm inside your head," or, "Sing the melody inside your head") as a staple in classrooms or rehearsals, the students are given individual opportunities to "figure it out." Take time during this strategy to encourage students to problem solve with notation and sound. "Can you hear it?" "Sing it several times in your inner hearing and check your own opinion." "See if what you hear in your inner hearing matches what we will perform when we read it together." Be sure to allow quiet tapping on one hand or hand signals during the study time if these movement techniques are a part of the students' usual music-reading exercises. Avoid leading the exercises by singing or clapping the

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augmentation, and diminution of short patterns within a familiar piece often provide enough intrigue to warrant attention, focus, and effort from the reader. Arranging a piece in this way balances the familiar with the unfamiliar for interest and motivation in music reading.

For optimal benefit from these suggestions, teachers must assume two major responsibilities. First, the framework provided must be extended with activities tailored to fit each unique classroom setting, whether it is an ensemble or a general music class, in kindergarten or graduate school. Second, the teacher must maintain an attitude of *curiosity* for perceiving and analyzing student reading skills and *initiative* in varying and developing the applications of these suggestions to continually intrigue the students. Intriguing challenges that motivate students to want to read music and constant opportunities to develop and practice music reading skills can result in lasting enjoyment of music study beyond the school setting.

The individual within the group needs attention for the instructional process. Whether the goal of music reading lies at the heart or on the fringe of any music instructional program, an informed teacher who uses time efficiently is imperative. The investment of time and effort to develop independent music-reading skills in our students can have returns that will ultimately serve the individual, the teacher, and the group in the performance and knowledge of music. ■

Selected readings

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