

Hearing the Sounds Before Reading the Notes

Some students seem to sight-read music quite readily, while for others this is a formidable challenge. Despite differences in aptitude for sight-reading, the progress of all students is affected by the methods that are used to teach this skill. Good sight-reading results from a thorough understanding of music notation and a well-developed sense of time.

It is common for directors to explain rhythms in terms of mathematical proportions. Although the mathematical proportions are an important element, most rhythmic errors arise from a poorly developed sense of rhythmic flow. Directors often spend considerable time correcting the mathematics instead of addressing the rhythmic flow. That students readily respond to the rhythmic flow of music is evident whenever they listen to pulsating music. Marching band directors often become frustrated teaching some students to march on the beat, but usually these are the students who have not developed a sense of rhythmic flow.

Famed music educator Emile Jaques-Dalcroze believed the rhythms of the body are the source of musical rhythms. Many people refer to his method as Eurhythmics because it uses musical activities that encourage students to respond to music by marching, skipping, hopping, and clapping, activities that all use large muscles. Dalcroze expressed concern that instrumental music instruction should not begin before a student develops a sense of rhythm. Traditionally, we start beginning band and orchestra instruction when students reach a certain grade level, but before actually playing an instrument it is important for students to develop a sense of steady pulse through walking, marching, or clapping to music. More advanced exercises are clapping eighth notes while marching quarter notes or producing duple or triple meter patterns through combinations of thigh pats and hand claps.

These activities are often taught in general music classes, but clapping should be an integral part of every beginning ensemble rehearsal to develop rhythmic flow. Some directors believe that foot-tapping or learning quarter notes before long tones will instill a rhythmic pulse, but neither foot-tapping nor tonguing quarter notes entails the large muscle movements that develop a sense of rhythmic flow.

Directors traditionally have used counting systems or rhythm syllables to teach rhythm. Many disagree which counting system or rhythm syllable system works best, but most teachers accept that the system should duplicate the sound of the rhythmic pattern without conflicting with the articulation.

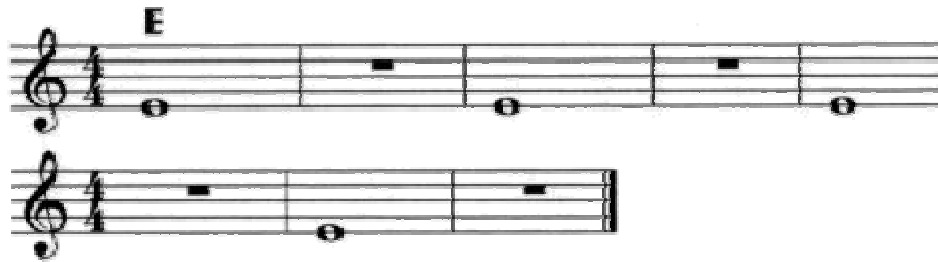
All instrumental music programs should include singing or students will come to rely on the instrument rather than their ears to identify and produce correct and in-tune pitches. Students should first sing all exercises to develop a better sense of pitch, and only then play them on their instruments. Over the years I have discovered that students who can sing simple melodies on sight are usually better at reading instrumental music than those who cannot.

Bruce Pearson

Music

Students should develop their senses of rhythm and pitch and be able to produce a good tone on their instruments before they are ready to read music. Just as we learn to talk before reading, instrumentalists should learn pitch and rhythm before musical notation. This way, the notation simply represents what a student has already experienced playing, which is a basis of the sound-before-sight reading system.

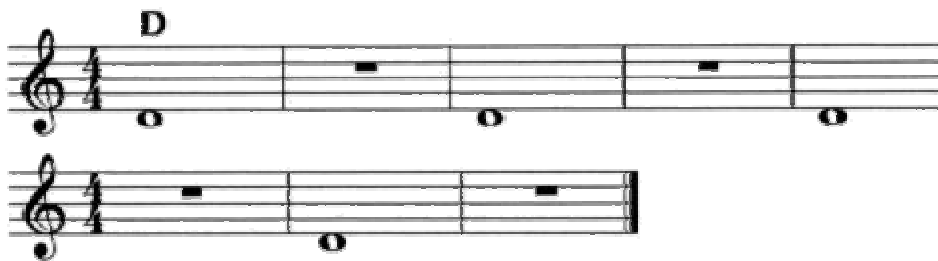
For instance, when teaching whole notes and whole rests, begin with students' books closed to eliminate the distraction of the music.



While singing the exercise using the mi solfège syllable, indicate the rhythm by clapping hands on beat 1, keeping the hands together, and bobbing them up and down on beats 2, 3, and 4. During the whole rests a director can maintain the beat by extending both hands outward and bobbing them up and down for all four counts. Students should then duplicate the teacher's example.

Now using note names, the students sing and clap for a second time, while the director demonstrates the exercise on an instrument. After correctly repeating the exercise on their instruments, students have the experience to read the exercise. At this point students should be instructed about note values and counting systems.

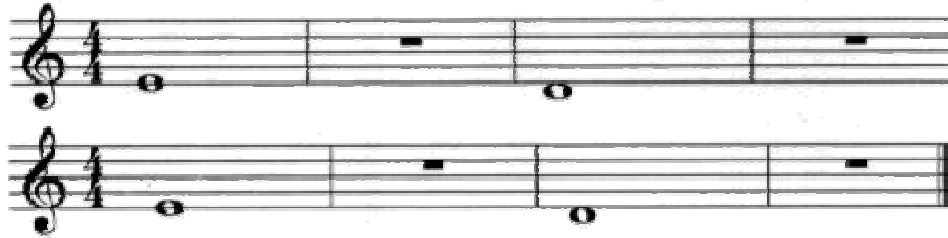
In this progression students should examine the similarities and differences in each new exercise.



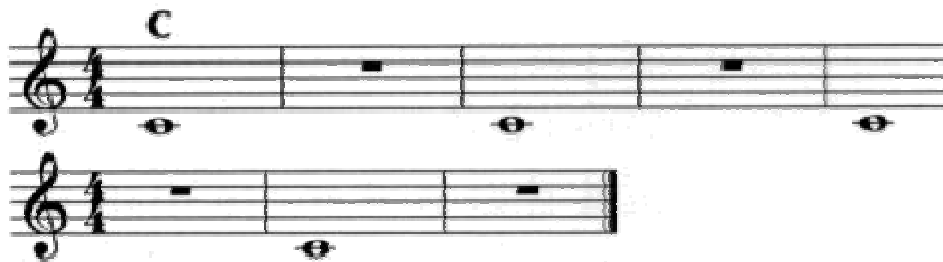
Students will readily see that the rhythm in this exercise is the same as in the previous one, but the pitch is different. Without further instruction, give the new pitch and ask students to sing using the solfège syllable re, while clapping the second exercise. As in the first example, students should then sing note names and clap the rhythm. This is where a song-before-sight approach differs from rote teaching: only new concepts are demonstrated. Students learned the rhythm in the first exercise and should not need

further explanation. Review only if a student cannot apply previously learned information to a new exercise.

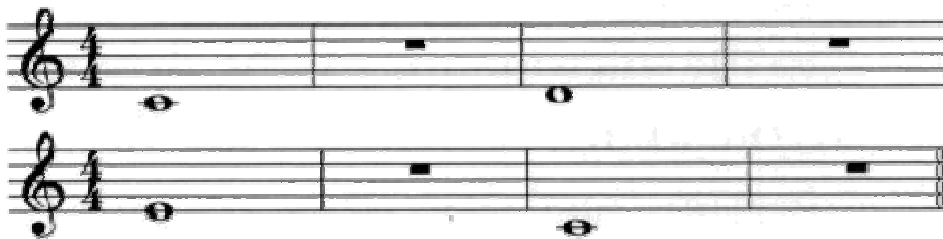
After singing and clapping the second exercise correctly, students are ready to learn the fingering for the pitch and play the exercise.



The third exercise introduces no new pitches or rhythms; students should apply the knowledge gained from the first two exercises to play this without further instruction or demonstration.



For the fourth exercise students should identify similarities and differences between the exercises, clap and sing the new exercise first using the solfège syllable do, then the notes' names, learn the correct fingering, and finally play the exercise.



All the notes and rhythms used in exercise five have been covered thus far, so students should be able to sing and clap the fifth exercise before playing it.

The sound-before-sight approach is a good way to teach all new concepts, including new notes and new rhythms. When teaching new notes, use familiar rhythm patterns, and combine familiar notes with new rhythms.

Bruce Pearson

Music

The first exercise, "Eighth Note Encounter," is presented in 4/4 time. The melody consists of two measures: the first measure contains a quarter note (C4), a quarter note (D4), and an eighth-note pair (E4-F4); the second measure contains a quarter note (G4), a quarter note (A4), and an eighth-note pair (B4-C5). Below the staff, a clapping rhythm is indicated by the word "clap" and a series of vertical lines with 'x' marks at the bottom, corresponding to the note values in the melody.

The second exercise is identical in rhythm to the first. The melody consists of two measures: the first measure contains a quarter note (C4), a quarter note (D4), and an eighth-note pair (E4-F4); the second measure contains a quarter note (G4), a quarter note (A4), and an eighth-note pair (B4-C5). Below the staff, a clapping rhythm is indicated by the word "clap" and a series of vertical lines with 'x' marks at the bottom, corresponding to the note values in the melody.

To introduce eighth notes, divide the class so one group claps quarter notes while the other group imitates the teacher clapping “Eighth Note Encounter.” The groups should then switch parts before the teacher demonstrates “Eighth Note Encounter” on an instrument. After duplicating the exercise by ear on their instruments, students should look at the notation as the director explains the note values and counting or rhythm syllable system for this exercise. Just as children quickly learn to read words they can pronounce and understand, students will readily decipher musical notation of rhythms they have already learned to play. From “Eighth Note Encounter” students learn the skills for playing the next exercise, “Jim Along Josie.”

The third exercise, "Jim Along Josie," is presented in 4/4 time. The melody consists of two measures: the first measure contains a quarter note (C4), a quarter note (D4), and an eighth-note pair (E4-F4); the second measure contains a quarter note (G4), a quarter note (A4), and an eighth-note pair (B4-C5). The notation is identical to the previous exercises, but the clapping rhythm is not shown.

Again, students should first examine the similarities between the two exercises, and after observing that the rhythms are nearly the same but the pitches are different, clap the rhythm to “Jim Along Josie” while saying counting or rhythm syllables. The teacher should not demonstrate “Jim Along Josie” because that would constitute rote teaching, and students do not become independent sight-readers when taught by rote. If students falter, they should go back to the previous step, which in this case was counting and clapping. The goal is for students to apply what they learned to new exercises without teacher demonstration.

Through consistent application of sound-before-sight teaching, students understand how musical notation represents musical sounds. As a result, they become exceptional music readers.

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