

## Strategies for Successful Sight-Reading at PMEA Band & Orchestra MPA's

**TOM SNYDER** // MPA Coordinator & West Allegheny SD - Retired

**P**articipating in the sight-reading component at Music Performance Assessments (MPA's) should be rewarding for directors and students. Directors new to MPA's are often wary about sight-reading. From my experience as a director and a sight-reading adjudicator, how directors prepare their students in advance and utilize the assigned time before the sight-reading begins are key for student success and maximizing the benefits this component provides.

Bands and orchestras enrolled in the *Traditional* performance context participate in an adjudicated sight-reading component immediately after performing their prepared pieces, with the rating received in sight-reading factored into their final rating. Ensembles participating in the *Festival* context have the option to participate in sight-reading, with directors choosing the grade level of the music involved.

The sight-reading component is detailed within the current guides to hosting and participating in a PMEA MPA, available at [www.pmea.net/adjudication](http://www.pmea.net/adjudication)

DECLARED GRADE LEVEL OF THE PREPARED PIECES	GRADE LEVEL OF THE MUSIC USED FOR SIGHT-READING
6	4
5	3
4	2
3	1½
2	1
1	½

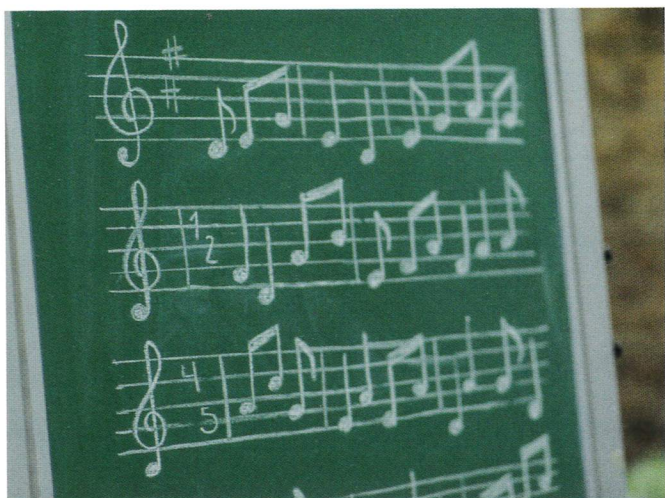
The music used for the sight-reading component within the *Traditional* context is at a lower grade level than the declared grade level of the prepared pieces in order to provide an appropriate challenge and opportunity for success.

Directors are urged to diligently practice sight-reading throughout the year, beginning well in advance of the MPA, and may not realize that ample content for practicing sight-reading is already present in their ensemble folders! They can use worksheets and method books to practice sight-reading by verbally addressing the targeted content and then reflecting on how well it's played "the first time."

In addition, using pieces already being rehearsed to practice sight-reading enables directors to develop strategies to use at the MPA. Start with the focus on performing short sections as accurately as possible the first time before continuing with the usual rehearsal process. In addition to practicing sight-reading, this also helps force students out of the mindset to not be concerned with initial mistakes, given the time remaining until the concert.

Strategies for practicing sight-reading naturally align with established rehearsal techniques and curricular objectives. This more "granular" approach involved in improving sight-reading further refines efficiency within the director's own pedagogy. Incorporating sight-reading as a routine option within normal rehearsal planning better enables consistent progress rather than trying to dedicate a "sight-reading day" or some other artificial construct that could become easy to skip.

Directors should also consider implementing a separate, designated "Sight-reading Folder," including pieces already in their



libraries and at a slightly lower grade level. Each part of the MPA sight-reading process can then be practiced more realistically with different pieces while retaining the flexibility to use part or all of a given piece.

Use of a separate sight-reading folder became one of my most successful strategies. When part of the rehearsal plan, students would simply retrieve their assigned sight-reading folder at the beginning of class. I've also asked the first chair players to distribute folders to their sections at a break point during class. Use whatever 'system' works best. Pieces in that folder included some chosen only for sight-reading along with others I was considering for future programming. Occasionally, students would unexpectedly like a particular sight-reading piece, and they would then lobby strongly for it to be included in a concert.

Students look forward to the challenges involved in sight-reading. Directors should allow time after practicing sight-reading to both share their observations and ask the students for feedback. This dialogue provides relevant learning opportunities while also implementing 'criticism' objectives found in most every arts curriculum.

Another recommendation is for directors to use the PMEA Sight-reading Assessment Form as a teaching tool. Also available within the PMEA website, copies can be distributed to directly engage each student with the assessment process. Start with sight-reading a short segment of music and then discussing and scoring just one of the Evaluation Areas. Gradually progress to using the entire form, including written scores and comments, to assess their own performance, a recording of their own performance, or a video of another ensemble playing the same piece. The many available options can be adapted for any ensemble at any level and gradually implemented.

## **I've observed directors who 'wing it' at the MPA with predictable results.**

While practicing sight-reading, directors should establish their own preferred approach to best implement each step involved in the formal MPA sight-reading process, with ample repetition so their students know exactly what to expect.

After the prepared pieces are performed at an MPA, the sight-reading music will be distributed. The adjudicator will then review the process with the students while directors first look at the score, followed by a timed, two-minute period of silence for the director and students to peruse the music. The students should be prepared with instructions concerning how to maximize the time. Common options include slowly reading through the entire piece once to confirm a select list of musical aspects, or to quickly read through the piece several times, highlighting one or two targeted aspects each time. Within this silent segment, students may 'finger' notes but may not speak or play their instruments.

Next, the adjudicator will start a timed, three-minute segment before the formal sight-reading begins. Directors may use this time as they wish. While instruments still cannot be played, directors and students may sing, clap, finger, count, ask questions, or otherwise refer to any aspect of the piece.

How directors use these two- and three-minute segments varies widely, with uniquely individual approaches to maximizing the



allotted time using strategies which work best for them and their ensembles that year. Having a plan is essential. I've observed directors who 'wing it' at the MPA with predictable results. Directors need to ensure the students understand the plan and have enough repetition in class to feel comfortable and prepared for the MPA experience.

Within that plan, directors should choose which aspects the students prioritize during these two- and three- minute time segments. The most common aspects that I've observed directors prioritizing include:

- the title, composer and style
- the 'road map' of repeats, etc.
- key signatures
- time signatures
- tempos & tempo changes (rit, etc.)
- dynamic levels and changes (crescendos, etc.)
- accidentals that 'carry through' the measure
- notes 'outside the key'
- distinctive rhythms and rhythm patterns
- articulations

After the three-minute segment, the ensemble performs the assigned sight-reading piece. Directors are advised they may tap on their stand, sing parts, count, clap, and call out instructions and

rehearsal numbers/letters, etc., during the performance. While it's obvious that the less verbally involved the better, directors are urged to provide whatever assistance they deem necessary to help their student navigate the sight-reading performance.

Directors may also choose to stop and re-start the ensemble if needed. The adjudicator would then identify where the ensemble will resume playing, most likely the closest rehearsal number/letter before where they stopped. While stopping is not preferred, directors are urged to do so rather than permit the performance to continue while barely holding together.

After returning from the MPA, directors are encouraged to "debrief" with their students, to hear their perspectives on the sight-reading component, along with the feedback from the adjudicator's comments and scores to reflect upon what went well and what can be improved moving forward.

For me, the sight-reading component initially caused considerable anxiety but quickly became an incredibly enjoyable and rewarding challenge. The strategies I developed with my bands for sight-reading helped refine my pedagogy and improved their performances. I hope this information is helpful! Please feel free to contact me with your observations, strategies, suggestions, and questions concerning instrumental sight-reading. ▀



 **CHOICE**  
music tours

  
Direct Travel

2 Penn Center West, Suite 220  
Pittsburgh, PA 15276  
866-583-6061  
[ChoiceMusicTours@dt.com](mailto:ChoiceMusicTours@dt.com)  
[www.ChoiceMusicTours.com](http://www.ChoiceMusicTours.com)

**Specializing in Memorable  
Student Travel Experiences**  
Since 1978



SILVER CORPORATE SPONSOR



#### OUR TEAM

CINDY HINNEBUSCH  
BILL GALVIN  
NEVIN SAYLOR  
FRANCIS NESTA  
DAVID HAINES