

# FESTIVAL SIGHT-READING 101

## *Tips on How to Prepare and Perform Sight-Reading at Large Group Instrumental Festivals*

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### **Why Sight-Reading Is Important**

The CMEA Central Section Board has decided to once again embrace the philosophy and spirit of the California State and NAFME National standard of sight-reading by requiring the activity at our festivals. We strongly believe that the skill of sight-reading is crucial in the development of every student through their journey as an enabled and skilled musician in our schools. A student with the ability to read music confidently and independently, will be far more likely to continue to play their instrument, or sing, by themselves or in an ensemble setting beyond their public school experience. If our ultimate goal is to truly educate children to be supporters and practitioners of the Arts and to keep music in their lives, then we must embrace the idea that a student with the ability to read music on their own is paramount in that end goal.

### **What is Sight-Reading**

It is the process of reading and performing a work of music without having seen it before. It is a tool by which students become confident in their own musical skills – to the point of being able to recognize and perform whole patterns at once. The discovery of new music can be very enjoyable for the students and the director. Sight Reading is a skill that can take them to a place where they are not dependent on someone else reading it to them first.

### **Classroom Preparation for Sight-Reading – Teaching Fundamentals!**

Most of us are doing the fundamental things in our classroom every day. Tell your students that reading new music for the first time isn't any different than reading a book for the first time. They wouldn't ask someone else to read a book to them first so that they could "hear how it goes". They would just read it! Reading, involves using words and symbols you already know, streaming them together in a different order to form a story. Music reading is just the same concept applying the knowledge of their instrument and music symbols to discover a "new story". Of course, in an Instrumental Ensemble, different instruments have different parts of the story. Put new music in front of your music students regularly. Include a sight-reading activity as part of their daily warm-up routine. Lay a foundation of scales, arpeggios, rhythm and short melodic melodies (chorales). Students need to practice the skill of sight reading and must go through the process regularly for them to be calm and confident when they enter the sight-reading room. Try to avoid letting your students listen to a recording or sing the music for them before they start new music. Here are a few things you can try:

- Teach Scales
- Rhythm – foundational for an ensemble to begin and end the piece together. Use a system for counting subdivisions. Count while fingering. Whole class rhythm exercises can be used to teach concert pitch and chords.
- Method books for the whole class
- Use chorales to help teach phrasing.
- Resources:
  - Download [www.sightreadingfactory.com](http://www.sightreadingfactory.com) One year subscription is \$34.99. If you have a television or projector screen, 8 measure or longer sight-reading exercises can be displayed though this cloud- based program or print and pass out
  - "[Rhythm Workouts](#)" by Gary Scudder is a fantastic resource. Consecutively works through more and more complicated rhythms and rests with easy to understand explanations.
  - "[The Sight Reading Book for Band](#)" by Jerry West. Wingert Jones Publications. 3 different levels.
  - Easier compositions in your library. High schools borrow music from Middle schools, Middle Schools from Elementary. Pass it out, read it, pass it in and put it back (return it). Some publishers will allow you to order music on approval – read it, send it back. (Will cost you shipping)

***The secret to being a good sight-reader – is having read it before.***

In other words, you know your scales and know how to count rhythm. You know what common music terms mean and you know your fingerings/sticking/bowing patterns on your instrument. All because you have encountered, learned and practiced them in class.

## How to Sight Read

- Practice
  - Students need to practice sight-reading (See classroom preparation for Sight-Reading-Teaching Fundamentals)
- Verbal Systems
  - Below are three verbal sight-reading systems that work for some teachers. Adopt one or create your own. Tell students to apply the formula and then finger through everything as you take 2-3 minutes to study your score

### 1.) STARS

**S** = Key Signature  
**T** = Tempo  
**A** = Accidentals  
**R** = Rhythms/Repeats  
**S** = Style

### 2.) PKRSD

**P** = Pulse  
**K** = Key Signature  
**R** = Rhythms  
**S** = Style  
**D** = Dynamics

### 3.) TKTTRS

**T** = Title  
**K** = Key Signature  
**T** = Time signature  
**T** = Tempo  
**R** = Road Map  
**S** = Stylistic Markings

## Director Sight Reading Preparation

- Practice Sight-Reading Scores.
- Open up your score at the same time your students turn their music over. You need the practice as well.
- Upon opening up a score you need to be able to within 2 - 3 minutes of private study:
  - Discover where your students may have a glitch in their reading.
  - Use one of the Verbal sight-reading systems above (or create your own) to give a heads up in “your director talk” to your students: Be methodical and clear
    - Examples: We’re in concert Eb – trumpet your “Bb’s” are first valve. Flutes there is an accidental “Db” at measure 7-pinky only. Clarinets you have the melody at measure 20. Trumpets you take the melody over at measure 29. Baritones you have a counter melody at measure 40. The phrases are mostly 4 measures long. There is a sudden *pp* at measure 55. There is a syncopated rhythm at measure 17. Key change at letter “D”. Form is ABA – fast-slow-fast. The title is “Cops and Robbers” what do you think the music is going to try to express? Most all notes followed by a rest – end on the rest. Etcetera.
- Sight Reading Conducting is not the same as “Performance” conducting.
  - Right Hand may be more subdivided – especially if there are syncopated rhythms. Style should be indicated.
  - When practicing rhythm only with your ensemble, conduct the exact rhythm with your baton. Could they figure out the rhythm by watching you conduct?
  - Size of pattern to help indicate dynamics
  - Left hand may be needed to emphasize longer notes, indicate phrasing and of course cue.
  - Whole body to help with dynamics
- Project confidence and expect that your students will do well. They trust you. Be positive. Convince them that they are virtually back in the music room at school and there is no reason to not be confident. Tell them to have fun.

## CMEA CENTRAL SECTION Sight-reading Guidelines and Procedures

The CMEA Central Section Festival Sight-Reading Evaluation room is closed to the public. Only the adjudicator, room helpers, the host, the director and the students are permitted in the room. Anyone else is admitted by the invitation of the director only. The scoresheet has no numerical scores and categories are assigned simple ratings. The sight-reading rating assigned is never distributed and is not included as part of the performance rating. However, the rating is recorded as part of CMEA Central Sections records. Ensembles who choose not to perform in Sight-Reading cannot receive a Unanimous Superior rating.

The following categories are judged:

- TECHNICAL ACCURACY (Articulation --- Bowing, Correct Notes, Note Values, Rhythm Figures, Signatures)
- FLEXIBILITY (Balance, Precision, Response to Director)
- INTERPRETATION (Expression, Phrasing, Style, Tempo)
- MUSICAL EFFECT (Confidence, Fluency, Intonation, Tone)

## PROCEDURE

1. Students should enter the Sight-Reading room in a disciplined, quiet and orderly manner. *The sight-reading adjudicator is watching.*
2. Students find their seats and place their performance music under their chairs. It is acceptable to move your top players deeper into the section to help support weaker players. (Top 3 trumpets reseat into sitting next to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> part players.) Be sure percussionists know which instrument they will be playing before going in.
3. While the students are taking their seats, the adjudicator will ask the director to quickly peruse and choose one of the two sight reading selections in the classification that the director chose at registration. *In 2020 directors may choose any music in any classification to sight read - regardless of registration classification.*
  - a. Classification I – Grade .5 and 1 music
  - b. Classification II – Grade 1.5 and 2 music
  - c. Classification III – Grade 2.5 and 3 music
4. The adjudicator will give instructions to the students, setting the tone for a positive and encouraging experience.
5. Room assistants will pass out the sight-reading folders. The students are not to open the folders but need to be sure they have received the correct folder for their instrument.
6. The adjudicator will issue these instructions:  
*Please open your folders and remove (music selection). Does everyone have the right part for their instrument? Percussion are you set? Are there any problems?*
7. The adjudicator will hand the conductor the score at this time.
  - a. The conductor will have up to 8 minutes to study the score and instruct the group. The adjudicator will inform you when it's time to start sight-reading. It's okay to use less time in the review.

### During the eight minutes of review

Study the score for a minute or two. While the director is studying, students are silently looking it over also, applying the system that the director has practiced in the classroom. Students should literally finger their way through the piece.

- The director talks them through the piece, acquainting them with as many of the details as time allows (2-3 minutes)
- Questions from Students to the Conductor (2 minutes)
- Students can quietly discuss the music among themselves (1 minute)

*During the 8 minutes of review, follow these guidelines:*

#### **What the director MAY do:**

Talk about the piece.

- Point out the key signatures
- Review time signatures
- Run quickly through the procedure used to practice sight reading in the classroom
- Provide as much detail as possible that will allow your students to successfully read the music

#### **What the director MAY NOT do:**

Perform the piece or phrase

- Sing
- Count
- Tap
- Conduct
- Mark the score
- Verbally correct any incorrect rhythm or note.
- Do anything other than use descriptive words

### What the students MAY do:

- Practice a difficult rhythm
- Count
- Clap
- Tap
- Sing any part of the work
- In the last minute, confer quietly with other students

### What the students MAY NOT do:

- *The students may not play the sight-reading music at any point during the preparation time*
- Make any marks on the music

8. You may warm-up your ensemble. *Suggestion: play a memorized scale in the key of the sight-reading piece.*
9. Perform the Sight-Reading piece.  
*The director may call out rehearsal numbers or letters if needed. Other than that, all communication needs to be done through conducting.*  
Listen to each other and the director, watch the director, GO FOR EVERY NOTE AND MARK ON THE PAGE – don't give up and Count, Count, Count!!!!
10. Feedback from the adjudicator and/or mini clinic will begin. Let your students know that the adjudicator may want to engage with them and it's okay to respond back!
11. At the conclusion of the adjudicators feedback, all music will be placed back into the folder and carefully closed. Follow instructions as to how to pass in the music.
12. Exit the room quietly and in an orderly fashion. *It is the final impression you will leave with the adjudicator before he assigns your rating*

### Final Thoughts

When preparing to sight-read at festival, the most important thing to remember is that there needs to be a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere, having a similar feel to your own music room.....sure, you are physically in a different place, but as their director, you can take fear and worry out of the picture. Be confident of your own musical abilities. If you enjoy the challenge of sight-reading as a director – they will learn to enjoy it also.

Many directors have said that their students look forward to Sight-Reading during a rehearsal. It gives them a chance to play something different from the current music that they have been preparing for a performance. They liked the challenge and when they held it together, they were extremely proud of their efforts. It was just fun for them! The more they sight-read, the more confident they got and the more they wanted to do it. When the director approaches sight-reading with a positive, can-do attitude, the students will more likely be successful.

Compiled by,  
Peggy Biller  
CMEA Central Section, Kern County Festival Coordinator



# CMEA CENTRAL SECTION FESTIVAL INSTRUMENTAL SIGHT-READING PROCEDURE

- **The Ensemble enters room quietly and finds places in set-up ..... (2-3 minutes)**
  - Director selects music from the 2 selections in their Classification Level and informs adjudicator.
  - All music brought in by students will stay closed, under their chairs
  - Percussionist bring their own performance equipment (Snare drum, crash or sus. cymbals, etc.)/sticks/mallets/"percussion toys" into the Sight-Reading room. Bass Drum, xylophone/marimba/bells, and maybe timpani will be in the room. Rating will not be lowered if something in the sight-reading music is not available to perform on.
  - Sight-reading room helpers' pass out music folders to the ensemble members
  
- **Adjudicator instructs and encourages students ..... (1 minute)**

*Please open your folders and remove (music selection). Does everyone have the right part for their instrument? Percussion are you set? Are there any problems? Have Fun!*
  
- **Prepare, discuss, and talk about the selection ..... (up to 8 minutes)**
  - Below is a basic guide for using the time
    - Director and students study the music (1-2 Minutes)
    - While the director is studying, students are silently looking it over also, applying the system that the director has practiced in the classroom. Students should literally finger their way through the piece.
    - The director talks them through the piece, acquainting them with as many of the details as time allows (2-3 minutes)
    - Questions from Students to the Conductor (2 minutes)
    - Students can quietly discuss the music among themselves – without leaving their chairs (1 minute)

*(Student/Director can do and cannot do at this time are listed below)*
  
- **Warm-up ensemble for Sight-Reading Performance..... (1 minute)**

*(Consider playing a memorized scale in the same key as selection, quick tune)*
  
- **Perform Selected Piece! ..... (up to 5 minutes)**
  
- **Feedback by "Sight Reading" Adjudicator ..... (5+ minutes)**

*Depending on the performance time of the selected sight-reading piece, and the preparation time used the feedback and/or clinic could be lengthier*
  
- **Return music to folders, Pass folders in, Quietly Exit room**

**Total Time: 23 minutes**

➤ **What the director MAY do:**

- Talk about the piece.
- Point out the key signatures
- Review time signatures
- Run quickly through the procedure used to practice sight reading in the classroom
- Provide as much detail as possible that will allow your students to successfully read the music

➤ **What the students MAY do:**

- Practice a difficult rhythm
- Count
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➤ **What the director MAY NOT do:**

- Perform the piece or phrase
- Sing
- Count
- Conduct
- Tap
- Verbally correct any incorrect rhythm or note.
- Do anything other than use descriptive words
- Mark the score

➤ **What the students MAY NOT do:**

- *The students may not play the sight-reading music at any point during the preparation time*
- Make any marks on the music

## **SIGHT-READING PERFORMANCE STANDARDS (large group festivals)**

### **I – Superior**

This rating represents the finest conceivable performance for the event and the level of participants being judged; worthy of being recognized as among the very best.

- All the parts are played or sung accurately and with musical sensitivity. The secondary parts of instrumental compositions are played with confidence. Balance is maintained between voice parts of choral compositions. When technical errors occur, they are quickly recognized by the performers and the same mistake does not occur twice. The selection is not only performed with technical accuracy but with good attention to its expressive features.

### **II – Excellent**

This rating reflects an unusual performance in many respects but not one worthy of the highest due to minor defects in performance or ineffective interpretation. It is, however, a performance of distinct quality.

- This is an authentic reading on the whole, but one which is marred by a considerable number of technical errors. The section leaders carry the group through well, but there is a lack of precision and solidity because many in the group are not performing with confidence. The playing lacks the fluency and finesse of a Superior performance. The rhythms are not always clearly marked. Instrumentalists are careless as to articulation; singers fail to enunciate clearly. Expressive features are not carefully noted.

### **III – Good**

This rating is for a good performance, but one that is not excellent. The performance shows accomplishment and marked promise, but is lacking in one or more essential qualities.

- This is not a clean performance by any means. There are many wrong notes. Key signatures are not recognized; wrong intervals are sung; rhythmic patterns are not correctly performed. There is little attention given to expressional features. A few leaders hold the section together but there are many who frequently get the ensemble together for a fresh start. Such a group might show qualities which would enable it to give a fine performance of a prepared section, but it obviously needs more experience and training in the reading of unfamiliar music.

### **IV – Fair**

This rating describes a performance that shows some obvious weaknesses.

- This performance is full of technical errors. Many students are lost a good deal of the time. It reveals weakness in the fundamentals of tone production, rhythm, articulation, enunciation and other basic factors. There will probably be numerous stops or at least places which approach a complete breakdown. It would be of little use for the judge to attempt to list specific errors. His/her comments should be encouraging and offer suggestions for a course of training which would prepare the students to read with greater confidence and assurance the next time they have the opportunity to read at sight.

### **V – Poor or Needs Improvement**

This rating indicates a performance that reveals much room for improvement. The director should reevaluate his/her methods with those of more mature organizations.

- This rating is rarely used even by the most critical judges. It indicates a performance in which the students reveal almost a complete lack of preparedness and understanding. The selections they attempt at sight are barely recognizable and such a group will often give up before it is even completed.



# Sight Reading - Orchestra or Band

Final Rating

Use no plus or minus signs in final rating

PERFORMANCE TIME /ORDER: \_\_\_\_\_  
 SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_  
 GROUP: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DIRECTOR: \_\_\_\_\_  
 NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN ENSEMBLE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 GRADES REPRESENTED: 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12  
 SCHOOL ENROLLMENT: \_\_\_\_\_  
 LEVEL: ADVANCED INTERMEDIATE BEGINNING ONLY GROUP  
 HOURS OF REHEARSAL PER WEEK: \_\_\_\_\_  
 CLASSIFICATION LEVEL: \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADJUDICATOR: \_\_\_\_\_

Adjudicator will grade principal items in each respective area: I-Superior, II-Excellent, III-Good, IV-Fair, V-Poor. Written Comments must deal with fundamental principles, be constructive and justify the rating given. The Final Rating must represent a preponderance of small caption ratings.

TECHNICAL ACCURACY (Articulation --- Bowing, Correct Notes, Note Values, Rhythm Figures, Signatures)

FLEXIBILITY (Balance, Precision, Response to Director)

INTERPRETATION (Expression, Phrasing, Style, Tempo)

MUSICAL EFFECT (Confidence, Fluency, Intonation, Tone)

GENERAL COMMENTS

\*May be continued on the other side

DATE \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Adjudicator \_\_\_\_\_