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## **Achieving the “Effortless Performance” Using Dee Hansen’s Progression of Music Literacy**

### **Theory in the Practice Room and in the Rehearsal Hall**

Time for battle! All of us have encountered a passage in our music that has caused the “fight or flight” response. During these passages, our muscles tense, our heart rates increase (along with our tempo), and we sometimes stop playing all together. Occasionally, our muscles will lock up, which causes the overall tempo to drag. Despite hours of working on that same darn passage, we cannot match our performances to simulate those that we hear on Your Tube posts of the concerts at Carnegie Hall. Sound familiar?

Here is the secret. Our brains need time to send signals to our muscles in order to take in information and coordinate an exterior response based on that information. All individuals have an optimum speed-the fastest speed that one can perform a task with the fewest mistakes. If that optimum speed suddenly pushed to work at a dramatically higher pace, the brain does one of two things: attempts to process the information faster creating more errors (fight) or cancels signals to certain muscles to protect it from over processing (flight).

Dee Henson, author of *The Music and Literacy Connection* (MENC, Rowman, and Littlefield), argues that the human brain and, in turn, the muscles in the human body process information best if the complexity level of music literacy GRADUALLY increases. Figure 1 (located on the next page) illustrates **Hansen’s Progression of Music Literacy Theory**.

**Figure 1: Hansen’s Progression of Music Literacy Theory**

Cognitive Level	Title of Music Literacy Level	Traits of Music Literacy Level
Low	<b>Emerging</b>	<p><b>Phonological Awareness-</b> ability to discriminate between sounds (high vs. low; loud vs. soft).</p> <p><b>Phonemic Awareness-</b> ability to understand the smallest units of language and sound in isolation.</p>
Middle	<b>Decoding</b>	<p><b>Sight Identification-</b> ability to recognize “high-utility common music symbols by glancing at them” (Chappell, 46).</p> <p><b>Orthographic Awareness-</b> ability to read all of the music symbols as a complete language with little study/practice time at a slow tempo.</p> <p><b>Cueing System Awareness-</b> ability to combine all of the music symbols together at a slow tempo to form a complete musical idea that makes sense in the current musical setting.<sup>1</sup></p>
High	<b>Fluency</b>	<p>Ability to clearly express musical ideas with a complete understanding of the artistic and fundamental aspects of the music at a slow tempo.</p> <p>Ability to gradually increase the tempo on the metronome after 3 to 5 repetitions enabling the mind and the body to relax while simultaneously increasing the complexity level of the current task. Ability to achieve an “effortless performance” that is enjoyable and makes sense to both the audience and the performers (Chappell, 46-47).</p>

<sup>1</sup> This can occur in a solo with accompaniment, a chamber ensemble, or a large ensemble.

Most of us love listening to professional recordings on our iPods and watching professional performances on You Tube. This is how we select the music that we REALLY want to learn and ultimately perform. We become so excited and impatient to recreate these performances that we sometimes skip the “decoding” stage and speed right to the end of the fluency stage (“effortless performance”). Such an action can lead to muscle lock, muscle tension, phasing and intonation problems, incorrect posture and playing technique, and an overwhelming amount of pitch and rhythm errors (Chappell, 47). Can we REALLY achieve an “effortless performance” based on the preceding criteria? Not really.

Think of an Olympic distance runner. Yes, to an extent, we musicians are all athletes! Every athlete has an optimum tempo of performance. This “just right” balance among the athlete’s speed, form, breathing rate, heart rate, and pacing allows him or her to sprint a longer distance over a more extended period of time without injury. The best runners gradually push their optimum tempo higher allowing their brains and muscles to adapt to a slightly more demanding level of performance. If the optimum tempo is pushed in small increments, the athlete gets used to the new tempo faster leading to a smoother and more effective transition to the final desired product. Furthermore, he or she gets less frustrated and experiences less muscle strain because his or her brain and muscles do not feel immediately overwhelmed (Craig, 1).

When approaching new music in our practice sessions, rehearsals or private lessons, most of us subconsciously go through Hansen’s emerging stage. Shockingly, many of us struggle with the last transition between the last portion of the decoding stage (cueing awareness) and the first level of the fluency stage. This situation most often occurs in chamber music and in late romantic, 20<sup>th</sup> century, and contemporary solo literature where all of the parts are equally difficult and completely independent of each other.

Regardless of our current ability level, there is a way that we can achieve higher fluidity, better accuracy, and better memorization in the material that we intend to perform. First of all, we must go

through the entire decoding stage and fluency stage. Second, we must GRADUALLY increase our optimum tempo so our brains and our muscles can be “tricked” into performing more demanding tasks.

One of the best ways to approach a performance piece is to use the same process that a high school student would use during the sight reading portion of an All State audition. Carefully studying the music prior to initially playing it helps improve one’s cognition, which improves the flexibility of one’s fine motor programming and gross motor programming skills.<sup>2</sup> As a result, all of the muscles become more relaxed when approaching new and complicated material (Evans, 2-3). As these motor patterns gradually become more in sync with the brain’s signals, the body gets stronger and more limber improving efficiency and fluency (Evans, 2-3). Another advantage of using sight reading skills to approach performance material is the establishment of the meter and a clear steady beat, which help the performer recover after making a mistake during a concert (Saxton, 24). Better sight reading skills also create better input skills-“skills that sight readers use to collect information” and process that information prior to “output or performance” (Saxton, 24). Figure 2 contains a methodological process on how to improve one’s input skills and sight reading skills.

**Figure 2: Progression of Steps that will Improve Input/Sight Reading Skills**

1. Talk yourself through the music first. Keep your eyes on the page.
2. Establish the meter of the piece using a slow steady tempo on the metronome (quarter note equals 60 or lower). Set the metronome to subdivide either the eighth note pulse or the sixteenth note pulse.
3. Using the metronome at the settings mentioned in step 2, sight read the piece. Record this run through with the voice recording app on your smart phone (SP) or a digital voice recorder (DVR). DO NOT STOP. DO NOT GO BACK AND FIX MISTAKES!
4. Listen to the playback of your performance on your recording device. Identify all problem areas with parentheses lightly in pencil. Identify what caused these problems (see step 5). Write these causes above their corresponding parentheses in lightly in pencil.

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<sup>2</sup> In order for the sight reading technique to be effective, one must use the same consistent approach when encountering ALL new music.

## 5. Define a plan of attack for the problem areas in parentheses.

Problem	Plan of Attack
Notes and Accidentals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write in all accidentals above the corresponding note heads on the staff.</li> <li>2. Play the first two pitches as quarter notes slowly 3 times. Repeat this process adding 2 pitches to the right after 3 correct repetitions.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>3. Play the passage slowly as eighth notes 3 times each and sixteenth notes 3 times each.</li> <li>4. Run through the passage slowly as written three times each.</li> </ol>
Intervals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Play the first 2 pitches of the interval as quarter notes. Raise the jaw and push the center of the lips forward for ascending leaps. Lower the jaw and relax the lips for descending leaps.</li> <li>2. Repeat the same process used in step 1 adding one pitch for every 3 slow but successful repetitions.</li> <li>3. Play the passage slowly as written 3 times.</li> </ol>
Articulations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Darken all slurs, ties, accents, and staccatos with a pencil.</li> <li>2. Sing or tizzle the passage slowly three times with the metronome using the correct articulations. Use the tip of the tongue when separating pitches.</li> <li>3. Play the passage slowly three times using one pitch.</li> <li>4. Play the passage slowly 3 times as written.</li> </ol>
Complex Rhythms and Syncopation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write in all of the counts underneath the music staff with a pencil using the passage's smallest rhythm increment (usually sixteenth notes).</li> <li>2. Circle the subdivisions that are joined together. For example, a quarter note will have the four sixteenth notes directly underneath it circled together.</li> <li>3. Clap and say the passage slowly with the metronome. Record this performance on a digital recorder such as the one on your smart phone.</li> <li>4. Listen to the playback on your SP or DVR three times while looking at the music.</li> </ol>

<sup>3</sup> I use pencils on my stand to help keep track of the number of repetitions that I perform.

	<p>5. Play the passage slowly three times on a single pitch with the play back.</p> <p>6. Play the passage slowly as written three times with the play back.</p>
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6. After completing all of your “Plans of Attack” (see step 5), gradually increase the tempo for the problem passages in parentheses 5 to 10 clicks on the metronome for every 3 to 5 correct repetitions until an attainable performance tempo is reached.<sup>4</sup> Make sure your muscles stay relaxed and your demeanor remains calm.<sup>5</sup>

7. Play the phrases containing the aforementioned problem areas at gradually increasing tempos (5 to 10 clicks on the metronome for every 3 to 5 correct repetitions) until an attainable performance tempo is reached.<sup>6</sup>

If the musician goes through all of the above steps, he or she is now ready to add “the artsy stuff!” This is when one moves from the decoding stage to the fluency stage! At this point, one is ready to address phrasing, climaxes, form, and ornaments (See Figure 3).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Set reasonable goals when coming up with a performance tempo. The performance tempo should depend on the amount of practice/rehearsal time available to all of the performers prior to the concert, the combined skill level of all of the ensemble members, and the complexity of the individual parts. If you want to perform Ibert’s *Concerto for Flute* in under a week, be prepared for your accompanist to DEMAND a slower performance tempo!

<sup>5</sup> If you feel any frustration or muscle tension, repeat the passage 3 to 5 more times at a slower tempo before increasing the tempo on the metronome.

<sup>6</sup> Dynamics can be added at this stage.

<sup>7</sup> Auditory learners can record their first repetition on a SP or DVR and hear the play back prior to playing additional repetitions.

**Figure 3: Plan of Attack for “Artsy Stuff” During Individual Practice**

Problem	Plan of Attack
Phrasing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mark in breath marks with a pencil on each cadence.</li> <li>2. Play the entire phrase with the metronome set to the smallest subdivision at a slow tempo, a moderate tempo, and a fast tempo.</li> </ol>
Climaxes <sup>8</sup>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Label the climaxes with a pencil.</li> <li>2. Sing the passage gradually increasing the amount of air used (crescendo) going towards the climax and gradually decreasing the amount of air used (decrescendo) moving away from the climax.</li> <li>3. Using a straight tone, play the passage gradually increasing the amount of air used (crescendo) going towards the climax and gradually decreasing the amount of air used (decrescendo) moving away from the climax.</li> <li>4. Using vibrato, play the passage gradually increasing the vibrato speed (crescendo) going towards the climax and gradually decreasing the vibrato speed (decrescendo) moving away from the climax.</li> </ol>
Form <sup>9</sup>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Play the last two measures of one theme and the first two measures of the next theme 3 to 5 times at a slow tempo with the metronome set to the eighth note or sixteenth note subdivision.</li> <li>2. Play the above passage at gradually increasing tempos (5 to 10 clicks on the metronome for every 3 to 5 correct repetitions) until you can move fluidly from one meter or time signature to the next. <b>MAKE SURE THE EIGHTH NOTE OR SIXTEENTH NOTE PULSE REMAINS CONSISTANT FOR BOTH THEMES.</b><sup>10</sup></li> </ol>
Ornamentations (trills, tremolos, turns, grace notes, and grupettos)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Set the metronome to quarter note equals 40. Program the metronome to click sixteenth notes (or the smallest rhythm subdivision of the passage).</li> <li>2. Play the passage three times with the metronome <b>WHILE TAPPING THE FOOT TO THE DOWNBEAT</b> without the ornaments.</li> <li>3. Sing the passage with the ornaments using the</li> </ol>

<sup>8</sup> A climax is the highest emotional point of the melody.

<sup>9</sup> When exercising, it takes between 3 to 5 repetitions of the same move for the body to adjust the heart rate and breathing rate from a high impact task to a low impact one (and vice versa). The body responds the same way to tempo changes in music.

<sup>10</sup> Knowledge of the form yields better eye contact among all of the musicians and a stronger ability to adapt to quick time signature changes. Thus, rehearsals become much more productive.

	<p>metronome 3 times. Record the third repetition on your digital recording device.</p> <p>4. Play the passage with the play back on your digital recording device.<sup>11</sup></p>
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Finally, the individual musician has reached the fluency stage! Have any of you ever been to a band or orchestra rehearsal where the conductor insists on taking a brand new piece at performance tempo during the first rehearsal? Have any of you noticed that, despite all of your work in the practice room, you and everybody else in the ensemble crashes and burns at the first challenging passage? You may have reached the fluency stage individually; however, you have not yet reached that stage with the rest of the ensemble. A new level of complexity is added-the ensemble! Thus, the body and the brain once again have to go through portions of the decoding stage (orthographic awareness and cueing system awareness) to achieve fluency with the rest of the ensemble. Each musician needs to have aural, kinesthetic, tactile, and auditory communication among all of the parts in order for the group to be in sync with one and other. To reach the fluency stage, the ensemble as a collective must go through the decoding process again but at a slightly more accelerated pace (see Figure 4).

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<sup>11</sup> Adding ornaments can be tricky. The musician has to rework his or her brain and muscles for a few selected portions of the music. To do this, the musician must see how these changes relate to the current subdivision as well as hear and feel the passage with the new changes. A digital recording device is a great tool if no conductor or other mentor is available.



**Figure 4: Most Effective Rehearsal Process for A Chamber Music Ensemble and/or Solo and Piano Accompaniment**

1. Run through the piece as an ensemble without stopping at 10 to 20 clicks on the metronome below the posted performance tempo. Record this run through on a SP or DVR.
2. Listen to the playback as an ensemble. During the play back, all members of the ensemble mark problem areas on their individual parts with pencils using parentheses.
3. Discuss as a group which problem areas involve the entire ensemble. Determine a plan of attack for fixing these problem areas.
4. Rehearse the ensemble's problem areas at the next rehearsal using the groups' plans of attack (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Suggestions on Possible Plans of Attack for Small Ensemble Rehearsals**

Problem Area Type	Plan of Attack
Timing and Phasing (Rhythm Conflicts)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Subdivide the passage with the metronome to either the eighth note or the sixteenth note. Play conflicting parts slowly with the metronome.</li> <li>2. After 1 person plays, add another member to the ensemble at the same tempo. Gradually add more parts at the same tempo until all parts line up with the metronome.</li> <li>3. Gradually increase the tempo (5 clicks per 3 to 5 correct repetitions) until a realistic performance tempo is reached.</li> </ol>
Intonation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Play the passage in half notes matching pitches with the ensemble.</li> <li>2. Write an up arrow (jaw up) above the music staff for the pitches that are flat. Write a down arrow (jaw down) above the music staff on the pitches that are sharp.</li> <li>3. Repeat the excerpt 3 to 5 times slowly on the metronome in the same manner to commit jaw and lip placement to memory.</li> </ol>
Articulations, Accents, and Syncopations <sup>12</sup>	See "Timing and Phasing (Rhythm Conflicts)"

5. At the end of the rehearsal (or the beginning of the next one), each ensemble member erases all of the parentheses on his or her part. Run through the piece at 10 to 20 clicks below the posted

<sup>12</sup> These errors usually occur when the accented pitches or the articulation changes fall on a weak beat such as an upbeat. Hemiola passages can also cause similar problems.

performance tempo. Record this run through on a SP or DVR. Repeat steps 2 through 4 in Figure 4 if necessary.<sup>13</sup>

Why are the processes in Figure 4 and Figure 5 important for obtaining fluency for the ensemble? Musicians are able to hear, see, and feel how their parts interact with the rest of the group allowing them to more readily adapt to any gradual or sudden changes in the music. These processes help solidify all tempo and meter changes. They also help musicians internalize the form of the piece, which helps the ensemble members recover quickly after mistakes. These processes require musicians to maintain constant eye contact, which helps keep the line of communication going among all of the performers for the entire concert.

As individuals and as ensemble members, we achieve better quality performances if we go through all portions of the decoding and fluency stages of Hansen's Progression of Music Literacy Theory. As educators, we must teach our students to go through this same process. Why should they spend hundreds of dollars a year on private lessons, master classes, competitions, and festivals if they cannot experience the joy in their performances after hours of work? Why should they attend our concerts, buy our CD's, or watch our You Tube posts if there is no way they can even come close to reaching the fluency level that allows them to learn the same music that we love to perform?

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<sup>13</sup> Once all ensemble members can perform the entire piece fluidly at the slower tempo, the ensemble is now ready to run through the work at a realistic performance tempo.

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