

Sight-Reading Through Spatial Visualization

A method for mallet sight-reading

BY ALICE GOMEZ

Many beginning mallet players have more trouble with sight-reading than with basic mallet technique. Mallet instruments are especially difficult to play because you cannot physically “feel” the notes with your fingers the way you do on a piano or any wind or string instrument—that is, there are no fingerings for point of reference. Trying to hit the notes accurately while trying to read the music on a stand requires training of peripheral vision. Add a conductor in front of the ensemble and you have three things at different eye levels to focus on.

Particularly when reading mallet music with an ensemble, there is no time to stare at each line or space and think of “Every Good Boy Does Fine” or “F-A-C-E.” I can hear my students thinking that way, which further slows down the response time from page to instrument. To remedy this, I teach sight-reading through spatial visualization—looking at the music more graphically than theoretically, concentrating on the spaces between notes.

Here are some basic steps I use in teaching sight-reading.

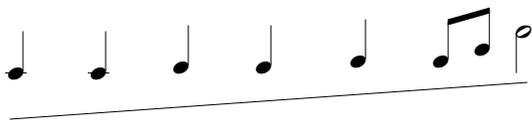
Step 1: To begin, try to choose music in the key of C major or A minor without accidentals. The student will have to concentrate only on the “white keys” of the instrument.

Determine whether the motion of the melodic line is going up or down. (Sometimes I have to explain the concept of “up” or “down” in melodic lines.

Upward motion



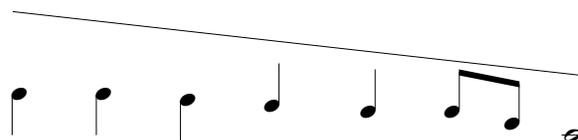
Graphically



Downward motion

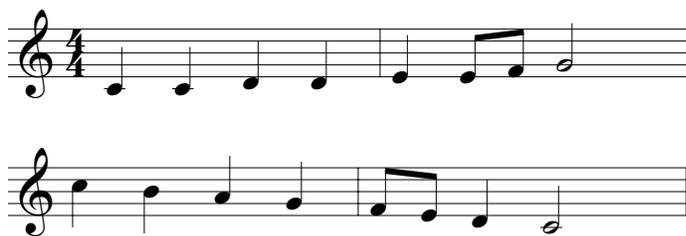


Graphically



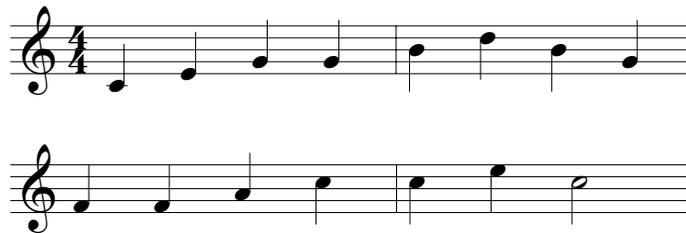
Step 2: Determine whether the notes are moving in stepwise or skipping motion. Moving in stepwise motion involves notes moving from space to adjacent line, or line to adjacent space on the staff. Have the student play a C major scale on the instrument, paying close attention to the spacing of the bars.

Stepwise melody

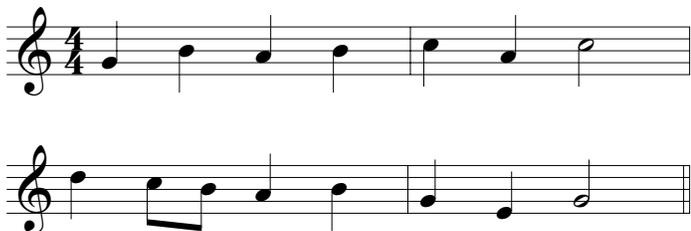


Skipping motion involves notes moving from space to space, or line to line. Explain that from line to line on the staff or from space to space on the staff is the interval of a third. Have the student play thirds diatonically on the “white keys” of the instrument: C-E-G, D-F-A, E-G-B, F-A-C, etc. This exercise will also help the student get more familiar with the location of the notes on the instrument.

Melody with skips in thirds



Step 3: Read a melody that contains both steps and skips.



Be sure that the student spends at least fifteen minutes during the lesson or ensemble rehearsal on sight-reading. Often, the band director focuses on the wind and brass instruments during sight-reading time

while the drummers keep the beat with some kind of cadence in the background. This is only one of the many reasons that most of my beginning college percussion students are deficient in mallet playing.

Two of my favorite sight-reading books for beginning mallet players are *Fundamental Studies for Mallets* by Garwood Whaley, and Mel Bay's *Fun With The Oboe*. Beginning oboe books keep the notes on the staff, unlike flute books, which quickly get into ledger lines above the staff. I have also developed a fun sight-reading book with rhythm tracks, *Sight-reading Jams*, available on my website, www.alicegoomez.com.



Alice Gomez is an Associate Professor of Music at San Antonio Community College. She is an ASCAP Award-winning composer, arranger, educator, performer, and recording artist. She has also presented workshops and clinics at many schools and universities.

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