



# Music Literacy Among Adults In Church Choirs

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**Editor's Note:** The information in this article is based on a doctoral dissertation by the author resulting in a DMA in music education from Shenandoah Conservatory.

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It is naïve to assume that just because adult church choir singers appear musically engaged during rehearsals and performances that they are also musically literate. According to recent research, it is reasonable to state that many, perhaps more than half of our adult church choir members are musically illiterate. Singers with limited or absent basic music reading skills typically rely on rote learning, memorization, and stronger singers in order to contribute. Even though there is nothing wrong with these music-making techniques, they do limit choir members from being more engaged musicians.

Findings from a recent music literacy study conducted by this author seem to indicate that church choir members in particular lack the basic music reading skills necessary to contribute as more engaged musicians. Because of this research, a music-reading skills course designed and tested to reverse this deficit, showed promising results. The content of this course, entitled the Basic Music Reading Skills Course was rudimentary, demonstrating that the subject material could remain simple and still be quite effective.

### **The Preponderance of Church Choirs in America**

In a 2003 survey conducted by the organization Chorus America, of the estimated 250,000 choruses in the United States, approximately 200,000 (80%) were church choirs. With such a large segment of the choral population in America represented by volunteer church choirs, it benefits both the choral and church music communities to explore more closely the music reading skills of its adult singers.

### **Choral Conductors *are* Music Educators**

Many conductors employ what one researcher referred to as the "potter-clay" approach to teaching music. That is, these conductors (as the potters) value their ability to mold their singers into the shape they think is best by doling out to the singers (the clay)

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only what they think their singers need to produce the sound the conductors envision. This technique is common among many choral conductors, yet without a balanced approach that includes improving music literacy skills, such a technique denies the choir member a comprehensive music experience.

Don Neuen, in his book *Choral Concepts*, reminds conductors, "we must positively embrace the concept that every conductor is essentially a teacher. The choral conductor is a full-time voice teacher and a full-time music teacher. In Italian, maestro means teacher." Stephen Demorest, in his book *Building Choral Excellence*, states this point even more directly, "choral music educators must ask

themselves an important question: 'if I am not teaching students how to read music, what am I teaching them?'" Good question.

## Overview

The remainder of this article will explore this author's research into the music literacy skills of members from various adult church choirs (master's thesis). Following that review, attention will then turn to the course and curriculum designed and employed to improve music-reading skills by adults in church choirs (doctoral dissertation). The results from that course reveal very promising possibilities toward improving the music

reading skills of adults in church choirs.

## Research into the Music Literacy of Church Choirs

Choirs and conductors from seven main-line Protestant churches with a total participation of 407 choir members agreed to participate in a study into adult choir literacy. Each participant confidentially completed a questionnaire made up of three sections: (1) a section to record biographical information about each choir member's musical experiences; (2) a section to record responses to questions regarding their personal opinions of music reading skills; and (3) a basic music-

## Women in Choral Music

an international database of women choral conductors

In conjunction with the forthcoming ACDA publication *Women in Choral Music*, Joan Catoni Conlon and Rachel Samet are compiling names and contact information for women who are active in choral music as conductors and educators.

We are launching this project for many reasons. Primarily, we hope to promote collegiality among women choral conductors. The database will also serve to expand awareness of women who might serve as graduate and undergraduate mentors, or who might be sought to conduct All-State and Honor Choirs. Additionally, we would like to meet the needs of the growing number of women conductors who have expressed a desire to know their colleagues. We invite you to be a part of this important resource. To enter your information, please go to: <[www.womeninchoralmusic.org](http://www.womeninchoralmusic.org)>

We welcome any questions you may have about this project. For questions about the book, please contact Joan Catoni Conlon at <[conlonj@colorado.edu](mailto:conlonj@colorado.edu)>. For questions about the database, please contact Rachel Samet at <[rachel.samet@colorado.edu](mailto:rachel.samet@colorado.edu)>.

reading skills (music literacy) test. Each of the seven choir conductors also completed a separate questionnaire allowing them to report both their professional experiences and training as well as providing additional information regarding their current choir setting, such as worship music styles, socioeconomic status, etc.

### Background on the Study Participants

Bar graph 1 shows the age groupings of the participants in the study with middle-aged adults (46-59) as the highest percentage. Approximately half of the choir members had sung in church choirs 26 or more years. The remainder of the choir members had sung in choirs an average of 10% in each of the following groupings of five years (e.g., 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, and 21-25 years).

Forty-three percent (43%) of the participating choir members had neither prior instrument nor any organized music lessons, while the remaining 57% had taken some form of formal lessons on a musical instrument with an overwhelming number of those lessons taking place as students. Half of those 57% who had taken lessons as students no longer play their instrument.

### Background on the Conductors and Their Choirs

All seven conductors were between the

age of 40 and 59 and were career conductors of church choirs from 22 to 35 years with an average of 27 years. The range of years conductors had served with their current choirs was from six to 27 years, resulting in an average of 12 years. All seven conductors had advanced education degrees and three conductors had doctorates in music.

The seven churches were located in suburban or urban locations in lower middle to upper middle-class socioeconomic settings. Table 1 contains additional information about the churches and choirs participating in the study. The conductors rated the general music literacy of their choirs as reported in the second row of Table 1 using the following descriptions:

#### The Four Skill Levels

- (1) Completely illiterate in music-reading skills (incapable of reading music).
- (2) Basic music-reading skills but depends heavily on stronger singers, rote learning, and other techniques to learn the music.
- (3) Above average reading skills and capable of reading music but still needs help on occasion.
- (4) Advanced music-reading skills (perhaps even formal training).

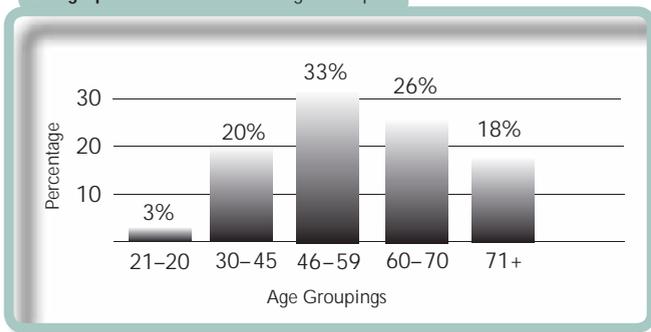
Worship styles in many Protestant churches have undergone changes in recent years resulting in new types of music used in worship. In the third row of Table 1 are the responses from conductors when asked to describe their church's worship music style, along with the length of time at this worship style. In row

four and five of Table 1 are responses from the conductors when asked if there was any consideration for teaching or improving music literacy when selecting choral music for their choirs.

### Choir Member Opinion Section

In another section of the questionnaire, the choir members responded to ten questions designed to record the opinions of the choir members regarding music literacy. In responding to these questions, the choir members were asked to refer to the following definition whenever answering a question that referred to or used the term "music-reading" within the question: The ap-

Bar graph 1 - Choir Member Age Groups



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Cincinnati, July 4-14, '12

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**American International Choral Festival,**  
St. Louis - Nov 17-21, '10, Reno - May 4-8, '11

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**Contact**  
Lois Harper, BA, MEd, ARCT, President

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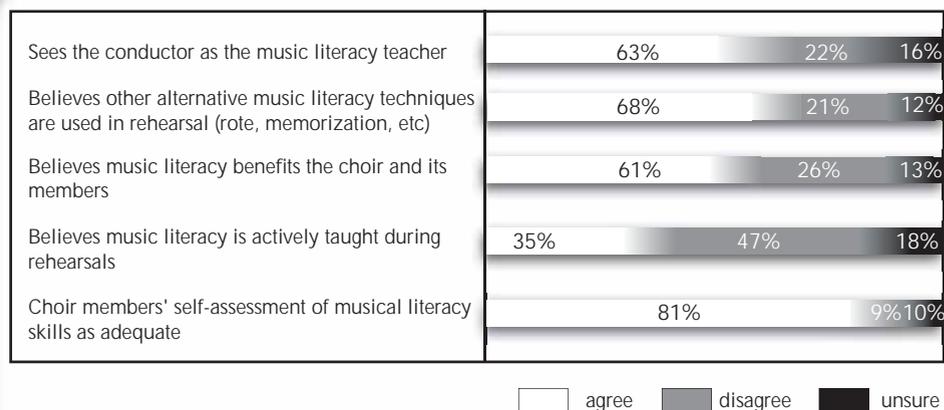
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**Table 1** Participating Choir and Conductor Information

	Choir/ Conductor #1	Choir/ Conductor #2	Choir/ Conductor #3	Choir/ Conductor #4	Choir/ Conductor #5	Choir/ Conductor #6
Music status of choir before the current conductor's arrival to that choir and any change to that status	Previous: 20 voices; traditional anthem literature; Sunday performances, one seasonal concert/yr Current enrollment: 54	Previous: very good choir; previously has two long-termed music ministers prior; Current: Choir has tripled under current music minister; performs regularly with orchestra both anthems and extended works; improved sight-reading skills; broader repertoire. Current enrollment 65	Previous: Excellent choral training, but lapsed over years previous to my tenure. Current: Choir has improved and is very teachable; Performs challenging literature on a regular basis. Current enrollment: 72	Previous: Traditional church music along with extended works during seasonal events; Current: Have now combined with other churches for major works with orchestra. Current enrollment: 55	Previous: General good musicians in choir; Current: improved music literacy as a result of this conductor's emphasis on general music skills. Current enrollment: 44	Very poor music literacy skills—less than 5% of 150 voice choir could read music; After 6 years, that has risen to approximately 25% music literacy skills. Current enrollment: 150
Skill Music Literacy Level	50% at level 2 50% at level 3	100% at level 3	10% at level 1 45% at level 2 30% at level 3 15% at level 4	100% at level 3	10% at level 1 30% at level 2 35% at level 3 25% at level 4	50% at level 1 20% at level 2 20% at level 3 10% at level 4
Current Worship Style	Blended;	Blended leaning toward traditional instead of contemporary	Traditional	Traditional	2 Services: Traditional; Traditional/Contemporary	Blending of many styles
How long at this style?	8 years	10 years	Entire church history (170 Years)	Entire church history	100 years; and 7 years	4½ years
Is there any attention to music literacy when selecting music?	Very little	Some attention given, but not the determining factor when selecting anthems	Yes, mostly to strengthen specific inadequacies	Yes, mostly to strengthen specific inadequacies	Some, but is not the primary concern	10% attention to music literacy
Do you address music literacy specifically in rehearsals?	Music-reading skills are taught when the need arises with a particular piece that we are rehearsing	Not specifically addressed	Yes, mostly to respond to weaknesses within the choir, as well as reinforce basic music-reading skills	Yes, mostly to respond to weaknesses within the choir, as well as reinforce basic music-reading skills	Yes, an attempt to teach literacy and reading skills is made each week in rehearsals	Not generally. Only on specific occasions is this given attention
Do you use organized literacy materials?	No organized materials are used.	No organized materials are used	No organized materials are used.	No organized materials are used.	No organized materials are used.	No organized materials are used.

**Table 2 - Opinion Section Questions Combined and Grouped by Theme**



agree   
  disagree   
  unsure

Choir/  
Conductor  
#7

Previous:  
Excellent church  
choral musicians;  
Current: Styles,  
expression,  
and repertoire  
have expanded  
over 18 years  
during current  
conductor.  
Current  
enrollment: 52

30% at level 1  
40% at level 2  
25% at level 3  
5% at level 4

Blended

3 months

Possibly half of  
new music has  
specific musical  
attributes and  
challenges to  
work on during  
rehearsal of the  
anthem

No specific  
program at  
this time; just  
utilize "hints" in  
rehearsal

No organized  
materials are  
used.

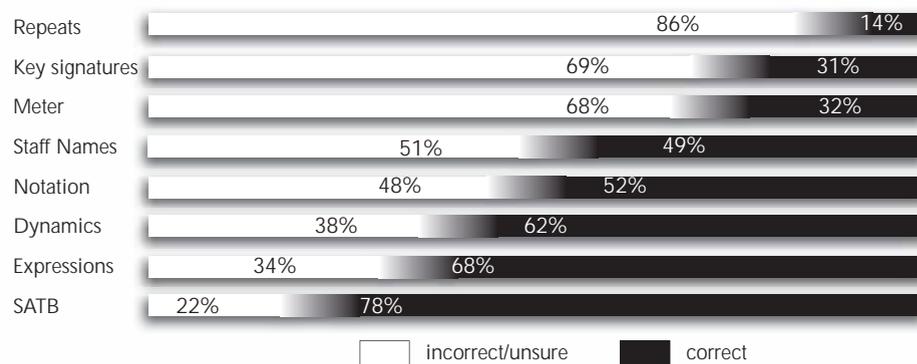
titude to recognize music symbols, notation and terminology, coupled with a basic understanding of melody and rhythm, resulting in the ability to independently interpret and perform music. The questions were presented in a progressive manner moving toward ultimately self-assessing their own music literacy skills. The results from those ten questions are grouped by theme and reported in Table 2.

**Music Literacy Assessment**

This questionnaire (and research) focused only on the music reading capabilities of the

participants and not on music making (as in breath management, tone production, vowel and consonant formation, etc.). A 23-question literacy assessment instrument was designed to identify the following areas of music-reading: recognition and understanding of music notation as found in music (notes, rests, etc.) along with basic rhythmic figures, key signatures, time signatures (meter), dynamics, repeat symbols, SATB voicing, expression and articulation symbols and terminology and treble and bass clef line and space staff names. Table 3 shows all the areas tested in graphed form, with the incorrect and unsure answers grouped together.

**Table 3 - Music Elements Tested in Literacy Section**



incorrect/unsure   
  correct

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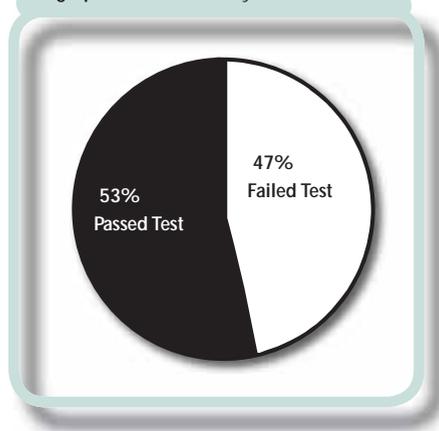
## Study Participant's Self-Assessment of Music Literacy Skills

Opinion Section, Question 10: "I believe I have adequate music-reading skills to function with musical confidence as a contributing adult choir member." This final question in the opinion section of the questionnaire prompted a closer evaluation of the actual music literacy scores of those who believed they had adequate music-reading skills to determine if, in fact, they could make that claim. Eighty-one percent (81%) or 330 of the 407 respondents believed that they possessed "adequate music-reading skills." However, when a random sample (25%) from the literacy tests were graded as if it was a test, of those study participants who stated that they possessed "adequate music-reading skills," less than half (40%) passed the literacy portion of the test, with the remaining 60% unable to pass it. One possible analysis of this "(self-) perception versus reality" discrepancy seems to reveal an assumption on the part of the choir members that if they are "making music" they must surely be "reading music."

## Music Literacy Test Results

When the final tests were graded for all 407 study participants, approximately half (53%, or 216) could actually pass the test with 47% (or 191) essentially "failing" the test—demonstrating that they do not have a grasp of basic music reading skills (Pie Graph 1).

Pie graph 1 Music Literacy Test Final Results



After the final scoring of the opinion and literacy sections of the questionnaire, an interesting pattern emerged. Despite the variety of choir sizes, worship styles, locations, and general music styles, the results of the opinion and literacy portion from all the choirs were similar to each other. Not singled out as better as or worse than other choirs may have been good news for each choir and its conductor; however, this does not necessarily mean it is good for the future of adult church choirs.

## Basic Music-Reading Skills Course

The reality that approximately half of the participants were unable to read music led to the task of improving music literacy among choir members. Although the actual musical elements of such a course are similar to music features found in music theory lessons for young instrumentalists, some of the techniques for teaching those elements to adults need to be different from techniques used for teaching children.

## Teaching Adults – "Andragogy"

Andragogy, a recent term related to adult education, refers to a learner-directed relationship between the teacher and student. Researchers in andragogy report that adult students typically recognize their need for

education and are highly motivated to acquire it. According to Michelle Kelly regarding principles of andragogy, "self-esteem and ego can be compromised in an environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive." For that reason, setting up an environment for a free-exchange of ideas instead of a lecture setting might be the most beneficial setting for teaching adults. For motivating adult learners, Kelly suggests that instructors offer expertise, have empathy, show enthusiasm, and demonstrate clarity. This is good advice for all teachers, but when teaching adults in particular, the instructor must demonstrate these four areas in each lesson. Additionally, unlike pre-adult students, adults have already accumulated years of personal experiences. It benefits both the instructor and student to capitalize on the adult student's wealth of experience by incorporating images and concepts already familiar to the students when introducing new material such as music symbols and related terminology.

## Hymns as the Primary Music Resource

The primary music source used in this course was the hymnal. With only a couple of exceptions, every lesson incorporated familiar hymns as the music source. This one decision proved important to the students as reported in a post-course questionnaire when asked about whether using familiar hymns as the primary music source for the course was beneficial to them (actual responses):

Yes! I think if we used some other highbrow music, it would have made me feel a little intimidated. I found the hymnal to be an excellent textbook.

I went into this course a bit stressed, but the hymns were a familiar element that was in a weird way, comforting.

What was especially neat was to take a hymn I've always sung but didn't know what I was looking at, and then to slowly start learning the parts of the music.



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I could take the hymnal home at night and review [the lesson] very easily. While we were taking the course, when we sang in worship on Sunday, I would try to apply what I learned to whatever we were singing. Now when I sing the hymns, I don't just look at the words.

### Course Materials and Methods

The Basic Music Reading Skills course for this study consisted of fourteen lessons taught within ten weekly, one-hour sessions. These sessions took place during the hour immediately prior to the weekly adult church choir rehearsal. Nineteen adults between the ages of mid-thirties to early-nineties enrolled in the course. Twelve of those students were active choir members in the church's adult choir. The students were encouraged to attend regularly and if they missed a session, to make-up the lesson with the instructor before the next lesson in order to stay on course and keep their studies in sequence. The usage of Microsoft PowerPoint slides projected on a screen proved both efficient and beneficial in teaching the lessons quickly, and in-class worksheets served as aids for instruction. Handouts summarizing the elements of each lesson were distributed at the conclusion of each lesson. Pop-tests were given occasionally and each lesson concluded with a homework assignment. To keep the students on-track for the course, each lesson began with a brief review of the previous lesson and discussion of any difficulties they had with the homework assignment. A Pre-Test/Post-Test instrument was given at the beginning, then at the conclusion of the course, and those results are reported later in this article.

It was very important to remind the students in this course that music notation (symbols, music literacy, etc.) is not music – it only represents music. Music is an auditory art and using written music notation, which is the subject of this course, is one technique for communicating with other musicians how to perform the music. As a result, in addition to using the piano to demonstrate music concepts, the class sang the hymns together whenever possible.

Each student self-selected a student number in order to maintain confidentiality when turning in written work. Although this was necessary as required by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) since this project was part of a doctoral dissertation, in retrospect, this one element may have also contributed to the success of the course as well. Recall from earlier in this article, "self-esteem and ego can be compromised in an environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive." Having a self-assigned confidential student number for each student allowed the adult students to participate anonymously at least through their written materials (tests, homework, worksheets, etc.). This allowed for a non-threatening environment for the students and kept them engaged and returning each week. All nineteen students completed the course according to the course requirements.

### Lesson Sequence

The lessons for this course followed a specific order, with each lesson systematically building upon the groundwork laid in the previous lessons in this order:

#### Session One

- 1) Introduction of Music as Symbol and the Music Staff

#### Session Two

- 2) Barlines and Measures
- 3) Treble and Bass Clefs

#### Session Three

- 4) Naming of Staff Lines and Spaces (including ledger lines)

#### Session Four

- 5) Interval Identification (numeric only, not interval quality)

#### Session Five

- 6) Notes and Rests

#### Session Six

- 7) Time Signatures (Basic Meter)

#### Session Seven

- 8) Rhythms (Six basic rhythm patterns)

#### Session Eight

- 9) Tempos
- 10) Key Signatures and Pitch Modifiers

#### Session Nine

- 11) Dynamics
- 12) Repeats

#### Session Ten

- 13) Expressions and Articulations (Terms and Symbols)
- 14) SATB Voicing; Review of course materials

What follows is a brief overview of how each lesson built on the previous lesson, as demonstrated through the first five lessons.

### The Essential Question: What is a Symbol?

**Session One, Lesson One:** Music as Symbol and the Music Staff. After various start up and housekeeping chores (syllabus reviewed, student number assignments, Pre-Test given, etc.) this lesson began by recalling the preponderance of symbols in our society and then demonstrated through a review of basic symbols known by all the adults in the class: traffic signs. The lesson began by outlining the three-step process for learning traffic signage, and how that same process is involved when learning music symbols. That three-step process involves learning (1) to identify the symbol; (2) what the symbol means; and (3) how the symbol relates to other symbols. Following the discussion on symbols in general, the introduction of the first musical symbol (staff lines) began.

This staff was referred to as a "musician's canvas" upon which the composer "musically paints" his/her music or in our case, upon which other music symbols are placed. As tempting as it might seem, there was no effort to name the lines or spaces, introduce clefs, or add anything to the music staff. In fact, there was no reference to any other specific symbols at this point in the lesson. Keeping the students "in the moment" and focused only on what is in front of them at that moment proved to settle a great deal of anxiety.

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## Session Two, Lesson Two

### Barlines and Measures

After reviewing the single music symbol from the previous lesson (the music staff), this lesson covered two music symbols: barlines and measures. The only three barlines introduced: normal (single), double, and final bar line, resulted in a second music symbol: measures (or bars). Repeat barlines appear in lesson nine along with other repeat symbols.

## Session Two, Lesson Three

### Treble and Bass Clefs

Having learned the music staff, then how barlines divide it into smaller units called measures, this lesson proceeded to assigning a clef to each staff. Again, as tempting as it may seem to teach the names of lines and spaces in this lesson, the students still did not have enough information to cover that lesson. Instead, placing the treble and bass clef on the music staff requires introducing the name of only one line on each clef.

An interesting observation: The students seemed very anxious about learning certain music symbols, which, in turn, threatened

their confidence regarding whether they could actually learn to read music. Among the more stressful topics: Learning the names of the staff lines and spaces, notes and rests (types, names, and values), basic rhythms, and key signatures. This observation is one reason why such care went into isolating and then teaching basic music reading skills in a carefully structured and simply presented method, avoiding the temptation to teach beyond the current music topic.

## Session Three, Lesson Four

### Naming the Lines and Spaces

Building on the single named line on each clef introduced in the previous lesson, the students then learned how to name the other lines and spaces for each clef. This lesson also included learning how ledger lines work — especially the “shared ledger lines” between the treble and bass clef. Traditional line/space acrostics assisted the students with this lesson. The students were encouraged, however, to memorize the names of the lines and space for each clef without relying on acrostics.

## Session Four, Lesson Five

### Numeric Interval Identification

Before introducing notes, the students learned how to count the distance between notes both melodically and harmonically. The focus of this lesson on this study on intervals was only on numeric intervals as in a third, sixth, octave, and not on the quality of intervals as in major, minor, perfect. Acquiring the ability and confidence to count intervals between notes, provides the groundwork for any future study of intervals, including interval qualities.

## Subsequent lessons

### (Lessons Six through Fourteen)

The remaining lessons continued to manipulate the staff by adding notes and rests, time signatures, key signatures, rhythms, etc. As with previous lessons, each lesson built upon material taught in the previous lesson.

## Rehearsal Reinforcement— Transfer of Learning

Transfer of Learning, as it relates to this course, involves the student learning a lesson and as soon as possible, experiencing the subject matter first-hand in a practical situation. During this course of study, transfer of learning occurred when each musical element introduced in the lesson was then located in the music of their hymnal. Additionally, since this Basic Music Reading Skills Course immediately preceded the weekly adult choir rehearsal, once in rehearsal, the choir received a far more concise version of that week's lesson. Then, throughout the rehearsal, special attention to that particular music concept was highlighted whenever it was encountered in the music.

Presenting a mini-lesson during each rehearsal produced several desired results: (1) Transfer of learning was achieved through an immediate application of the music lesson taught to the choir members who are also taking the course. (2) Choir members with marginal music-reading skills received a brief reminder of those lesson materials. (3) Choir members who were uncertain about the course soon discovered that it was a helpful and even fun course, and well worth their

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consideration when offered again.

### Pre-Test / Post-Test Results

In the first session of the course, the students were given a Pre-Test similar to the literacy portion of the questionnaire used earlier in the pilot study, but developed further to more thoroughly measure the music literacy skills of the students. The average Pre-Test percentage score for the class was 23% with a standard deviation of 15.7 points. The Post-Test scores dramatically increased to 83% with a standard deviation of 14.0, resulting in a difference of 60 percentage points between the Pre-Test and Post-Test with a standard deviation of 16.8. See Table 6 for a graph showing the individual student Pre-Test/Post-Test results. (Note, especially, student #16 who entered the course with a score of 3% and exited with a score of 100%.) This overall class increase of 60 percentage points between the Pre-Test and Post-Test, seems to support the assertion by this author that adult students were capable of acquiring basic music-reading skills if taught in a friendly, non-threatening environment (Table 4).

With such a large population of adults assembled in church choir rehearsal rooms each week, the opportunity to improve the music reading skills of these singers seems not only obvious, but appropriate as well. With surprisingly little

effort, it is possible for present-day church musicians to begin reclaiming the church's role as "patron of the arts" simply by reasserting ourselves as church music *educators*, providing more comprehensive music education to our choir members. The following suggestions will assist you when setting up a similar course in your church.

- Keep it simple. Teach only music reading basics in a basics music reading skills course in order to minimize confusion and frustration from your students.
- Restrict the subject matter only to the information required for the lesson. Teachers must resist the temptation to "chase rabbits" by giving more detail than is required. Such grandstanding only leaves the students overwhelmed, intimidated, and confused.

- Andragogy. Engage the students by using familiar concepts and imagery and avoid the temptation to lecture.
- In every choir rehearsal, teach music-reading skills while rehearsing the music. Be prepared to define and when necessary, repeat the definition of the musical term or symbol whenever encountered in the music, since one explanation will usually not be sufficient.

Please contact the author for additional suggestions on how to set up such a course, or for information on the published *Basic Music Reading Skills Course* curriculum.



**Table 4 Individual Pre-Test/Post Test Results Reported by Student Number**

