

Several Issues Related to Sight-Reading in Piano Pedagogy in High-Education Institutions

Hui Jin

Hangzhou Normal University , Hangzhou 311121 , Zhejiang China

Abstract: Piano sight-reading refers to the ability to instantly perform a new piece of music and is a manifestation of comprehensive piano playing skills. It is a prerequisite for improvisational playing and accompaniment and is closely related to the progress of piano learning. Sight-reading holds significant importance in piano teaching within the music departments of Normal University in China. This paper focuses on “piano sight-reading” and discusses in detail various aspects related to it, summarizing effective methods to improve sight-reading skills.

Keywords: High-Education Institutions ; Piano Sight-Reading ; Teaching ; Effective Methods

“Sight-reading, the skill of instantly playing a piece of music from a score, particularly shines when encountering new compositions. This ability demands a high level of accuracy in adhering to the score’s indications, especially in terms of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics.”^[1]

In response to the misunderstanding of sight-reading training among teachers, students, and parents in piano education, Mr. Miao Tianrui has made a pointed assertion: “One should not focus solely on memorizing music. Rather, it’s crucial to cultivate the skill of quickly translating various musical intervals and chords from the score to the fingertips, directing attention to the score instead of fixating on the hands.” Importantly, this perspective is not confined to piano education alone but is broadly applicable in the teaching of all musical instruments.

The concept of ‘sight-reading’ encompasses both the ability of a performer to read music at sight and perform correct content. In exploring ways to enhance sight-reading skills, experts suggest that “for pianists, regularly participating in duets, trios, or accompanying other instruments (or vocals) is an excellent method to develop sight-reading abilities.” From my perspective, engaging in various ensemble performances is an effective means to improve sight-reading skills, and the guiding role of piano teachers is of paramount importance. A proper understanding of piano sight-reading shapes the teaching philosophy and practices of piano educators.

1. The Commonality between Piano Sight-Reading and Aural Skill Course

In Normal University in China, Aural Skills are a key part of the music education curriculum, while the inclusion of sight-reading has not gained uniform acceptance in instrumental music education. ‘Sight-singing’ and ‘sight-reading’ involve performing music from the score without prior practice. Despite both being fundamental music skills, sight-singing is often more developed due to its incorporation into ear training courses, unlike sight-reading.

Psychologically, ‘sight-singing’ starts with the eyes deciphering musical scores, then the brain interprets this data and orchestrates the vocal organs into action. This complex interaction involves breath, vocal cord function, and articulation to produce the correct pitches. ‘Sight-playing’ follows a similar initial cognitive process, but instead, the brain’s instructions are for the respiratory and motor systems, influencing how the musician manages breath, hand positions, and posture to play an instrument. The shared cognitive groundwork between sight-singing and sight-playing suggests that foundational skills in the former can enhance proficiency in the latter.

2. The Correlation and Parallelism between Piano Sight-Reading and Improvisational Performance

2.1 Correlation

Historically, improvisation was integral to Western music, with individuals often being both composers and performers. Baroque and Classical greats like Bach and Mozart excelled in spontaneously creating complex variations from simple themes on instruments like the fortepiano. Such improvisational prowess was built upon a foundation of extensive sight-reading practice, which allowed the absorption of numerous works into memory and honed the skill to innovate musically.

In the Classical music period, concertos' cadenzas were the final frontier for improvisation until Beethoven's time, when they became pre-composed, reducing opportunities for performers to exhibit improvisational virtuosity. This shift led to the specialization of composing and performing as separate skills and the gradual decline of improvisation's role and prominence in musical performance.

2.2 Parallelism

Piano improvisational accompaniment spans from simple to elaborate, depending on the accompanist's skills, offering more artistic liberty than études' technical drills. It demands quick mental adaptability, strategic contemplation, and keen auditory self-monitoring to ensure real-time performance quality. Strengthening sight-reading skills is essential for this, as it cultivates a swift reaction to music scores and a natural keyboard feel, ensuring steady tempo and rhythm. Training also involves understanding harmonic structures, recognizing chordal sound colors, and considering the music's texture, structure, dynamics, and tempo.

The "5th 'Pearl River Piano' National College Music Education Students' Basic Skills Competition" recently concluded in Changchun, with events in music theory, piano, vocal performance, and conducting. Research into the competition's "piano improvisational accompaniment" category showed advancements in teaching methods, but also pinpointed ongoing challenges like poor sight-reading, limited harmony, monotonous accompaniment textures, uninspired accompaniment design, and below-standard performances.^[2] Weak sight-reading was particularly noted as a critical factor affecting the quality of improvisational accompaniment.

Both piano sight-reading and improvisational accompaniment are grounded in basic piano techniques and develop through practice and good reading habits. Sight-reading involves interpreting score information through the eyes and the brain, directing the hands to play while also integrating the musician's experience and interpretation to bring depth to the performance. This process enriches the performer's knowledge and with regular practice, enhances the brain-hand coordination, leading to more logical and expressive playing.

3. The Pivotal Role of Piano Sight-Reading in the Advanced Piano Learning Program

Sight-reading, a fundamental skill in piano education, is key to assessing a student's ability and is essential for exploring different musical genres. It accelerates learning new compositions, thereby expanding the pianist's repertoire. Moreover, it cultivates musicality, fosters quick thinking, and promotes self-directed learning.

Mr. Zhao Songguang, a renowned Chinese music theorist and music educator, emphasized the importance of sight-reading in piano education, stating, "The cultivation of sight-reading abilities should be a focus from the very beginning of learning the piano, rather than waiting until a considerable level of proficiency has been achieved." Highlighting the significance of sight-reading skills, Mr. Zhao also quoted Professor Li Feilan, a famous piano educator: "The proficiency in reading music scores directly influences the pace of progress in learning the piano."^[3]

Sight-reading, while a particular skill, is crucial for piano proficiency and lack of its development due to inadequate training can stall overall playing progress and prevent reaching higher mastery levels.

In music education at Normal University, piano instruction serves several key purposes. The first is to develop basic playing skills and understand the dynamics, harmonic contexts, and techniques within piano pieces. The second purpose is to deepen students' comprehension of piano music and their ability to express musical variations and originality, achieved by engaging with a diverse range of piano works. The third purpose is to cultivate the students' skills in improvisational accompaniment, preparing them for future professional and academic endeavors. Central to all these goals is the enhancement of sight-reading abilities in students. Put simply, a significant aspect of piano education revolves around teaching and improving sight-reading proficiency.^[4]

4. Strategies for Improving Piano Sight-Reading Skill

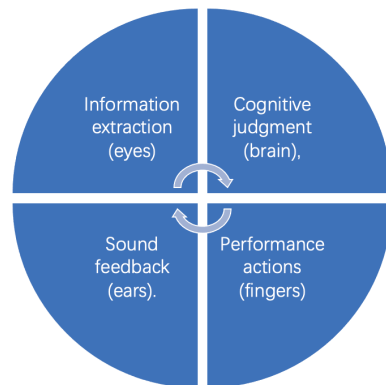
In teaching practice, few students excel at sight-reading, which is often seen as difficult and overwhelming. The typical method of note identification, memorization, and practice is slow and inefficient, raising the question of how to quickly enhance piano sight-reading abilities.

Sight-reading on the piano is an activity that combines specific objectives and distinctive methods, involving both cognitive and physiological processes. This practice necessitates a seamless and coordinated interplay of visual, auditory, and motor controls by pianists.

Sight-reading on the piano requires a seamless interaction between interpreting the music score and expressing it through the instrument. The reader's visual and cognitive processes are continuously engaged by the score's notations and dynamics. This involves translating the score into precise hand movements, with the auditory system monitoring and adjusting the output. Mastery of

sight-reading necessitates a finely-tuned synergy of the musician's sensory and motor functions.

Piano sight-reading entails the eyes identifying notes on the score, the brain processing this data and guiding the fingers to play, while the ears monitor the sounds for accuracy and prompt corrections as needed. This cycle continues throughout the sight-reading process. Essentially, the whole procedure of piano sight-reading can be described in this way:



In piano lessons, many teachers have developed practical methods for sight-reading training. Summarizing these approaches, the key points of piano sight-reading can be articulated as follows:

① Before playing a new score, take time to review it, noting the clef, key signature, and tempo. Mentally adjust to the key's feel, perhaps by playing its scale and primary triad, especially for beginners. Also, focus on the score's indicated expressions, tempo changes, dynamics, and other performance directions. ② In sight-reading, it's essential to play steadily and maintain the flow of the melody rather than rushing and risking disruption. Music demands temporal consistency; therefore, always sight-read at a tempo slower than the piece's actual speed, focusing on coherence over tempo. Purposeful practice involves careful review and reflection on mistakes and hesitations to enhance proficiency over time. ③ During sight-reading, focus is key, requiring tight coordination of eyes on the score, brain processing, hand movements, and auditory feedback. Initially, practice with the "eyes and brain lead" approach, tackling small sections before advancing to larger ones with "hands and brain in sync." As proficiency grows, so does the ability to process and remember more music visually, reducing reliance on watching the hands and minimizing mistakes. ④ To excel in sight-reading, blend thoughtful practice with strategic insights. Grasp melody structures, distinguish chord positions, and determine efficient fingering. Simplify complex chords by understanding their harmonic base. Focus on varying pitches in repetitive rhythms, and for intervals like thirds and sixths, recognize the space between notes to guide hand placement. The essence of progress in sight-reading is uncovering these fundamentals for more effective practice. ⑤ In sight-reading, recognize score elements such as texture, form, and rhythm, including any intricate rhythms or sharps/flats. Maintain an awareness of the piece's structure and key changes. Use your musical knowledge to analyze and express the music as you play. Choose fingering that's natural and manageable during the initial reading, refining it in subsequent practices. ⑥ Teachers should guide students to sight-read new pieces slowly and accurately in class, offering explanations or demonstrations when pauses occur. The goal is to play without repeating notes, fostering a strong sight-reading foundation. ⑦ To improve piano sight-reading, engage in vocal or instrumental accompaniment, maintaining the set rhythm and tempo from the start. Play as many notes as possible, omitting only the most difficult ones, and avoid stopping to correct mistakes during the performance. This enhances the accompanist's sight-reading and collaborative skills. Additionally, participating in ensembles and group playing further develops these abilities.

In conclusion, the author believes that effective methods are crucial for training competent musicians, achievable through consistent practice and theory application. Piano teachers should emphasize sight-reading's theoretical and practical aspects at all levels and in any teaching setting, enhancing skills, performance, or competition readiness. A focus on practical piano application streamlines the educational process, contributing to national improvements in piano teaching quality.

References:

- [1] Miao, Tianrui, ed. "Music Encyclopedia Dictionary." Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1998.
- [2] Zhang, Hui. "Reflections After the 5th 'Pearl River Piano' National College Music Education Professional Students' Basic Skills Competition." *Piano Art*, no. 11 (2008): 9-10.
- [3] Zhao, Songguang, ed. "Piano Sight-Reading Textbook." Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House, 2001.
- [4] Wang, Wenli. "On Improving Students' Piano Sight-Reading Skills." *Journal of Qingdao Teachers College* 12, no. 3 (September 1995): 77.