

Perspectives on Sight Reading for the Advanced Piano Student

Jessica Nilles
David Korevaar

Why should we sight read?

- Good for gigs
- Ability to quickly learn music
- Chamber music parties
- Strengthens all piano and musicianship skills

When should we sight read?

- As often as possible
- Sight reading in the lesson
- Encouraging and assigning sight reading materials
- All pianists should read voraciously

How should we sight read?

- Attitude counts!
- Rhythmic continuity
- Pre-reading?
- Sight singing?
- Fluency with basic keyboard formulas
- Eye movement
- Musicality
- Ensemble reading with a partner

What should we sight read?

- Materials at a lower level than current repertoire
- Progressively arranged materials
- Pieces of a wide variety of style periods
- Anthologies
- IMSLP
- Four-hand repertoire
- Hymns
- Collaborative repertoire

Materials

Baroque

J.S. Bach – Anna Magdalena Book

Often used in repertoire as an introduction to Bach's keyboard writing. These make appropriate sight reading exercises for students who need to be more exposed to contrapuntal writing and voicing of the Baroque era.

J.S. Bach – Wilhelm Friedemann Bach Book

Like the Anna Magdalena Book, some of these pieces may be used as sight reading exercises to expose the student to Baroque styles and writing.

George Frideric Handel – A Handel Album: The Easiest Piano Pieces (ed. Scholtz)

This book contains Handel's easiest keyboard works. The levels of these pieces range from 3 to 6.

Domenico Scarlatti – An Introduction to his Keyboard Works (ed. Halford)

These pieces are some of the easiest by Scarlatti. The easiest pieces in this book are level 4.

Classical

Thomas Attwood – Easy Progressive Lessons: Four Sonatinas (ed. Jones)

These are pedagogical pieces which serve as a great introduction to classical styles. They are multi-movement sonatinas – the first sonatina is level 3.

C.P.E. Bach – Little pieces (ed. Vrieslander)

This collection includes many short pieces, ideal for sight reading. There is a variety of levels, and teachers should be judicious in picking appropriate pieces for individual students.

J.C. Bach and Francesco Pasquale Ricci – 14 pieces (ed. Hinson)

These pieces are arranged progressively and guide students through beginning stages of sight reading and finger training. Pieces included range from levels 5 to 6.

Ludwig van Beethoven – An Introduction to his Piano Works (ed. Palmer)

This collection includes a variety of easier Beethoven works, including some of the Bagatelles (Op. 119), country dances, menuets, and écosaisais.

Georg Benda –12 Sonatinas (ed. Jones)

These are all one movement sonatinas around level 6; a great addition to the sonatina genre.

Muzio Clementi – Sonatinas, Op. 36

These popular sonatinas include idiomatic classical writing that students will find satisfying to play, but not as frustrating as many of the Mozart and Haydn sonatas.

Anton Diabelli – 11 Sonatinas, Opp. 151 and 168 (ed. Palmer)

These pieces give more insight in the sonatina genre. Students will find them satisfying to play, since they sound more difficult than they actually are.

J.L. Dussek – Six Sonatinas, Op. 19 (ed. Salter)

These pieces exhibit fuller textures than some of the Clementi sonatinas and are satisfying to play. They are around levels 6 and 7.

Franz Joseph Haydn – Dances and Marches

These pieces are all quite short and can easily be used for sight reading purposes. Minuets, German dances, and marches are all included in the Henle edition.

Franz Joseph Haydn – Six Sonatinas (ed. Palmer)

These six works are Hob. XVI/4, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 – often categorized as divertimentos or sonatas instead. These have shorter, easier movements than many of the other Haydn sonatas, however. They might be useful to read through once students have read through easier sonatinas (by Hook, Dussek, Clementi, etc.).

James Hook – Twelve Sonatinas, Op. 12 (ed. Salter)

Many of the first movements of these sonatinas are one page, making them ideal for sight reading.

Friedrich Kuhlau – Sonatinas Opp. 20 & 55

Like the Clementi sonatinas, these are longer works than some of the easier one or two page sonatinas of other Classical composers. The first movements are well-known, but it would be worth reading through the other movements as well.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – An Introduction to his Keyboard Works (ed. Palmer)

This book includes the easiest of Mozart's keyboard works. There is also useful information at the front of the book concerning style and performance practice.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – Six Viennese Sonatinas

These sonatinas are more difficult than the works in the above book but are still a good introduction to Mozart's works. They are also more difficult and longer than some of the other sonatinas listed here.

Alexander Reinagle – 24 Short and Easy Pieces

The pieces in this book would be a great starting point for sight reading for students who have a lot of trouble reading. They are very easy and extremely short – the first few pieces are only a couple of lines long. These pieces are arranged progressively.

Daniel Gottlob Türk – Sixty Pieces for Aspiring Players, Books 1 & 2

The 120 pieces are arranged progressively and are also divided into four parts. The first part contains short pieces in two parts and begins at level 1. The most difficult pieces are around level 7.

Samuel Wesley – Twelve Sonatinas, Op. 4 (ed. Roberts)

These are all single-movement sonatinas, around levels 6 and 7. The writing is "Viennese" in style with some Baroque influence.

Romantic

Johann Burgmüller – 25 Progressive Pieces, Op. 100

These pieces are tuneful and can encourage the student to sight read musically. Students are exposed to pieces that provide problems with musicality, including phrasing and dynamics.

Frédéric Chopin – An Introduction to his Piano Works (ed. Palmer)

This collection contains many of the more accessible works by Chopin. Students can also read and explore stylistic concepts, such as rubato, ornamentation, and pedaling.

César Franck – short pieces from *L'Organiste*

Originally conceived for the harmonium, many of these pieces work just as well on the piano. These pieces can introduce students to French styles, with interesting harmonic writing and contrapuntal textures. Many of these pieces sit around levels 6-8.

Enrique Granados – Stories of the Young, Op. 1

Not all of the pieces in this set would be accessible for sight reading purposes – however, nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 would be good options. Many of these pieces use similar textures to those in Schumann’s *Scenes from Childhood* and *Album for the Young*.

Edvard Grieg – An Introduction to his Piano Works (ed. Halford)

This collection contains many of Grieg’s easier pieces. Pieces in this book range from level 5 to level 8.

Cornelius Gurlitt – Six Sonatinas, Op. 54 (ed. Palmer)

These pieces provide further exploration in the sonatina genre, but in the Romantic era. Numbers 1 and 5 are especially satisfying to play and offer a lot of musical opportunities.

Cornelius Gurlitt – Albumleaves for the Young, Op. 101

There are 20 pieces in this set, all short; the pieces range from level 3 to level 6.

Cornelius Gurlitt – Little Flowers, Op. 205

This collection contains pieces that would be easier to read than the Gurlitt sonatinas – many being around levels 4 and 5. Pieces have either a simple melody/accompaniment texture or are based on rhythmic motives.

Stephen Heller – 25 Melodious Studies, Op. 45 (ed. Palmer)

These well-known works would make a great collection to read through to further explore the Romantic era. Many of the pieces in this collection are levels 6-8.

Génari Karganov – Album for the Young, Op. 25

This set contains eight short character pieces. They make a nice addition to the “Album for the Young” genre – pieces are around levels 6 and 7.

Theodor Kirchner – New Scenes of Childhood, Op. 55

These pieces reflect the influence of Schumann. There are 25 one-page pieces in the set, and they would be interesting to read alongside Schumann’s *Album for the Young*.

Theodor Kirchner – Miniatures, Op. 62

These works are a bit more difficult than *New Scenes of Childhood*. Again, the pieces are shorter – many are only one page.

Theodor Kullak – Scenes from Childhood, Opp. 62 & 81

There are twelve short pieces in each set – all are one or two pages long. All would be suitable for sight reading, ranging from levels 4 to 7.

Felix Le Couppey – L'Alphabet, Op. 17

This is a set of etudes – all around level 4. Each etude is preceded by a very short exercise, guiding the student through various patterns that can be found in its subsequent etude. These are good pieces to find and identify patterns while (and perhaps before) reading.

Frank Lynes – Four Analytical Sonatinas, Op. 39

These pieces are perhaps more Classical in style than Romantic. Each movement is labeled (song form, theme and variations, rondo form, dance form, sonata form); they can serve as an introduction to the sonatina genre. Many of the pieces are easier than other composers' sonatinas.

Edward MacDowell – Woodland Sketches, Op. 51

Not all of the pieces in this book would be appropriate for sight reading. Ones that could be used are nos. 1, 3, 5, 6, and 8. The easier pieces are around level 5.

Theodor Oesten – Maiblümchen, Op. 61

Many of these pieces are extremely short and are nice character pieces. 25 pieces are included and sit around levels 3 and 4.

Robert Schumann – Album for the Young, Op. 68

Arranged progressively, these pieces range from level 2 to level 7. Many of the pieces in the first half would work especially well as sight reading exercises.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky – Album for the Young, Op. 39

These are 24 easier pieces, probably modeled after Schumann's work of the same name ranging from level 4 to level 8.

20th Century

Samuel Adler – Gradus, Books I and II

Arranged progressively, these pieces were written with the intent to expose students' ears to the diverse styles and techniques of the 20th century, including whole tone scales/harmonies, modal writing, irregular rhythms, shifting metric patterns, bi-tonality, cluster

sounds, twelve-tone and serial techniques, spatial notation, fragment notation, and extended techniques.

Béla Bartók – Mikrokosmos, Bks. 1-5

Also a method, these pieces intend to cover technique issues. We suggest using Books 1-5 for sight reading purposes. Some pieces even have a second piano part – ensemble reading can be especially useful in teaching sight reading.

Aaron Copland – Piano Album

These pieces explore some of the more lyrical and jazz-inspired side of 20th-century music. Some pieces would most likely be too difficult to sight read, but pieces such as “Petit Portrait,” “Down a Country Lane,” and “In Evening Air” would be accessible.

Norman Dello Joio – Diversions

Fugue-like writing, chromaticism, bitonality, triads, and seventh chords are all featured in these pieces. The “Arietta” is nocturne-like and is especially lovely to play.

Norman Dello Joio – Lyric Pieces for the Young

These, along with Diversions, can be used to promote musical sight reading. Some of the pieces require a deeper level of musicianship and all have a lot of color and character.

Ross Lee Finney – 24 Inventions

Each piece presents some sort of “puzzle” and introduces the student primarily to twelve-tone writing. The pieces are accessible, beginning with easier pieces that are about level 4 or 5.

Jean Francaix – Dix Pièces enfantines pour le Piano

These ten pieces are arranged progressively and present a great introduction to French and neoclassical styles. Easier pieces feature a lot of five-finger patterns but are not limited only to those patterns. Pieces also feature other compositional devices including imitative counterpoint, hemiola, ostinato, and modal writing.

Reinhold Glière – Eight Easy Pieces, Op. 43

While written in the twentieth century, these are romantic in style, with plenty of opportunities for highly expressive and musical playing. These pieces would also provide more of a challenge to read – many of the pieces are levels 7 and 8.

Morton Gould – Ten for Deborah

The pieces included in this collection are progressively arranged. All are accessible for the advanced piano student to sight read, ranging from levels 3-5.

Alexander Gretchaninoff – A Child's Day, Op. 109

This collection is satisfying to read through, containing pieces with a wide variety of characters. The first four pieces would be especially accessible to read – all of the pieces are around levels 5 and 6.

Paul Hindemith – The Hindemith Collection (ed. Hinson)

This book is divided into two parts – intermediate level pieces and moderate to difficult level pieces. The intermediate level pieces would be most appropriate for sight reading. Some of the pieces include “Let's Build a Town” and “Three Easy Pieces” (from *Kleine Klaviermusik*, Op. 45 no. 4).

Jacques Ibert – Histoires

These are great character pieces from the French tradition. They would provide a challenge for the student to read but are pianistic. Nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 would be the most readable for the student.

Dmitri Kabalevsky – 24 Pieces for Children, Op. 39

These pieces are progressively arranged and offer the easiest compositions by Kabalevsky. The first few pieces are only a line long and are level 1. Many of the pieces are also highly patterned and are a great way to study various compositional devices in simpler forms (ostinato, counterpoint, mode mixture, etc.)

Dmitri Kabalevsky – Five Sets of Variations, Op. 51

The sets of variations are appealing pieces based on various folk tunes. Students could read each theme and each variation as separate exercises, rather than tackling the works as whole entities.

Dmitri Kabalevsky – Six Preludes and Fugues, Op. 61

These neo-Baroque pieces are great for developing contrapuntal sight reading. Both the preludes and fugues are accessible – the fugues mostly have two or three voices. All are around levels 7 and 8.

Aram Khachaturian – Adventures of Ivan

Many of the pieces in this collection are levels 4, 5, and 6. They vary in character and texture and give the student the chance to pay attention to articulation.

Bohuslav Martinu – Spring in the Garden

These are longer pieces with a lot of different characters. The writing and style is comparable to Dello Joio, and many of the pieces are level 6.

Kirke Mechem – Whims: Fifteen Easy Vignettes for Piano

Pieces in this set are all around level 5, brief, and satisfying to read through. Many of the pieces are written in a modal context.

Gian-Carlo Menotti – Poemetti

There are twelve short pieces in this set – all levels 4-6. Menotti uses a wide variety of meters, including mixed meter.

Gérard Meunier – Le château du temps perdu

These pieces were especially enjoyable to read through – all are levels 5-8. They each contribute to a story and include illustrations. The writing is Impressionistic and colorful.

Darius Milhaud – La muse ménagère, Op. 245

The 15 pieces in this collection are all about a page long. However, they are more challenging than the pieces in *L'enfant aime*.

Darius Milhaud – L'enfant aime, Op. 289

These pieces are mostly linear in nature and include a lot of dissonant writing. They would be good exercises in reading accidentals. All five pieces in this set are about level 5.

Robert Muczynski – Seven, Op. 30

These pieces would give the student a reading challenge and contain a lot of chromatic writing. Most of the pieces are highly patterned, however – some even have ostinato patterns.

Vincent Persichetti – Serenade No. 7, Op. 55

There are six pieces included – all around levels 2 and 3. They are meant for children but are still appealing to older students.

Vincent Persichetti – Piano Sonatinas, Nos. 1-6

Nos. 4-6 are much easier than nos. 1-3 and are levels 3 and 4. They are interesting because they contribute to the sonatina genre but within 20th-century idioms, including dissonant writing.

Vincent Persichetti – Four Arabesques, Op. 141

All of these pieces are about level 3. The pieces feature dissonant writing, linear textures, imitative textures, and clef changes.

Francis Poulenc – Suite française pour piano

French writing that reflects the Renaissance era can be found here, with modal writing and dance rhythms. Not all of the pieces would be good for sight reading purposes – Pavane, Complainte, and Sicilienne would be good options, however.

Francis Poulenc – Villageoises

These pieces are a bit challenging to read but are among the easier works by Poulenc. Petite Ronde is the easiest piece in the set and is about level 6.

Sergei Prokofiev – Music for Young People, Op. 65

The 12 pieces in this collection contain a lot of “wrong-note” writing. Many of the pieces are levels 6 and 7.

Vladimir Rebikov – The Christmas Gift

These are very easy pieces – levels 2 and 3 – with a lot of character. They are also quite short, making them useful for sight reading.

Vladimir Rebikov – Silhouettes, Op. 31

These pieces are also easier – but not quite as easy as those in “The Christmas Gift.” Nine pieces are included; most are at least two pages.

Wallingford Riegger – New and Old: Twelve Pieces for Piano

Each piece uses a certain compositional device (reflected in the titles), all of which are outlined in the introduction of the book. Titles include “The Augmented Triad,” “The Twelve Tones,” “Seven Times Seven,” and “Polytonality.”

Joaquín Rodrigo – The Rodrigo Collection (ed. Hinson)

The ten pieces in this book are organized into two parts: early to middle intermediate level pieces and late intermediate level pieces. The first five pieces would be appropriate to use for sight reading. A nice introduction to Spanish style.

Pierre Sancan – Pièces Infantines (Vol. 1)

There are six pieces total in this French collection – the first three could be used as reading exercises.

Erik Satie – Sports et divertissements

These pieces include illustrations and commentary – and they don't have barlines! Generally, they are not difficult technically, but students may have a difficult time understanding them musically.

Robert Starer – Sketches in Color

There are two sets of *Sketches in Color* – the first set is easier and perhaps better suited for sight reading. These pieces are great for introducing various 20th-century sounds and styles. One piece (“Grey”) even explores twelve tone writing.

Marko Tajčević – Lieder von der Murinsel

These are easier pieces (levels 3-4) that are arrangements of folksongs from Yugoslavia. Comparisons may be made to Bartók, and there is a lot of rhythmic and modal writing.

Further Reading

- Craige, Mary Ann. "A Survey of the Instruction of Sight-Reading Skills to Undergraduate Piano Majors in Selected NASM Colleges and Universities." PhD diss., University of North Texas, 1993.
- Goalsby, Thomas W. "Eye Movement in Music Reading: Effects of Reading Ability, Notational Complexity, and Encounters." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, No. 1 (Fall 1994): 77-96.
- Kornicke, Eloise. "An Exploratory Study of Individual Difference Variables in Piano Sight-Reading Achievement." *The Quarterly* 6, No. 1 (Spring 1995): 56-79.
- Kostka, Marilyn J. "The Effects of Error-Detection Practice on Keyboard Sight-Reading Achievement of Undergraduate Music Majors." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 48, No. 2 (Summer 2000): 114-122.
- Lannert, Violet, and Marguerite Ullman. "Factors in the Reading of Piano Music." *The American Journal of Psychology* 58, No. 1 (January 1945): 91-99.
- Magrath, Jane. *The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co, 1995.
- Pogemiller Farley, Alison Lauren. "The Relationship Between Musicians' Internal Pulse and Rhythmic Sight-Reading." PhD diss., University of Washington, 2014.
- Spillman, Robert. *Sightreading at the Keyboard*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1990.
- Wiley, Charles Albert. "An Experimental Study of Tachistoscopic Techniques in Teaching Rhythmic Sightreading in Music." Ed. D. Dissertation, University of Colorado, 1962.

Sight-reading, or sight reading, or sightreading, or prima vista playing is that ability to play from the first reading of a music score, without prior practice. It may be better termed "sight playing" or "playing at sight." Pianists have to read two staves instead of three. Some of the problems encountered by piano students when sight-reading are as follows:

- Having to look at the hands and the keyboard when reading
- Consistently playing the wrong notes
- Using the wrong fingers, which get in the way of a smooth scale or arpeggio
- Losing the beat
- Getting lost in the score (because of having to look down at the hands)
- Getting confused by the notation
- Not comfortable with sight-reading or anxiety about doing it

Piano Book. Progressively teaches the student to sight read through observation and study of phrase shape, melodic outline, harmonic structure and overall rhythmic feeling of the music. *Practical Sight Reading Exercises for Piano Students, Book 1*. By Boris Berlin and Claude Champagne Piano Book Item: 00-V1031. \$6.99. 165 collaborators including university professors, private piano teachers, and students were consulted on the creation of this project. Because of its non-subjective nature, SASR has become the International Standard for assessing Sight Reading. Test now. Sasr reports. The test is administered electronically via a computer and piano through a MIDI connection. Subjects are given an excerpt to read at sight for which they are assessed for correct rhythms and notes. The subject is given one attempt to read the excerpt. The excerpt begins at a level one difficulty. Depending on the score, the tes Intermediate students can tackle repertoire a couple of grades lower than their current level. For more advanced players, how about taking a set of pieces such as the Beethoven Bagatelles, Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives* or Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and committing to learning one a week in this way? Devote 10% of your practice time to it, and no more. It doesn't count unless you play it for someone at the end, though! What do you think of doing sight reading with duet pieces? That will keep the students at pace and work their reading skills at a certain tempo. Graham Fitch August 1, 2013 at 7:34 am - Reply. Hi Purwati. Thanks for your comments! Actually, I think duets and any kind of ensemble music is probably the best way to stimulate the sight reading muscle. Buy *Piano Specimen Sight-Reading Tests, Grade 8 (ABRSM Sight-reading)* by ABRSM (ISBN: 9781860969126) from Amazon's Book Store. Everyday low prices and free delivery on eligible orders. Buy *Piano Specimen Sight-Reading Tests, Grade 7 (ABRSM Sight-reading)*. Buy *Piano Specimen Sight-Reading Tests, Grade 7 (ABRSM Sight-reading)* by ABRSM (ISBN: 9781860969119) from Amazon's Book Store. Everyday low prices and free delivery on eligible orders. Eight Disney solos perfect for the elementary-level Piano student. Excellent supplements to any Piano method. Also includes lyrics!