

Project Year

2012-2013

Project Title

Sight-Reading at the Piano

Project Team

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Michael Rickelton, Peabody Institute, Composition Department, Fellow

Audience

This product will be used in the *Freshman Sight-Reading* class, a required course for piano majors at Peabody, and could be developed for use in other courses.

Pedagogical Issue

One of the most important skills in sight-reading is the ability to read ahead. This is a difficult skill to cultivate because the eyes naturally tend to focus on the notes we are playing and hearing at the moment rather than on the notes coming up. Many students are tempted to look back to see if what they played was correct. This brings their sight-reading to a stop. To encourage reading ahead and discourage looking back, teachers have traditionally resorted to covering up the printed page with a small card, as the student proceeds. This is difficult to do well, and impossible to practice on your own. Other techniques, such as playing only certain beats of the music, or naming events that are coming up, are either insufficient or difficult to put into practice.

Solution

The solution to teaching students to read ahead of where they are playing is to create a situation where it is impossible for them to play the music without reading ahead. For these exercises, music will be displayed on the screen; a metronome will set the tempo and the music on the screen will disappear in fixed segments as the student plays along. Since the students will not be able to see the music they are currently playing, they will be forced to read ahead and commit the music to short term memory.

Technologies Used

Finale (music notation software)
Image manipulation software (e.g., Photoshop)
Microsoft Movie Maker and/or iMovie (video creation)

Faculty Statement

The goal of this project is to create a bank of practice exercises that student pianists at Peabody can use to train themselves to read music ahead of where they are playing. Currently this task is addressed by having two students work together with one student covering up the music with a card while the other student plays the piano. There are inherent problems with this method: it can't be done alone and it is physically awkward to implement.

While there are a number of traditional books available for studying sight-reading, there are none in an electronic format and therefore none that actively train the eye to look ahead. This solution should have a marked impact on improving students' ability to sight-read fluently.

Because one can only sight-read a piece of music once, it is necessary to have numerous graded examples for students to read. Our Fellow, Michael Rickelton, a student composer, will bring his expertise in the use of Finale (music notation software) to enter the music and create the animations. Dr. Johansen and I will choose the examples, create the framework and write the accompanying text.

Our intent is to publish this content in an iBook format because the tablet is easy to use for displaying music at the piano. Because the examples are video files of notated music, they can easily be put into Blackboard so any students in the class can access them without a tablet. All of the examples will be in the public domain and re-notated in Finale so there will be no copyright problems with the material, reducing the cost of the project to labor only.

The efficacy of the examples will be assessed through their use in the classroom in the Fall of 2012 and will be based on student feedback and observation. We will also test some other preparatory exercises that focus on flash memorization, and development of peripheral vision, with the ultimate goal of creating a complete sight-reading e-text. Based on the progress of students from previous semesters, we should be able to measure a higher rate of improvement using the electronic resources.

While the skill of sight-reading is arguably most complicated at the piano, it is desirable for all professional musicians. Based on the success of this program, we could develop parallel applications in the future for musicians who play other instruments.