

En route to Musical Excellence

Part V

Music Literacy

by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley

Without literacy today there can no more be a musical culture than there can be a literary one.

Zoltán Kodály

Imagine how efficiently a rehearsal could be run if all of your students could read music! The time spent laboring on learning notes would no longer be needed and more effort could be spent on discovering the beauty of the music.



Clapping an excerpt from the octavo.

Certainly there is a great distance between having no musical experience and being able to read fluently. To become fluent requires extensive musical experience and daily personal practice.

Your students' literacy skills, however, are no doubt strengthening in your choir rehearsals. Each time students can identify a song by following your hand signs, by clapping a rhythm from stem notation or by singing a song in *solfa*, following note heads on a staff, they are demonstrating reading skills.

Our goal, though, is for students to be able to think the sounds while looking at an unfamiliar piece of music and then producing those sounds, eventually leading to their musical independence. This task can be exciting and challenging.

Music literacy is a process of building on foundations or moving from the known to the unknown. The children must first experience producing, responding to, and moving to sounds before they are ready to apply a sophisticated written language. This process is much like children learning to speak fluently, to listen intently, and to attain highly developed visual and auditory discrimination skills before being able to read words.

In general, the earlier children are involved with music the earlier



Singing/reading with hand signs and solfa.

they will be ready for literacy. Preliminary experiences should include singing games, games and songs involving the total body, rhythmic activities feeling simple combinations of quarter note, its equivalent rest, and its division in a variety of ways, *seeing* the symbols for these notes and rests, and relating them to an established pulse which can be played on body percussion and unpitched instruments, stepped in place and stepped in space. Once the students have had a multitude of experiences, they are ready to improvise using these known elements.

Pitch notation, in the same way as rhythm, begins with a limited scope. The descending minor third (*sol-mi*) and the three note *mi-re-do* are familiar to the ear and voice and

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Student using Kodály signing on a piece of music. "Guess which one?"

provide successful points of departure. For further information on possible sequencing of notes and pitches, I suggest **Jane Frazee's *Discovering Orff*** (Schott Music Corporation) and **Lois Choksy's *The Kodály Context*** (Prentiss-Hall Publishers).

While deciding where to begin, keep in mind the developmental level of your group as a whole. The materials chosen should be challenging enough to be interesting, but easy enough to ensure success.

Many books containing sequenced exercises for the purposes of improving literacy skills are available. The following recommended collections of exercises provide both simple and progressively more difficult reading experiences.

Kodály, Zoltán. *333 Elementary Exercises*. Boosey & Hawkes, 1963. This is one of many Kodály exercise collections, the others being more demanding and requiring further experience. *333 Elementary Exercises* offers extensive practice with each interval and turn of

melody. Beginning exercises use only *do* and *re* (tonic *do* system) and contain simple rhythm patterns. The book advances from this initial stage to more difficult challenges.

Bacon, Denise. *50 Easy Two-Part Exercises*. European American Music Corporation, 1977. This book contains short, easily mastered exercises which help prepare students for two-part singing and provides a foundation for eventual three- and four-part *a cappella* singing. The purpose of this collection is to develop sight reading skills and build secure intonation. All of the exercises are written in stick notation, and are then repeated in staff notation in the second half of the book.

Szonyi, Erzsebet. *Bicinia Americana I*. Boosey & Hawkes, 1984. This collection of 22 Traditional American Children's Songs contains easy, two-part unaccompanied contrapuntal settings including *Star Light, Star Bright*; *What'll We Do With the Baby*; and *Who's That Tapping at the Window?*

Jennings, Kenneth. *Sing Legato*. Neil A. Kjos Music Co., 1982. *Sing Legato* contains songs which emphasize interval recognition aurally and visually. Also included in the book are vocalises which focus on basic kinds of musical articulation (*legato*, *staccato*, and *marcato*), the development of good tone, use of breath, crescendo, decrescendo, and flexibility, all of which aid tremendously in the development of musicianship.

All of these exercises will help to strengthen your students' overall reading abilities, and you will find the quality of singing improving as well.

Reading exercises should be kept fresh and sung musically. It is counterproductive to emphasize literacy if it results in unmusical music pedagogy.

Once your students have had ample experience with exercises provided by the teacher, it can be tremendously rewarding for them to write their own exercises or pieces, and perhaps sing and play them as a group.

In addition to the above ideas, selecting phrases from the music as sight-reading exercises not only helps your students learn the pieces, but allows them the satisfaction of applying newly acquired knowledge directly to the music.

While it is important to spend time in rehearsal with literacy, it is extremely advantageous to work on these skills outside of the rehearsal as well. At the House of Hope Presbyterian Church Choir School, it has been delightful to observe the positive results in pairing a small group of children with a tutor (most of them members of the adult choir or those students of the Choir School who have had a great deal of musical experience) for the purpose of improving music reading and writing skills.



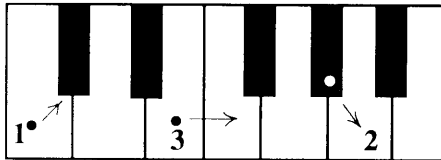
It is important to follow the score with a finger in the initial stages. The director can see easily if the student is tracking correctly.

Exercises should be selected to reinforce material introduced in the choir rehearsal. For example, once the interval of a half step has been sung, shown on the chalkboard or other visual, and discovered in the music, further work with the tutor, a piano keyboard and paper and pencil, can greatly strengthen the students' understanding.

The following is an example of a worksheet that might be used to reinforce this concept.

Half Steps

A half step is the distance from one key at the piano to the next key (either up or down) with no key in between.



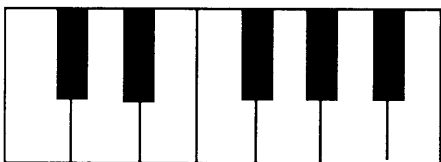
A half step can be

1. From any white key to the black one next to it
2. From any black key to the white one next to it
3. From any white key to the next white key if there is no black key in between them (between E and F, and between B and C)

Exercise

Draw arrows on the keyboard to show half steps:

- From a white key to a black key
- From a black key to a white key
- From a white key to a white key



Student leading an exercise.

The children meet their tutor for one half hour before choir rehearsal or one half hour after rehearsal, once a week. The children and adults enjoy the experience, the relationships formed have been special, and all have gained so much in terms of knowledge!

It must be an important goal of children's choir directors to allow their students opportunity to become musically literate. The less they are dependent upon the director for their music-making, the more they can enjoy music away from their choir experience. Music literacy is an ongoing challenge in the church choir situation. Soon, though, you will find that pieces will be learned faster, there will be little need for spoon feeding, the students will be proud of their accomplishments, and they will become musically independent!

**Next:
Improvisation**

Diary

Grace is not general. It is specific. Not "free ice cream cones provided by the church." Something was bought—and it wasn't free. Or trivial. Specifically: me. I was bought. At great cost. I am pompous, thinking I could get forgiveness without going through the process of repentance.

We are only passing through this century. Whatever possessed us, that we thought we could offer grace to ourselves, and skip the pain of an examined life? Discipleship is costly: pain, suffering, light-bearing. Specifically. Individually.

... Dona Hoffman