

Festival Sight-Reading 101

This year the CMEA Central Board is strongly encouraging all large group festivals to have a sight-reading room and that all ensembles participate in this very important assessment. Many directors have come to look at the Sight-reading portion of a festival as scary and negative, without benefit to their ensembles and they simply just won't do it. I'm hoping that with some strategies for daily classroom preparation and an understanding of what the Sight-reading room looks like at a festival, all of our directors will choose to allow their students to have this festival experience. Look for suggestions from Bill Ingram, an experienced Sight-reading adjudicator, in underlined print for a judges' perspective in this article. I have also included experiences that I have had preparing and participating in Festivals that include Sight-reading with my Middle School Band over the last 5 years. I have not always received a superior rating in Sight-reading – but have always walked away with the feeling that my students are solid, advancing young musicians with enough confidence in their musical skills to be able to create music on their own.

What should I expect to happen when I walk into the Sight-Reading room at Festival?

Sight-Reading will always be done directly after your prepared pieces performance. It is done in a different room. Sight reading is a closed performance situation in which no one is allowed into the room except the judge, room monitors, Site Chair, the performing ensemble, the conductor and (if space is available), any individuals who are there by the *invitation* of the conductor.

The procedure is as follows:

- Walk into the room with a clear mind of what it is about to happen. Come into the room quietly without talking, and listen to instructions with undivided attention. Bill Ingram has actually watched some bands walk in like it's free-time, where they are loud and some (yes, it's hard to believe) are on their cell phone/I-pads, etc. They need to be told that this is a very important part, and that the festival is not over yet. Sit in the same seating arrangement as you were on stage. The student will not be allowed to use any outside music. I have had the students music collected by a parent or put in an empty tub as they leave the auditorium.
 - Pre-set your percussion section with what part they will cover. Be sure your Snare and Bass Drum players can keep a steady tempo. (Bring your own sticks and mallets into the room. They are not provided by the host.)
- The adjudicator will review, with the conductor and the ensemble, the procedures to be followed
- The conductor will select the work from the folder that represents one grade level below the most difficult selection just performed. Usually, there are 2 compositions per grade level in the folder. (.5; 1; 1.5; 2; 2.5; 3)
- The conductor will have a maximum of five minutes to study the score while the room managers pass out the folders to the students.
- The students are instructed to open their folders and the conductor is given five minutes to prepare the group for sight reading. It is during this preparation period that information flows from the teacher to the students. The conductor may not utilize counting and/or singing to communicate his/her interpretation of the work. There will be no feedback allowed from the students at this point (i.e. singing, playing, tapping).
- At the end of the five minute preparation period, the conductor will hold a maximum of two minutes for a question and answer session. Students may ask questions regarding form or style. - During the actual playing of the selected piece the students should be told to 'go for every note and rhythm - don't quit playing at any time, and count, count, count'.
- The conductor will have a maximum of one minute to warm up the ensemble. The conductor may not use a passage from the sight reading work
- During the performance the conductor may no longer use vocal or rhythmical demonstrations to correct performance errors. The conductor is to conduct silently except for calling out rehearsal numbers or letters as needed.
- Should the conductor find that he/she has to stop the ensemble, the conductor should restart the group at the nearest rehearsal number or letter to the point where the group stopped.
- At the conclusion of the sight reading performance, the adjudicator may give oral feedback to the group as time allows while the music is still on the stands. *(This is the part that my ensemble and I have benefitted from so much. The comments/clinic from the judge at this point provides encouragement and knowledge from a fundamental perspective. Sight-Reading is as fundamental as it gets in determining what your students know about their instrument and music. It's also great for your students to hear "live" what they did well and where they still need work.)*
- At the conclusion of the feedback session the group may be asked to pass in the folders.

The Sight-Reading Rating is not included in your overall rating. Sight-reading adjudicators can make a recording or conduct a “live” clinic after the group has sight read. They will also write comments and score with a simple rating (no number scores) in the following categories:

- 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)

How Can I Help Prepare My Students for this Part of the Festival Experience?

Most of us are doing the fundamental things in our classroom every day. I tell my 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”. The hardest part for ensembles is that every section has a different part of the story. Fundamentally the secret to sight-reading well is having read it before! When I decided to take my band to a festival where sight-reading was required, I began to add things to my daily and weekly warm-up routines to give my students the advantage of “having read it before”.

In your daily warm-up, incorporate Scales and Arpeggios that are in the most common keys that your level ensemble plays in.

Find a rhythm only book that students can sight-read out of 2-3 days a week. I use Gary Scudder's “Rhythm Workouts”. Before I had “Rhythm Workouts”, I would write a 4-8 measure rhythm on the board. The rhythms have no clef sign, so I used this opportunity to teach about concert pitch, chords, and use rhythm to strengthen the ensembles balance and blend.

Pass out or have your students write out the procedure of what to look for when preparing to SR a new piece of music.

Practice Sight-Reading enough that this list is memorized. Include:

- Time Signatures and Time Changes
- Key Signatures and Key Changes
- Tempo Markings and Tempo Changes, Rit., Accel., Fermata's etc.
- “Road Map” – Repeats, D.S., D.C. Coda, etc.
- Dynamics
- Style/Articulation markings and symbols
- Musical Form (Recognizing repeated sections)
- Finger through more difficult passages and look for rhythmic challenges
- Title and composer of the music (The title of the piece may indicate what the piece is about and your students may have played a piece by the same composer in the past.)
- Finally – 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!!!!**

Pass out a new piece of music that neither you nor your students have seen once or twice a week. It will take less than 15 minutes of rehearsal time. But the time you get back, because of your students improved skills, is more than worth it. I borrowed (and returned) music from the elementary feeders in my district. High Schools can borrow music from JHS. www.JWPepper.com will allow you to get music on approval for 30 days. There are web-sites out there that have “free music compositions” you can download and for the price of paper and ink you have some sight-reading materials. The selection doesn't need to be longer than 3-4 minutes (The lower the level of the Group the shorter the selection). Remember the director has 5 minutes to talk to the students and 2 minutes for them to ask some questions. Stick to the time line.

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, the atmosphere is different, but as their director, you can take fear and worry, out of the picture. Be confident of your musical abilities.

My students get excited when they see that I have scheduled Sight-Reading into my rehearsal. They look forward to the break from the music they are working toward performance on. They like the challenge and when they hold it together they are extremely proud of their efforts. It's just fun for them! The more they sight-read, the more confident they get and the more they want to do it.

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