

GOT NOTES? STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING NOTE READING

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12:30-1:15 p.m.

1) Say the alphabet forwards and backwards.

“In-school fieldtrip” using the staircases:

UP-alphabet forwards/DOWN-alphabet backwards

Spanish-speaking students have to learn new vowel sounds

(E) sounds like (A), and (I) sounds like (E)

Up and down direction seems to be hard for students to understand both on the staff and on their instruments; especially for cellos/basses. Up is toward the bridge.

2) Use your fingers to show the lines of the staff.

Point to the spaces your fingers, and ask the students to name the lines/spaces

Name the lines/spaces going up and down

Give the students the name of one space or line to start with

Drill treble, alto and bass clef in this manner

3) Ask the students to make up sayings for the lines and spaces.

TREBLE CLEF Lines: “Even George Bush Drives Fast”

Spaces: “F A C E”

ALTO CLEF Lines: “Fat Alley Cats Eat Garbage”

Spaces: “Great Big Dogs Fight”

BASS CLEF: Lines: “Giraffes Bend Down For Apples”

Spaces: “All Cows Eat Grass” or “All Cars Eat Gas”

4) Most method books stay on the D & A strings for a long time. Here are some ideas for getting the students to play on the other strings before they have to read the notes in the book or play them in sheet music:

Play *Mary Had a Little Lamb/Hot Cross Buns* on all the strings using the same fingerings.

Teach a G scale by rote using the same fingering as the D scale. (except for bass)

Make up different rhythm patterns by naming favorite foods, etc.

Do teacher-led warm-ups by asking the students to echo back notes on all the strings using simple patterns.

5) Teaching the “G” string

For violin & viola, say “A B C, 1 2 3”

For cello stay with the same 1,3,4 finger pattern and say “learn your ABC’s”

For bass, they can shift to the III position by playing with fingers 1,4-1(- means shift)

They like to learn to shift before the other students

It makes them feel special, and prepares them for tuning with harmonics

It gets them ready to play a high D scale

6) Teaching the “E & C” strings

Violin/Bass players will both have two sharps in a row on their “E” strings

Viola/Cello players can spell words both ways on the “C” strings

upwards *sort of* spells “deaf” but leaves out the letter “a”

downwards spells “fed

7) Give the students a visual study sheet with all the notes listed in parallel movement.

Refer to study sheet in packet. The names of the open string notes are listed. Ask the students to write in the other note names. Beneath the notes are the fingerings needed to play those notes. It's a good reference sheet if they need to find a note name. If they need to write a few note names periodically, they can do that at home. Their method book is theirs, so if they wish to use a PENCIL to do that occasionally, no harm done. THEY take on the responsibility to learn the names of the notes. Start asking the students what the notes look like on the staff, or where they are located. They need to learn that early. If they rely on fingerings, they start reading below the notes and then there are too many thoughts to process. They do far better to learn instant note recognition early on. Since each of the instruments uses different fingerings, it also saves time in rehearsal to only say note names as opposed to several different fingerings. Confusion can result if there are letters written in for other things such as what string the note is on, etc. Start expecting them to learn note names the first year of playing.

8) Included in this packet is a list of words that can be spelled using only the first seven letters of the alphabet. Make a set of cards that can be used in class as flash cards. Give each student a card with a word on it, and ask them to spell the word individually. Then they can all switch cards and spell their new word. If stickers or candy rewards work for you, perhaps give them skittles for spelling words. Try asking the entire class spell a word together in tempo. Each time you play the game, make the rules a little harder. If the word has two of the same letter, ask them to play two different "D's" for example. If there are three of the same letters, then the violin/viola players get to use their fourth fingers. Tell the students to pretend that their "A&D" string broke and all the notes have to be played on the other two strings. Or, tell them that no open string notes are allowed. They love the challenge, and it gives them drill practice on the note names in a fun way. Sometimes simply ask how many "A's they can find on their instrument, etc. Later when they learn the C scale and natural notes, introduce the fourth position to the cellists, as the note names are the same as first position a string lower. Then they can use the fourth position notes to spell some of the words. With the second year violinists/violists, you can drill third position notes with the cards. By the end of the second year, the students are quite comfortable with two octave scale warm-ups in C, G & D Maj. If you don't tell the students that something is difficult, they embrace the challenge, and make more progress than they ever thought possible.

9) Also included in this packet is a set of flash cards with note names on them. There are 16 cards, which you can color-code for each instrument, so that the kids don't get them mixed up. For example, make the violins pink, the violas blue, yellow for cello, and green for bass. For violin & viola, there are 4 open string notes, first, high second, and third finger notes on each. For cello, the notes are 4 open strings, first, third and fourth finger notes on each. For bass, there are 4 open strings, first, fourth, and then III position first finger notes on each string. Give each student a packet of flash cards to cut apart. Their parents can help drill them at home, because the names of the notes, how to finger them, and the string that each note is on are all included on the backside of each card. The helper does NOT need to be able to read music. Laminate your cards so that they can be re-used many times for testing the students. To make a game out of it, tell the first level students that they have to say and play (pluck) the notes at the same time as you show them the cards. Use an actual timer to test them. Other students love to help work the timer. In order to win a prize, I have set the expectation at 60 seconds or less to name & play all the notes. For my second year players, I set the expectation at 30 seconds or less. The second year players repeat the exercise at the beginning of the year, and I offer another prize incentive along with a grade. In my case, I make this worth a quarter of their grade and tell them that it is the most important test of the quarter. Some students can accomplish this in one day. Others need more repetition and drill. They can try as many times as they want within the first quarter, but DO set a deadline to end the testing. Generally, I'll end the activity by the start of the second quarter. Some days we'll spend the entire class on the activity. Sometimes they pair up or work in groups with like instruments. They genuinely want their friends to pass, and are very helpful to each

other. Perhaps allow a few tests each day. Gradually, more have passed than not. If you have some really slow students, put them into the hallway with a partner and keep moving the class ahead. If they are just lazy, they soon find out that it's way more fun to be a part of the class. If the opposite happens and there are some really sharp students, give them extra duets to work on out in the hallway if you're still drilling notes with the majority of the class. It takes consistency to send the message that it is important, but the time is well worth it later on, when preparing sheet music for a concert. Once you have accomplished this, reading sheet music is a breeze. The fastest times I have recorded to date were by a bass & cello player who both passed in 16 seconds. I try to look very serious when I am testing, and I turn the cards very quickly. If they are one second over the time, I won't pass them! I won't let them time each other either, but I will let a student work the timer next to me as I turn the cards. The Spanish-speaking students spend more time on the activity, but when they finally passed the test, they are very proud. It puts the entire class on the same playing field when it comes to playing sheet music. I borrowed the idea from a piano teacher who used her cards to initiate her students into the "One Minute Club". Most students prefer using sheet music, rather than staying in the method books at the second level. If you don't teach in your own feeder schools, then you can make sure that all the students have this common body of knowledge. Students won't become frustrated or feel left behind. A giant hurdle has been overcome. Be encouraging as they try to pass. The first step is just getting through all the cards. Congratulate them, even if it took 3 minutes! Urge them to try to better their own times until they reach their goal. Celebrate each attainment, even if it is a small increment. Write down the exact time it took them to test so that they can see their improvement. When they are testing, if they have the correct finger but the wrong note name, say "right finger, wrong name!" and if they play the wrong octave, say "wrong string". If they are getting close, I'll start to nod vigorously. They pick up on my enthusiasm and excitement, and enjoy the process. They basically have to decide that they want to do it, and drill is the key. They have such a feeling of accomplishment when they finally attain the goal. The success factor depends a great deal on how it's all presented. Make it fun! Create a sticker chart, and perhaps offer a grand prize for the fastest time in the class. A *Symphony* chocolate bar works great! The only student that I've had who never could attain the goal had a learning disability, but virtually all the rest of the students eventually attained the goal. It really shows the students that if they put their mind to it, and if they want it badly enough, they *CAN* do it.

10) Keep on drilling note names in different ways.

Try attaching note names to numbers and ask the students to play their telephone #

Some students will have problems with just one string.

Tell them to separate out the flash cards to represent notes on each string and practice one string at a time.

Try drilling a section of the orchestra on just one string while talking about what the notes look like on the staff. Show the sequence up and down, especially with notes on ledger lines.

Ask one student to come up and write a scale on the board at the beginning of class.

Start a scale around the room by telling each student to play one note of the scale and if they miss, the scale needs to start over with the first person again.

Have everyone play the scale together, only leave out one note intentionally and instead of the note, everyone has to do a body motion instead. Gradually leave out more and more notes making them think the note names.

Teach the D, G and C scales by rote the first year. It helps to know the notes on the instrument before the students have to read them.

11) The first year, it helps to separate the right hand, left hand and reading skills.

When learning sheet music, rather than writing in note names, ask the students to drill in various ways. For example:

1) Say the note names in tempo.

2) Use left hand silent fingering as you say the note names.

3) “Air bow”, or “shadow bow” in the crook of the arm to the correct rhythms. Try attaching bow speeds to note values. For example: (slow bow, fast, fast)

4) Play difficult measures first using pizzicato, then arco.

Assign each section of the orchestra a different drill and rotate the drills so that each section eventually does all four drills. The students are busy figuring out which drill they are doing, and so they don't get bored. Nor do they realize that they have just practiced a section four times! Hopefully, the students won't feel the need to write in note names.

12) A fun way to learn F natural, is to teach *Twinkle* in a minor key. Using the following chords as accompaniment: dm, gm, and A7, it will sound like a Hebrew dance. Just change the F#'s to F naturals, and B's to B flats. The students may already have *Twinkle* memorized, and then you can give them all sorts of bowing variations and rhythm patterns, which can make the song a fun way to end class, or begin class. (A piano introduction gets the students in their seats quickly...)

13) The first year of playing is a time to establish a pace of learning. It's far more important for the students to have a positive experience, than to require total perfection from them. I call it “discovery learning”. The students are so receptive and eager to learn. Try introducing some shifting and harmonics so that later on, they aren't scared to try it. Use TV jingles for fun tunes. Students in Boulder all know the C.U. fight song which is great for introducing G#'s, and B flats. The cellos can easily learn to play it in second position. Part 1 three times = low D, F#, G, G#, A, then three high D's and three low D's. Part 2 three times = high D, C, B, Bb, A, then three high D's, and three low D's. (Of course you have to yell “Go C.U.!” at the end).

14) Other miscellaneous fun ideas:

Have a “play-off” with the *Can-Can* tune by asking all the upper strings to stand. The first time, play it slowly, and each time play it a little faster. If the students make a mistake, they have to sit down. See who is left standing at the end.

Hand out some fiddle tunes for fun that they can try on their own. The *Devil's Dream* is a good one.

Any book that has unison tunes such as *Unitunes* or *Pop-Style Solos* is a good sight-reading tool. The *Pop-Style Solos* book has a CD accompaniment with each book.

Martin Norgaard's jazz books have some good echo patterns that can be done by rote with a CD accompaniment.

My Heart Will Go On is a harder tune, and has difficult rhythms, but I've just thrown it out there at the end of the year because almost all the kids have a CD already, and the tune is in the same key. Since I've already introduced G#'s and B flats, they can kind of pick out the tune and have fun with it. *Star Wars* is back in vogue again!

Set aside a “Talent Day” and let the kids prepare pieces together or perform solos from the back of book 1, or share other talents that they have.

Just before the December holidays, let the kids form small ensembles and then perform around the school. It's a good future recruiting tool.

Invite a younger class in to observe and ask questions of the students.

There's no end to the creative ideas that we can all use to generate excitement and keep the kids involved. The big message is that working hard and having fun are NOT mutually exclusive!!!