

# **A practical approach to Performing at Sight.**

Michael Lea 22/02/2010

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sight reading is often considered to be the primary difficulty that is faced by dyslexic musicians. It is certainly the difficulty that most often presents itself openly.

However from studying research into dyslexia I suggest that a much more complex picture of dyslexic traits is likely to be present amongst dyslexic musicians. Indeed for some, dyslexic traits might be an advantage and even an essential part of the "brain soup" that enables them to be musicians, the particular mix of dyslexic traits determining whether the musician is naturally a memoriser, an improviser or a sight reader.

For some sight reading can be alarming. For others memorising can seem to be impossible. For yet others the idea of improvising is frightening. Yet all these skills can be studied and learnt. It does though help to be good at one or another to start with. Or rather it does help to think you are good at one or another to start with: for example the person who thinks of themselves as a good sight reader may be good at performing at sight but is not necessarily playing all the notes. On the other hand the musician who is diligently playing all the notes might be poor at performing at sight.

In considering **performing at sight**, I suggest the following approach, an approach which works for all whether dyslexic or not. It is though particularly important for dyslexic musicians.

### **SEE, PLAN, DO, CHECK**

Things to think of when **seeing** a piece of new music for the first time include:

#### **Key signature:**

How many flats or sharps. Which are they? Which key is it in? Major or minor?

#### **Time signature:**

How many beats in a bar?

#### **Speed:**

- a) Any words that give some ideas of speed. Any metronome marks.
- b) Look for general idea of speed. An idea can be had from an overall view of the score.
- c) What speed CAN you play the piece? Look for fast or complex passages.

#### **Style:**

Who wrote the piece? What is the title? When was the piece written?

#### **Look through the whole piece:**

- a) Quickly pass over the parts you can play easily: Look as closely as necessary at the parts that might be difficult for you.
- b) in an ensemble look for solo passages or other "exposed" passages.

## **PLAN**

**Reflect** over all the things you have noted initially.

### **Additionally:**

Note what you have to do **to make the style work** What is the "feel" of the music?

Decide as to how ideal performance would go.

Note the practicalities.

In what state is your instrument/voice at that moment?

If playing as part of an ensemble or section in an orchestra,

a) what is your role?

b) Look at who you are playing with. Be aware of the acoustic. Study the conductor, (see note 1)

Decide, based on these observations, about whether the conditions are helpful or unhelpful.

**Sum up** your thoughts and reflections and decide how you are going to play on this particular occasion. Can you "go for it", or do you "play it safe"?

a) If playing on your own you have control over all aspects of your performance. Prepare to play the piece so that you can navigate the most difficult parts successfully.

b) If accompanying: The soloist is in charge and needs your support.

c) As part of an ensemble. Be a team player or soloist where appropriate.

**Calm yourself.** There are many ways of doing this without resorting to Beta Blockers. Bear in mind when learning how to cope with stress, that over time sustained stress will cause damage to yourself.

## **DO**

There is much to think about when **playing**. Allow your self to think and breath.

**Relax.** Listen to the others, their breathing, all the little noises before a note.

If there is a conductor work out where in relation to his beat is the beat of the music. This can vary considerably.

If playing in a section **Osmosis** is the key. Watch the leader. As a section player your job is to accompany the section leader at all times. (How the section leader's playing interacts with the conductor and the leader of the orchestra is advanced performance at sight technique not covered here). Focus on important notes. For instance placing the first note of any passage is important. Placing the second note of any passage is of crucial importance as it sets the speed. Where and how the last note of every bar is played determines the placing of the first note of the next bar. This process becomes more complex, and more fun, when considering which notes establish the harmony or make a running passage work. The scope is endless.

Concentrate on the musical idea that you are trying to put across in the context of the

ensemble. The magic is that your fingers will find their own way. In the same way when walking people think about where they are walking to, who they are walking with etc.. Only if the terrain is challenging do walkers think about each step. If the terrain is too challenging then walking ceases.

In performance: focus on keeping the time going, playing in tune and the musical idea.

Start with the first note and make all the following notes "work" in relation to the first note.

In an ensemble or accompanying, do not get in the way. Add to the performance however little the addition may be.

In accompanying or ensemble, play the things the soloist at that particular time needs to hear in a way that enhances the soloists performance. It is not always necessary to play every note. Playing in time and in tune is necessary - always. Thus the rule here, as in ensemble playing is "If in doubt leave it out". "Bouncing" through a part becomes an art in itself that can bring life to a performance.

I hope the idea is clear that all kinds of things are going on when performing at sight, and that there is no limit to the number of factors that need to be taken into account.

## **CHECK**

Handling failure is important.. On the principal of "half empty - half full" it is, I suggest, **helpful to congratulate yourself** on what has been successful and learn from what has failed. Some "accidents" sound brilliant, in which case working out what happened enables the performer to add to their repertoire. Other failures might require the performer to improve their technique or some aspect of their playing.

It is important to bear in mind that a successful professional musician will have honed their performing at sight technique over years. A symphonic musician will have studied their parts in all the works of major composers. For instance it is possible to buy books with the complete bass parts of the symphonies of Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky etc etc.. There are comprehensive collections of "excerpt" books. In addition the player will make their own collection of awkward passages. While these books come all ready "marked up" with bowings and sometimes fingerings, the player will add in their own as well.

Given this extensive knowledge, then performing a new piece at sight becomes much easier. It is also the case that "sight reading" in an audition is a complete misnomer. A well prepared performer is unlikely to be presented with a passage that is new.

The mind is wonderful, it works best left to its own devices. So relax and allow it to work. Perhaps this is true magic, for concentrating on the musical idea can be enough for it to happen. One's mind and body released to 'do its own thing' can.

Prof T.R. Miles writes on the cover of the book he has edited, (Dyslexia & Stress 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, published by Whurr 2004 ) "*most of us experience stress at some time in our lives, but experience suggests that dyslexics are particularly vulnerable to it.* "

Clearly for a nervous dyslexic musician performing at sight will be difficult. Here are a few ideas on how to deal with stress and nerves as a performing musician at every level. For instance I hope that the beginner, who might be put off by performing nerves, might benefit from these strategies and add their own.

I suggest that teachers are at all times aware that their attitude to their pupil in lessons is carried onto the stage by the pupil. Thus it is important for teachers to be positive at all times, indeed the words 'growing', 'enthusiasm', 'wonder' etc are apt to the learning process. I suggest that the pupil treat themselves with the same consideration. After all the pupil is really their own teacher, while the teacher is really a guide.

**Dealing with stress and nerves.** The primary aim is to use stress and nerves to enhance one's performance. Being on edge can enhance whatever musical idea is being portrayed. Fingers can 'stamp' with anger. Calm in the midst of turmoil can be made all the more intense.

There are various tricks and strategies to deal with nerves and stress. Some of these can be used to fool one's body into not realising you are nervous and can be applied to many different areas of life.

**Symptoms of nerves** can be:

- a) **cold hands.** Thinking your hands warm, can make them warm. Because your hands are warm your body forgets it is nervous.
- b) **a dry mouth.** In this case licking your tongue over the back of your teeth produces saliva. Because your mouth is now moist your body forgets it is nervous.
- c) **Stiffness.** It is important to play in a way that is supple. Movement can happen internally. In general, clenching and hugging happens naturally; thus working on opening and lifting is needed particularly in stressful situations.
- d) **Negative feelings.** It is important to feel positive. There is always something to feel good about even in the most negative situation. It helps to congratulate others around you. For instance anyone playing a solo genuinely deserves praise and encouragement.
- e) **Shaking bow.** In addition to the above, think of the soft suspension of a luxury car. Hold the bow in such a way as to give it room. In practise find out how to make the bow judder along the string by bowing very slowly and stickily. Then do the opposite.
- f) **Not breathing.** Breathe out before you play. At least you start with some fresh oxygen inside you.
- g) **Tight bow/fingers.** Think expansively, huge, large, fat, big. Carry your arms on your shoulders.
- h) **Fright.** Imagine a situation in which you are fearful. Still in your imagination calm yourself down and imagine playing through your fear,
- i) **Weakness.** In a tense situation it is common to lose strength. I was once told that matadors lose over 50% of their strength when faced in the ring by a bull.

The answer is to have enough reserves of strength to be able to lose most of it and still have sufficient.

- j) **Mistakes.** What is a mistake? Mistakes sometimes sound good. Good or bad, mistakes are to be learnt from. When evaluating mistakes having a realistic idea of your own capabilities is important. The ultimate test of your ability to play a solo is to pick your instrument up in the middle of the night, and, without any preparation at all, play the solo straight off. How you play the solo is the standard of your worst performance. Improve on this and you will improve your public performance.

This list of symptoms of nerves and strategies to deal with them is not exhaustive. Rather it is a guide. The idea is to recognise symptoms and then look for ways of handling the symptoms. Everyone will have a different approach. The important thing is to know there are answers.

## **CODA**

As a coda I commend the advice of Professor T.R. Miles in his summing up chapter 'Some Final Thoughts'(p-192/193. Dyslexia & Stress 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, EdT.R.Miles published by Whurr 2004 ) .

He writes:

*"Laughter is of course one of the best antidotes to stress. Where there was dyslexia in a family, some of the happiest families I have met were those who were able to laugh at the mishaps and vagaries that regularly arise when one or more members of the family are dyslexic. To laugh at dyslexics is criminal; to laugh with conveys empathy and understanding."*

I suggest the following paragraph is also highly relevant:

*"It is, of course, a very basic principle when one is helping people to change their behaviour that one ignores as far as possible the 'unwanted' behaviour and gives high praise for any behaviour, however minimal, that is in the right direction. "* These are the words of a man with a lifetime of experience and great knowledge.

Good luck and have fun. It is a wonderful world out there.

Michael Lea 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004. Revised slightly 18/02/2010

## **OPTIONAL NOTE**

**Conductors.** The actual mechanics of conducting can be taught in a short time. Say an hour. Learning to conduct takes a lifetime and can only be learnt by doing it. It is

said that 50% of conducting is musical and 50% is psychological, learning to handle musicians. For the performing musician therefore the conductor is not necessarily a help and indeed can sometimes be a major hindrance. In the international survey of stress in orchestras by the late Dr Ian James, conductors were perceived by musicians as the primary source of stress. As a principal bass player I see helping conductors as a major part of the job