

## Problems with sight-reading?

### Note that

Not every dyslexic musician has problems with sight-reading

Dyslexia and other neurodiverse differences such as DCD/dyspraxia **do not** necessarily correlate with cognitive ability. All learning should be **active**.

**Ask yourself** whether sight-reading is really necessary.

It's possible to learn new pieces by ear: by listening to the teacher or a recording.

It's possible to find exams which don't include sight-reading or not do exams at all.

### There are exams that don't have sight-reading

For details, see BDA Music document: 'Music exams, syllabus options' available from [bdamusicdyslexia@gmail.com](mailto:bdamusicdyslexia@gmail.com) and the Boards' websites.

- Build up skills such as improvisation as well as (or possibly instead of) sight-reading. Many areas of music (pop, jazz, other cultures) don't use written music at all.
- Look through a piece thoroughly before starting and try making a copy. This is legal as long as you have the original copy. Then
  - o Prepare thoroughly (and get into the habit of this) by looking at and noting key, time signature, metre, accidentals etc.

But **don't** spend too long as problems with short-term memory can mean that the more information that is accessed beforehand, the more is forgotten! Better to 'bash through' as well as possible.

- o Prepare it (perhaps away from the instrument) using colour (of the student's choice) to mark repeated phrases; links from one line to the next; places where the hand needs to move etc.

- o Create (and recognise) shapes on the music: stepwise; arpeggios; octaves etc.
  - o Colour the middle line of music to give an anchor for visual processing.
  - o Use two colours (chosen by the student) for the tonic and dominant in a tonal piece.
  - o Visually mark the rhythms either with lines or colour for the main beats.
  - o **Note** – if your examination board is offering you reasonable adjustments because you are dyslexic or are neurodiverse in another way, then you should have extra time to prepare sight-reading in the exam. You should ask if you can make notes on the score during the preparation time if this helps. They should be prepared to do this and to provide a suitable copy on tinted paper, if that helps. You will need to take along your own coloured pens.
  - o Trace the melody with a finger on the score; draw it in the air and on paper.
  - o Walk, march, skip or run to different rhythms and tempi that are being played. This helps to encourage good listening.
- Try to avoid very cluttered pages of music which can be distracting. Cover over sections that aren't being played right now. Perhaps re-write some sections and print them out.
  - It may also be helpful to enlarge the music (this can also be done by exam Boards if requested and **if** you have proof of dyslexia or other neurodiversity)
  - It may be useful to print the music on to tinted paper **of the student's choice** and/or to enlarge it in some way. This is legal if the person using the music is dyslexic and needs this to make reading easier. However, you **must** have the original copy in your possession.

- It may be helpful to use a coloured overlay, but this must be of a colour chosen by the individual. If visual problems seem to exist, it is really important to seek a proper optometrist diagnosis. Visual difficulties may co-occur with dyslexia, DCD/dyspraxia and so on but **are not** a feature of those conditions.
- Sound out the rhythm alone first using tapping or clapping or singing to one sound.
- **Rhythm** is most important – try only playing the strong beats in the bar.
- Chunk information – practise aspects in isolation (e.g. rhythms, melodic patterns); practise recognising them and being able to play them as patterns.
- Use **multi-sensory approaches** to help with areas such as learning note names and rhythm patterns:
  - o Link the **feel** of the note (on piano, flute or whatever) with the letter name.
  - o Create a large staff on the floor using masking tape and jump to different notes. This employs movement (kinaesthetic learning).
  - o Use a board with felt if this isn't possible.
  - o Use flash cards to learn rhythms – pianists can tap them out on two knees to represent RH and LH.
  - o Pitch flash cards can be read in different orders.
  - o Use an erasable coloured highlighter pen to emphasise (decode) the key signature and accidentals throughout the score. For example there could be one colour for flats and one for sharps. In E<sup>b</sup> major, for example all the Bs could be highlighted if that works for the student. Ideally the student should do this for him/herself and choose the colours.
- On the other hand, it's possible to get too 'hung up' on the names of the notes, which may not always be needed, if the student can relate a particular blob at a particular place on the staff with the fingering on flute or cello or the place on the keyboard. (Viola players, using

alto clef often work for ages without knowing the name of the note they're playing!)

- Look at London College of Music's 'Stave House' which has excellent approaches to sight-reading. See <http://www.stavehouse.co.uk/about/>
- Try *Improve your sight-reading! Teacher's Book (Piano Grades 1 to 5)* by Paul Harris.
- When learning a new piece, some dyslexic people find it important to gain a 'whole' picture of the piece first rather than working in the conventional way, by building it up in small bits. This does not mean that final detail needs to be abandoned; it is just a different initial approach.

See Gillian Backhouse's article, 'A Pianist's Story' available from BDA Music and also as a fuller chapter in *Music and Dyslexia: Opening New Doors* (2001) ed. Miles & Westcombe, published Whurr.

- In any case, when sight-reading, **keep going** even if things are wrong.
- If you play in an **orchestra, band or other group** that uses written music, try to get hold of it in advance. If it helps, make copies of your parts and prepare them as suggested above (using colour, if that helps).
- Playing or singing in some sort of group can really help sight-reading.
- If it's difficult to look from the music to the conductor and back again, enlist the help of the person sitting next to you!
- **Find a sympathetic teacher:** someone who is prepared to listen to the student and not 'dictate' the approach. Everyone's different; every dyslexic individual is different. What works for one person doesn't necessarily work for someone else. It's important to try different approaches and see what works. Even very young pupils can make up their own minds about this and (for example) about what to write on a page of music that's going to help them. The teacher should try not to do this for them.

See *How to teach Instrumental and singing lessons* (2017) by Karen Marshall and Penny Stirling, published by Harper Collins.

- **Find a suitable music learning book/approach**

Again, what suits one student may not suit another. Try different ones. The 'Get Set Piano' series by Karen Marshall are particularly dyslexia-friendly.

- **Regular practice and repetition** is important.

- **Young pupils**

Don't push young pupils. Sight-reading may well not 'kick in' until the age of 10, or indeed really be needed until then.

If a child is struggling with learning to read (text) at school, learning to read music may be an extra burden.

### Further information

BDA Music booklet 'Dyslexia and Music' is available by emailing [bdamusicdyslexia@gmail.com](mailto:bdamusicdyslexia@gmail.com)

*Music and Dyslexia: A Positive Approach* (2008), ed. Miles, Westcombe & Ditchfield. Published by Wiley. Particularly Ch. 10 'Sight reading' by Sheila Oglethorpe and Ch. 11 'Sight-reading and memory' by Michael Lea.

*Music and Dyslexia: Opening New Doors* (2001) ed. Miles & Westcombe, published Whurr. Particularly Ch. 12 'My experiences with the problem of reading music' by Siw Wood.

*Instrumental music for dyslexics, a teaching handbook*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2002) by Sheila Oglethorpe. Published by Whurr.

*How to teach Instrumental and singing lessons* (2017) by Karen Marshall and Penny Stirling, published by Harper Collins. Particularly Ch. 40, 'Sight-reading'.

Contact the British Dyslexia Association Music Committee at  
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