

The First Steps To Reading Music

by Eric Ruyle

Over years of playing and teaching I have often contemplated the process by which musicians learn to read music. Young students seem to learn primarily through a process of trial and error. Gradually they get better at learning new music, but students need the most help at the beginning.

Music involves a number of thought processes, but if students focus on each aspect separately at first the process of learning a new piece becomes easy. I have developed a method that breaks the process into simple steps. It focuses primarily on learning notes and rhythms rather than on dynamics, articulations, and phrasing, which are added later.



In the first step students say the names of the notes while using the appropriate fingerings; rhythms should be ignored at first. Before reading, the key signature should be stated, and all accidentals should be noted as they appear. Beginning students often confuse notes such as A5 and C5 because they look alike in written music. This first step helps students to recognize notes and practice fingerings.

Conversely, students focus only on rhythms in the second step of the exercise. In this read-through a player claps the rhythms while counting out loud and tapping their foot. Counting out loud will force a player to subdivide consciously, which in turn will help him to read rhythms accurately. Beginning students should read through the entire piece with this method, while

intermediate and advanced students may only need to clap out rhythms in difficult passages.

The third step is to combine clapping and naming notes in rhythm. Students may struggle to name the note in rhythm, but with concentrated effort they learn to focus intensely. There are physical limitations on how many syllables can be spoken in tempo, so key signatures are treated as understood. A student reading in the key of G major will not say "F#" each time but only if the rhythm permits. At first it helps to slow the tempo to a point at which note names can be stated clearly.

The final step before playing is to speak and finger the notes in rhythm at a drastically reduced tempo because adding fingerings increases the difficulty tremendously. This last step incorporates each of the previous exercises and prepares the brain to recognize, finger, and play the right notes with correct rhythms.

After progressing through the previous step, it is fairly easy to play accurately. A student who struggles at this point may not have covered each step correctly and should review.

Although this method may take some time and effort, it will ultimately save time because students will have learned the music more thoroughly. After learning the notes and rhythms correctly, a player may then concentrate on aspects such as dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. The method may seem difficult and time-consuming at first but becomes easier in time and will be useful for performers at any level. □

Eric Ruyle is a free-lance woodwind specialist in Ohio. He performs with symphony orchestras as well as professional jazz ensembles. He has taught several college courses and has published an article in Flute Talk. Ruyle earned a master's degree from Youngstown State University and a bachelor's in jazz studies from McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. His private studio ranges from beginning to college level woodwinds.

Job Guide

Band Director, Walt Disney World Co., Orlando, Florida. Direct a 20-member college marching band for 3-13 weeks in June-August 1998. Candidates should have knowledge of all contemporary styles, drill design skills, experience directing and recruiting at the college level, and leadership skills. Salary and housing provided. Send resume and video to College Programs Manager, Walt Disney World Entertainment, P.O. Box 10,000, Lake Buena Vista, Florida by December 10.

Assistant Director of Bands, Multi-cultural Specialist, String Education Specialist, Music Composition, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio. All four positions are for the rank of assistant professor of music education. Doctorate degree and teaching experience required. Send resume, transcripts, and five letters of recommendation with information for three references to Music Education Search and Screening Committee, Office of the Dean - College of Musical Arts, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio by December 20, except with the music composition position, for which applications are due December 15.

Air Force Conductor, Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C. Auditions will be held March 24-25, 1998. Applicants should have a bachelor's degree and experience conducting concert and jazz bands and be under age 34. Positions are also available for instrumentalists, vocalists, arrangers, and audio technicians. (Air Force Bands and Music Programs, SAF/PAC, 1690 Air Force Pentagon, Washington, D.C.; 703-695-0019, fax 703.693.1523)

Army C.D.

The United States Continental Army Band announced a limited release of its new C.D. *Tradewinds*, which features a variety of chamber music selections for winds. Complimentary C.D.s are available for educators. Send a self-addressed, padded envelope with \$1.10 for postage to The United States Continental Army Band, Attn.: PAO, 10 Bernard Road, Fort Monroe, Virginia. For more information call 757-727-3888.