

Sight Reading

<http://youtu.be/mEUvHtqFrkI>

Sight reading is one of the most difficult sections in the exam both to practice and to teach, yet it ultimately forms the basis of the whole of classical music. Learning classical music isn't about learning to play a couple of songs; it is about learning to read music. One way to think about it is that in the entire progression from grade 1 to 8 the total amount of pieces combined amount to little more than two or three Beethoven sonatas, no more than 10% of his output of 32 sonatas (by some counts 38 if you include the early unnumbered sonatinas). When considering that this itself represents but a fraction of his piano music, and that is but a tiny fraction of his music that includes the piano (like lieder and concerti). To think of it another way: If you only want to learn to perfect reproduce music in a certain way, there is no need to learn to play an instrument. All you need is to learn to press the play button on an mp3-player.

But how does one approach reading? The only real way, ultimately, is to read a lot.

For pianists the difficulty in reading is with getting a geographical sense of the keyboard (i.e. playing without looking down at your fingers). The best way to practice this is to read four part harmonized hymns and chorales.

For single line instruments (like the violin, oboe and flute) the problem is learning to maintain a steady beat, especially in contexts where the correct way to interpret a phrase is not immediately obvious because the player has got an accompaniment figures interspersed with melody line. The best way to practice this is to play contrapuntal music.

I highly recommend watching this video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aASBNbeREEY> in this regard. In it Ms Fabrizio argues the distinction between *reading* and *decoding*. This is certainly a valid point, but this is one of those cases where *reading* is nothing but *decoding* accurately at a given speed, unfortunately there is no way to systematically bridge that gap, except practicing until you can do it. In my estimation both reading and decoding are important skills to practice and the one informs the other.

There is very little that I can add to Ms. Fabrizio's advice though, so taking the time to review that video is well worth the effort.

Overall, the best way to think of sight reading is that it is the heart of classical music. Learning to read music is what classical music is ultimately about, everything else is just ways to improve the ability to interpret music from a score. The ability to sight-read is the reward for practicing all the other things we practice.

[Update] ABRSM is now offering their own iPhone aural training app (nothing yet for android as far as I can tell), it is highly recommended to use this if you have access to an apple product for the reasons outlined in last week's news letter. <http://www.abrsm.org/newsArticles/item.html?nid=829>