

Improving Piano Sight-Reading Skills of College Student

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Introduction

Sight-reading plays an important role in instrument playing. Sight-reading has been defined as “the ability to read and perform music in first sight, i.e., without preparatory study of the piece” (Apel, 1962, p. 679). Sight-reading could be considered one of the most important skills in piano playing. A pianist with good sight-reading ability learns his or her repertoire much faster in comparison to performers with poor sight-reading skills. Therefore, if pianists who sight read poorly spend too much time in learning a new piece, they might lose opportunities to play in an ensemble or to work with other instrumentalists.

The development of sight-reading ability still remains a mystery. Piano teachers often suggest the only way to improve sight-reading skill is to sight-read a piece of music daily and play a variety of music. However, playing an ample mass of repertoire may not necessarily develop sight-reading skill. “Improving one's sight-reading ability is not as simple as the anecdotal evidence suggests, preliminary evidence from prior studies supports the basic notion that sight-reading ability improves as experience with this type of music performance increases”(Lehmann & Ericsson, 2011, p. 7).

Sight-reading is a complex process, which involves elements such as pattern recognition, fingering determination, eye movement, “prediction” ability, and inner hearing. “More efficient and effective procedures may be possible for teaching sight-reading to instrumentalists. Before such procedures can be devised, however, there is a need for a greater understanding of the sight-reading process” (Elliot, 1982, p. 3). This study initially had two primary purposes: to determine how good sight-readers read and to discover how sight-reading skills can be taught. These purposes were to uncover

an effective way to teach sight-reading. With these research questions in mind, I video recorded a number of college level (graduate) piano majors to assess their sight-reading skills and interviewed them. However, as I collected my data, I found that none of the four pianists I interviewed had specific strategies for piano sight-reading. They had never worked on their sight-reading skills specifically. I concluded that sight-reading skill is not emphasized in piano teaching. Instead, I gained a better understanding of the difference in reading's habits of outstanding, good, and average sight-readers. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to examine the habits of piano sight-readers, and my analysis was guided by the following questions: What decisions do pianists make when they are sight-reading? What thoughts do pianists have when they are sight-reading? What helped them become outstanding sight-readers? What comparison can be made between outstanding, good, and poor sight-readers.

Literature Review

Sloboda *et al.*, 1998

Compared to other instruments such as wind instruments, there is no one-to-one correspondence for piano players between a key and the finger to be used. Determination of the finger choice is a complicated process and its skill is developed over a long period of time. This study examined how pianists determine their finger choice during piano sight-reading. They studied the fingering choices of sixteen pianists sight-reading an unfingered score of Czerny's piano studies. The pianists represented three levels of expertise. The researchers measured their performance accuracy and fingering consistency. They discovered that performance accuracy and fingering consistency corresponded to the pianist's expertise and was negatively correlated with the difficulty

of the fingerings. The authors concluded that proficiency in sight-reading requires exposure to a vast variety of repertoire, so that familiar visual patterns of notation can be recognized and performed effectively.

Lehmann *et al.*, 1993

In this paper, the authors discussed the trend of specialization in specific areas within the profession of music. For example, some pianists focus on solo performances, others play with orchestras, and others focus on accompaniment. The requirements for these areas are different. In order to be successful in a major, there are certain skills that a pianist needs to master, such as improvisation, sight-reading, and memorization. They argued whether accompaniment is a specialized knowledge. In the researcher's perspective, accompanying represented a standardized position, which requires expertise in sight-reading skill.

This study discussed the differences in sight-reading ability between pianists specializing in accompanying, and pianists specializing in performance. The researchers studied the sight-reading of two accompaniments to pre-recorded flute solos by sixteen pianists; half of them specialized in piano performance and the other half in accompaniment. They discovered that pianists with a specialization in performance performed more poorly than accompanists in the beginning. However, their performance became better in the second read-through. The authors concluded that individual differences in sight-reading ability might depend on the pianist's professional specialization.

Elliott, 1982

According to Elliott (1982), several music education researchers discovered that weakness in sight-reading is a major problem in public school music programs. There is a need for a thorough understanding of the sight-reading process in order to develop efficient procedures for teaching sight-reading to instrumentalists. This paper investigated the relationships between instrumental sight-reading ability and seven variables: technical proficiency, rhythm reading ability, sight singing ability, cumulative grade point average, cumulative music theory grade point average, cumulative performance jury grade point average, and major instrument grade point average. The author designed a test to measure the abilities of thirty-two undergraduate wind instrumentalists in sight-reading, technical proficiency, sight singing and rhythm reading. Data relating to the other variables were collected from the student's permanent records. Of all the seven variables, the results indicated that sight-reading ability is mostly correlated to rhythm-reading ability. The research concluded that rhythm-reading ability and performance jury scores tend to be the best indicator of one's sight-reading ability.

Waters *et al.*, 1998

This study investigated the factors determining a pianist's sight-reading ability. They measured (1) verbal protocols such as previewing a piece of music to be sight-read; (2) the speed of naming individual notes; (3) recall accuracy of briefly presented chords; (4) the time to make a same or different judgment of two repeatedly presented sequences; (5) priming effects in chord judgment tasks; (6) same or different judgments in comparing musical notation with an auditory sequence; and (7) performance in musical problem-solving tasks, in which a missing bar from a phrase needs to be identified. The results indicated that two factors correlated with sight-reading skills: recognizing pattern

and comparing visual musical notation with auditory sequences. The relation of priming effect with sight-reading is weak. They concluded that ability to use auditory representations and developing prediction skills were important skills in musical sight-reading.

Fredrich, 1950

In this paper, the author discussed the ways in which sight-reading and memorizing are related to each other based on his own experience. He stated that to become a good sight-reader, one must have a good memory and the ability to see through the musical symbols. In the sight-reading process, the reader continuously drew upon his memory in recognizing the symbols. Therefore, the reader must understand the meaning behind note patterns, so that they can easily recognize and define the patterns and structure of the pieces. He mentioned that understanding the structure of the music is very important to good reading. When instrumentalists are memorizing, they must know the structure of the piece, the exact sequence of the patterns, chords, phrases, and musical ideas. He claimed that difficulties with sight-reading and memorizing are normally due to lack of reader ability to look through the symbols. A pianist who reads music without comprehension is not adding to his or her knowledge. Therefore, teachers must teach students the musical ideas behind the notes, so that students can sight-read and memorize independently.

Summary

The five articles in my literature review discussed the process of sight-reading. Pianists with good sight-reading skills were able to recognize familiar patterns in the notation. In order to be able to recognize patterns, students must understand musical ideas

behind the notes. Once players understood the meaning of the notes, they were able to memorize the patterns and eventually recognize them. Additionally, auditory and prediction skills will help pianists to become better sight-readers. Pianists who score higher in juries tend to have better sight-reading skills. It was also found that pianists who specialize in accompaniment may have better sight-reading skills than pianists who specialize in performance.

Plan for Implementation

Design

The type of research that used in this study was a qualitative case study design. The case examined was the sight-reading habits of graduate piano majors. This research was constructed through interviews with four pianists majoring in piano performance in graduate program at a large, eastern university in the United States. Along with the interviews, video recordings were made of each participant's sight-reading process.

Procedures

An email was sent to all graduate students majoring in piano performance. The email indicated that there would be two sessions of interviews and video recording of their sight-reading process. Four students responded to the email and were able to schedule a time with the researcher. These students became the participants for the study.

The first interview was conducted before the video recording of each participant's sight-reading process. After video recording their sight-reading, the researcher and the participant went through the video together as part of the second interview.

In the sight-reading session, participants were required to sight-read two different pieces of repertoire. A member of the piano faculty recommended preparing two

contrasting repertoire, one difficult and one easy, so that each participant's sight-reading skill would be appropriately assessed. The more difficult piece selected was Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E flat major. It was chosen for its four parts and complex rhythmic patterns. The less difficult piece used was Clementi's Sonata Op.50, no.3 and chosen for its slower tempo and expressivity and less complicated rhythmic patterns. Due to time constraints, neither of these two-pieces were presented in their entirety, instead, the first two pages of each piece were selected. The first two pages of each piece contained the theme, as well as contrasting dynamics, articulations, and rhythms.

Following each participant's sight-reading session, the participant recordings and evaluation sheets were sent to piano faculty members in the School of Music. Based on the faculty responses on the evaluation sheet, participants were categorized into three groups; either outstanding sight-readers, or average sight-readers. One of the piano faculty suggested that I should design a rubrics, in order to assess the sight-reading skills of the participant more effectively. She recommended me to include the categories such as the accuracy of the note and rhythm notation, musical expression, tonality, and tempo.

Interviews

There were two sessions of interviews. In the first interview, participants were asked questions above on their thoughts about how they thought they developed their sight-reading skill as well as their daily routine of working on their sight-reading skills. Example questions from the first interview included: What do you think is an effective way to become a good sight-reader? Did you work on your sight-reading? How often? Did your teacher or friends teach you how to sight-read? If so, how? Was it helpful? Or did you learn by yourself? What are your goals in sight-reading this piece of music?

What do you intend to achieve? Musical ideas? Rhythm and note accuracy? Tempo? Articulation? Each of the participants was given two minutes to read through the pieces. They were allowed to test their finger position on the keyboard. However, they were not allowed to play the piece. After video recording participants' sight-reading process, the researcher played back the video and watched it with each participant. The second interviews took place while watching each participant's video. The second interview was focused on thought content while sight-reading, and as well as their sight-reading habits. Example questions for the second interview: What were you thinking when you played this measure or this note? Do you read measure by measure? Note by note? Fingering? Rhythm pattern? Chord progression? Do you think you achieved your goal for the read-through of each piece?

Participants

Four graduate students majoring in piano performance program from a large eastern university of United State. Two of the participants (Doug and Hannah) were master students and two of them (Julie and Helen) were in the DMA program. Doug and Helen were teaching assistant. Doug and Helen both taught individual piano lesson for non-piano major students. Helen also taught piano group lesson for non-music major students. Doug and Helen taught their student to sight-read hymns, because all non-piano major were required to pass the piano proficiency test, and one of the test is able to sight read hymns.

Data Analysis

According to Fielding & Fielding (1986), collecting information using a variety of sources and methods is one aspect of what is called *triangulation* (as cited in Maxwell,

2005) “This strategy reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (Maxwell, 2005, p.112). Triangulation of the data was made by gathering information from each participant’s perspective and summarizing statements from segments of the interviews. Member checking was accomplished through sending the transcripts and summary to each participant for their input. Audio recordings of each individual were sent to piano faculty members for evaluation. According to the evaluations by the piano faculty, participants were categorized into three groups. Comparisons were made within these three categories. The data collected for this study included the following:

- Video recordings of each participant’s sight-reading performances (Transcribed)
- Video recordings of individual interviews (Transcribed)
- Field notes from direct observation of the participants.

Include a few sentences describing what you did with the data; how you analyzed it.

Discussion

According to the evaluations by the faculty, Doug was identified as an outstanding sight-reader, Helen was recognized as a good sight-reader, and Hannah and Julie were classified as average sight-readers. In the interviews, Doug and Helen expressed confidence in their sight-reading skills. Helen said that her sight-reading skill is “naturally born.” After Helen finished sight-reading the two pieces, she felt very uncomfortable with her sight-reading skills. Doug felt the same way when he finished sight-reading the difficult piece. However, Doug changed his mind and thought that he actually did well after he watched his videos.

According to field notes, all four of the participants were satisfied with their performance of the easier piece, Clementi's Sonata Op. 50, No3. All four believed that they achieved most of their goals, which were note and rhythm accuracy. In contrast, only one participant, Doug, found that his performance was adequate in the difficult piece (Bach's St. Anne Prelude and Fugue).

Through an analysis of the results, four themes emerged from the data, including "Never been taught", "Sight-read more", "Note and rhythm accuracy", and "Persistence in working sight-reading skill."

Never been taught/ No specific strategies

In the interviews, none of the participants reported that they had been taught how to sight-read by their piano teacher. "My piano teacher never taught me how to sight read. However, my piano professor in my undergraduate just mentioned to me in general that when I am sight-reading, I should play it really slow. Also, she asked me to strive for note and rhythm accuracy. I think it is helpful, because when I try to play it with a slow tempo, I noticed more things," said Hannah. Helen agreed that sight-reading more slowly might help the accuracy of rhythm and pitch. She mentioned that she would subdivide the beat of the piece. "Sight-read in a slow tempo, so that you will have time to prepare for the next measure," Julie said. In the conversations with my participants, most of them believed that sight-reading is an innate ability. "It was born naturally," according to Helen, "I think some pianist just have more talent in sight-reading and I don't," stated Hannah. Basically, none of the participants have a specific strategy for sight-reading. They followed the general ideas provided by their teacher, such as sight-reading at slow tempo, looking for accidentals, and paying attention to the time signature."

Sight-read more

Doug stated that the most effective way to improve sight-reading skills is to do it more often. “The more you do, the more you become better,” Doug said. Hannah agreed that sight-reading more repertoires is the only way to improve sight-reading skill. “I think that spending an hour each day sight-reading a random repertoire is probably the effective way.” Helen said, “I think that by sight-reading two systems of hymns everyday will help to improve the sight-reading skill.” Doug agreed that sight-reading hymns is helpful for improving sight-reading, “I taught my students to sight-read hymns. I think it is helpful, because hymns were written in a consistent pattern and using regular chord progressions. I also witnessed their improvement through sight-reading hymns,” he said.

Note and rhythm accuracy

When approaching sight-reading, the participants were very conscious of accuracy of note and rhythm. Most were more concerned with getting the right notes and correct rhythm than they were over the musical ideas, dynamics, tempo, and articulation in the pieces. “When I come to sight-reading, note and rhythm accuracy is always my concern,” according to Hannah. “The accuracy of notes and rhythms is my first priority. Then musical shape and the last will be the articulations,” stated Doug. All four participants agreed that musical ideas were least important.

Persistence in working on sight-reading skill

In the interview, all of my participants agreed that sight-reading is an important skill. “Sight-reading is definitely an important skill for a pianist. If you have excellent sight-reading skills, you have more performing opportunities than others,” Doug said.

Some participants seemed to believe that that they have poor sight-reading skills. These pianists seem to feel that they have to spend a lot of time learning repertoire. However, none of the participants reported that they have ever worked on their sight-reading skills. “I never work on my sight-reading skill specifically, but because I play in church, I have to sight-read and learn a new piece every week,” Helen shared. All of the pianists mentioned that their previous teachers all had them sight read pieces that they are going to learn, but they only get to do when given new repertoire. “I do not work on my sight-reading but I get to sight-read when I have to play with in an ensemble or asked to accompany other instrumentalist,” Julie said. Doug also mentioned “I did not work on my sight-reading specifically, but every now and then there is be some students come in and asked if I can accompany them, and I have to sight-read right away.”

Sight-Reading Habits

An important goal of this study was to discover the difference in reading habits between the average and outstanding piano sight-readers. Doug reported that he read by chord progression. However, Hannah, Helen, and Julie reported that they read note by note. In the sight-reading process, when Hannah hit a wrong note, she tended to stop, and go back, and try to correct it. The same phenomenon happened with Julie and Helen. The similarities among the four pianists were looking for sudden changes in the piece, accidentals, and looking ahead to the most complicated part in the piece. Julie mentioned something different form other pianists, “When I get a new piece from the instrumentalist that I work with, I then listen to this piece before I play it. So that I get the gist of the piece.”

Conclusions

Decision making. When the participants first glanced through the pieces of music, they mentioned that note and rhythm accuracy were their first priority. Musical ideas were their least important consideration in playing the piece. However, there was a paradox found in the cases of Helen and Doug. They eventually paid attention to the expressive marks and tried to express musical ideas as well. In the evaluation sheets, piano faculty indicated that Helen and Doug's playing reflected musical ideas from the piece.

Thoughts while sight-reading. In the second interview, the researcher went through the video with each participant, paused and asked them about their thoughts while playing at a specific measure. Doug said that there was a measure where he noticed a tempo change, but he was unable to make the adjustment therefore he continued with the same tempo. Helen mentioned a spot where she instantly decided to use a specific fingering. "When I first glanced through the piece, I was not aware that might be a fingering conflict. However, my instinct told me to use second finger," said Helen. "I stopped because I heard I played the wrong note, so I went back and played it again," Hannah stated. Julie said, "I saw the rhythm is very complicated and I knew I would not be able to make it, therefore I tried to only play the top note (the melody line),"

What helped to develop outstanding sight-reading skills. Doug was evaluated as outstanding sight-reader. In general, he did not receive any formal training in piano sight-reading. He was asked to sight-read by his formal teacher only when he was going to learn the new repertoire. Doug said he thought that the reason he has good sight-reading skills is because his previous teacher was very strict, and asked him to read faster and more accurately in lessons.

From my observations and analysis of data, I found that although all four pianists received solid training in piano technique, their sight-reading skills are varied. All began learning piano at a very young age, and had studied piano for more than twenty years. All had numerous experiences in accompanying, including working with instrumentalists, ensembles, and church choirs. They also all had been giving piano lessons for five years or more. In the interview, all four pianists shared the same perspective and ideas about sight-reading. However, their sight-reading skills varied, as well as their sight-reading habits.

To summarize, outstanding pianist focused on chord progressions when sight-reading. Good and average sight-reader reads note by note. In this study, it is clear that sight-reading skills and techniques were not emphasized in the participant's piano training. Participants did not know exactly how their sight-reading skills developed. Although two of the pianist mentioned they found teaching their students to sight-read hymns were helpful, none of the pianists had ever been trained using this method themselves.

Further research needs to be conducted in order to determine if and/or how sight-reading can be taught. Ideas from the current study could be explored in more depth; for example, considering whether sight-reading hymns is helpful to develop piano sight-reading skills. Another consideration could be to examine whether or not reading chord progressions will help students to anticipate the melody and chords of the piece. In addition, examining sight-reading strategies for other instrumentalist might be helpful in gaining a better understanding different ways that instrumentalists approach sight-reading. Also, exploring of non-university teaching settings could be insightful and enlightening.

The result of my study leads me to believe that there is more room in understanding how to improve one's sight-reading skills.

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