



YAMAHA

Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



Dr. George Wolfe

Saxophonist George Wolfe has performed extensively throughout the United States and has also concertized in Europe, Cyprus, Costa Rica, Canada, India, Korea and Japan. He has appeared as a soloist with such ensembles as the United States Navy Band, the Navy Band Brass Quintet, the Saskatoon Symphony, and the World Band at Disney World. He currently teaches at Ball State University and has presented master classes at such prestigious institutions as the Paris Conservatory and at Interlochen National Music Camp, and is the author of Preparatory Method for Saxophone. He is featured on several CD's, including five volumes of the recently released compact disk series America's Millennium Tribute to Adolphe Sax which includes some of the greatest names in classical saxophone artistry. His teacher, Eugene Rousseau, describes him as "an artist of exceptional ability and great sensitivity."

Practice Tips for Better Sight-reading

By Dr. George Wolfe

Sight-reading is a weakness for many student instrumentalists and is often the part of an audition that students dread the most. A few years ago I realized many students adopt a practice routine that is actually detrimental to good sight-reading! What follows is a list of common approaches that students take to practicing contrasted with what is required for successful sight-reading.

First, when practicing, students often stop if they commit a pitch or rhythm error and correct the mistake before continuing. Sight-reading requires that we recover from an error and proceed without stopping. I refer to this habit of constantly stopping for mistakes as "stop-on-error."

Second, wind instrumentalists often plan where they will breathe. Sight-reading does not allow students to plan breathing in advance. Players must learn to spot phrase endings when first reading a piece of music and to breathe without breaking the musical continuity. This point also applies to string players with respect to bowings and pianists with respect to fingerings.

Third, while practicing, students often "woodshed" the notes first and then strive for correct rhythm. Sight-reading demands just the opposite approach. Rhythmic accuracy must take precedence over pitch if students are going to keep their place with the rest of the ensemble.

Fourth, serious students tend to strive for perfection and feel dissatisfied if they cannot play a passage free from errors. For effective sight-reading, however, we must temporarily set aside our goal of perfection and accept the likelihood that errors will occur. Accuracy is sacrificed for continuity during the sight-reading exercise.

Finally, sight-reading requires that students consider phrasing, dynamics, musical expression, and style before technically mastering the music. Yet, during a typical practice session, many students appear to reserve the interpretative aspects of the music until after note and rhythmic problems are reasonably conquered.

This antithetical relationship between these student practice habits and the demands of sight-reading demonstrate how it is possible for students to perform well and yet be poor sight-readers. In fact, students that practice conscientiously as described may be doing the most to hurt their reading ability! Furthermore, teachers can inadvertently reinforce poor reading habits if they 1) stop students every time a playing error is made, 2) focus on technical passages without keeping sight of the musical phrase structure, 3) neglect musical interpretation until the student has technically mastered the etude, and 4) mark in breathing points before students have read through the exercise on their own. What follows are suggestions for improving sight-reading that may be helpful to both students and teachers.



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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. Think in terms of playing complete musical phrases, recovering in the middle of a passage if an error is made. Once you reach a logical stopping point, return to correct the error, then play the entire phrase again.
 2. Make a rhythmic exercise out of difficult passages. Before playing the passage, clap or sing the rhythm while tapping your foot until you can easily execute the passage.
 3. Look at entire sections (or movements) before breaking the piece into smaller units. Do not simply start at the beginning of an etude or solo and wade through it. Think about interpretation, tempo, style, dynamics, nuances, and phrasing, even when first attempting to play the exercise.
 4. Plan your breathing and fingerings only after you become familiar with the piece. When first reading an etude, look for logical phrase endings during which to breathe. Many students make errors while sight-reading because they run out of air in the middle of a phrase.
 5. Practice your etudes and solos patiently by choosing tempos within your reading capability. If you practice at too fast a tempo, you will reinforce bad reading habits and learn pitches and rhythms incorrectly.
 6. Return to etudes you were assigned one or two years ago. Before reading them, look for key changes, repeat signs, da capo markings, and tempo and dynamic changes and consider the interpretative style of the etude. Read them from beginning to end, recovering every time you make an error.
 7. Set perfection aside when sight-reading new or old material. Most often, your sight-reading ability will be judged by how well you capture the musical aspects of a piece despite pitch or rhythm errors you might make.
4. When having students sight-read, emphasize rhythmic accuracy before pitch accuracy. It is also good to have students clap through an exercise before playing it for the first time. But remember, it is equally important for them to avoid "stop-on-error" when clapping the exercise.
 5. Relate difficult passages to the overall musical context. You can, for example, explain how a difficult phrase is actually an embellishment of an earlier theme that appeared in simpler form. Or, the direction and momentum of a certain scale may be more important than the notes themselves. Recognizing such musical gestures is a definite advantage when sight-reading.
 6. Have students look for familiar scales, melodic sequences, arpeggios, and syncopated rhythms. This is one of the practical applications of music theory to performance. If the student can recognize familiar melodic patterns, they can read the music in larger units of beats or measures. This will better enable them to look ahead while sight-reading.
 7. Another way to train students to look ahead is to use a piece of paper to cover the staff two or three beats ahead of the student. This procedure can first be applied to exercises the student already knows, then later to new reading material.
 8. Help students with decisions on breathing or fingerings only after a few readings. Give them an opportunity to make these decisions on their own as they become familiar with the piece they are studying. Students must learn to identify standard places to breathe (or not to breathe) on their own during practice and when they sight-read.
 9. Point number eight above also applies to interpretation. Before playing an etude in a lesson, many of my younger students will ask me, "How does this go?" I usually reply, "How do you think it goes?" Students must learn to make musical decisions about the pieces they are playing if they are going to sight-read successfully. This can be done by understanding tempo and character markings, but also by sensing the mood or style of the piece they are about to perform.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The following procedures can be applied by teachers whenever feasible. I say "whenever feasible" because these suggestions do take additional time to apply. Time constraints, student attitudes, and other personal factors may make it difficult to utilize these techniques consistently with every student.

1. Avoid "stop-on-error" during lessons. Consider waiting until students reach a logical stopping point or phrase ending before pointing out their mistake. After they correct the error, have them play the entire phrase again to emphasize musical continuity.
2. Carefully consider the level of difficulty of the lesson material you assign. Increase the technical difficulty of lesson materials gradually so as not to impede reading.
3. In every lesson, take a moment to have students read part of an etude you will be assigning for the next lesson. In this way, a small part of every lesson is devoted to sightreading.

10. Finally, small ensemble rehearsals provide excellent opportunities to work on sight-reading. With each person supporting his own part, pressure is placed on all participants to keep up with the ensemble and recover from errors while playing. As a teacher, you can help students recover by calling out rehearsal letters or giving crucial down beats when the performance starts to go awry.

Concluding Remarks

Remember, sight-reading can be taught as well as learned through experience. Its demands, however, are very different from the practice habits adopted by many students. Careful attention to both teaching style and practice routine can help students be more successful at this important skill.