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February 2024

Special Edition | Volume 2

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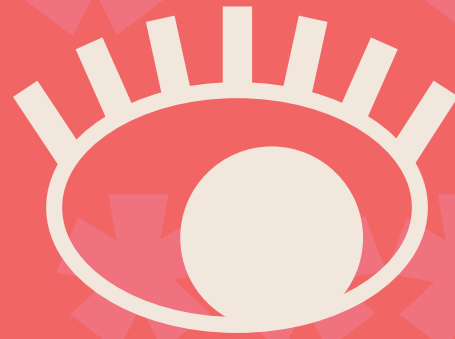
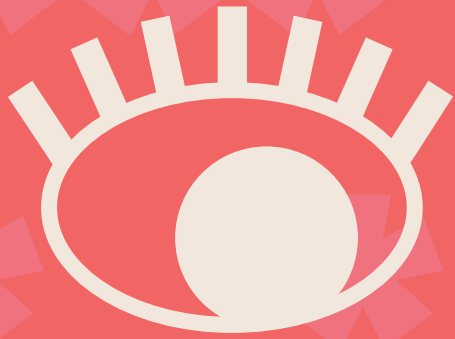
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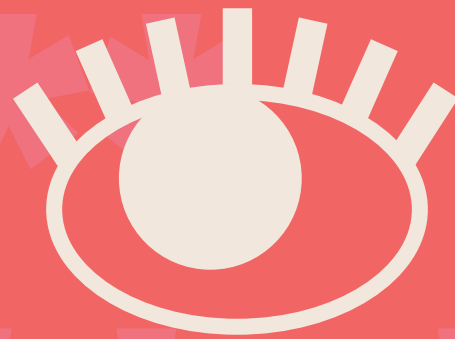
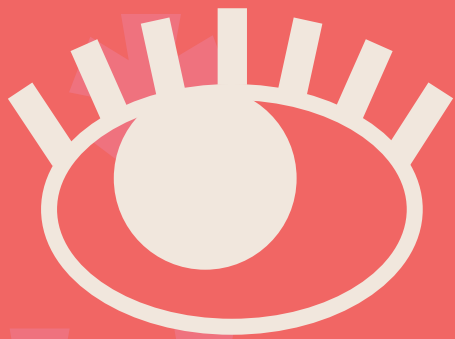
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THE SCIENCE OF (SIGHT-) READING

Casey Buck



Overview

Is there a "secret formula" to building better sight-readers/singers? The latest research in language acquisition (including "The Science of Reading" training courses) suggests that a "sound-before-sight" approach is key to developing fluency in reading.

How can we apply that in our music classrooms? We'll discuss practical and sequential steps to helping students of all ages and musical backgrounds become more fluent in the language of music.



The Science of Reading

We've all been through the *Science of Reading* training sessions, and perhaps you asked yourself, "what does this have to do with me?" Maybe you sighed, thinking, "now I have to teach *reading*? When am I supposed to prepare for my concerts?" Or, you were inundated with jargon, chanting like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* "vocab and morphemes and phonemes, oh my!" What could the *Science of Reading* have to do with teaching "Good Boys Do Fine Always," preparing your ensemble for assessment, or learning a text in a foreign language with your advanced choir? I'd like to take the position that the answer is, in fact, EVERYTHING!

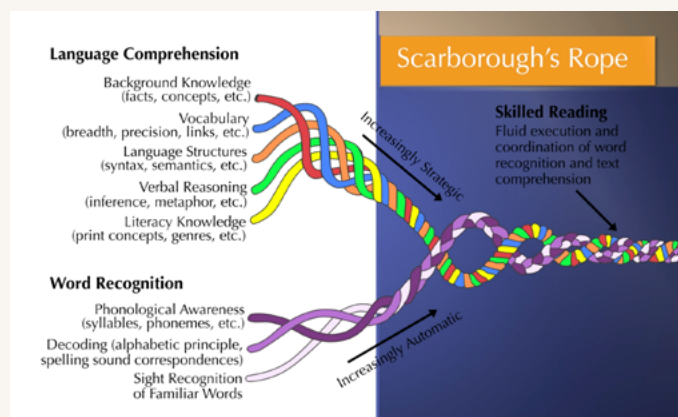
When we say or hear things like "music is the universal language," we are typically referring to its ability to transcend language and speak directly to the heart.

But, is there more to that trope than we originally considered? Maybe music also works like language. A cornerstone of famed violin pedagogue Shinichi Suzuki's philosophy was the "mother tongue" approach: children innately learn the language of their parents by exposure to the sounds, rhythms, and cadences of that language. Can we teach and learn music the same way? When we read music, are we not decoding and interpreting symbols, turning something on paper into sound? I tell my Advanced Placement Music Theory students early on in the school year that the piece of paper isn't the music; it's just a "sound recipe," an imperfect visual way to represent sound in time. In this article, we'll discuss how we learn to read and ways we can apply that knowledge to help our students be better music readers.

Guiding Thoughts

You can't train for a marathon in a day, and you can't learn a language overnight. Don't wait until two weeks before concert assessment to "do" sight-reading! Now, I don't mean you shouldn't practice the specific process your ensemble has to follow. Passing out music, modeling the practice and performance time, preparing your students on what the judge will say, etc. – that's VERY IMPORTANT! FIRST, we have to stop thinking of sight-reading as a separate act from music-making. When we are legitimately sight-reading a new piece, we are simply **READING** music, like always, just in the context of a piece we haven't seen, heard, or rehearsed before. At a fundamental level, there's nothing new going on. And, the more our students can recognize elements they already know (pitch patterns, rhythms, articulations, etc.), the more successful they'll be in their sight-reading. With this in mind, we should strive for a consistent, everyday focus on building fluent music readers at all levels if we truly want our students to succeed at music-making.

Scarborough's Rope Model



The Scarborough's Rope Model is a great visual representation of the many intertwined processes required of language learners as they build toward

fluency. A breakdown in any one of these strands affects the entire process. A child can be a great decoder, understanding the sounds of the words, but still struggle with comprehension if they don't know what that word actually is or means. Successful readers not only recognize the words, but also have the requisite background knowledge and vocabulary to comprehend what they're seeing. Let's apply this to our music teaching: how many times are our students just playing notes and hoping for the best, or looking to us to tell them if it was right or wrong? Our highest goal in building fluent music readers is the development of "seeing ears" and "hearing eyes," where these intertwined strands come together in comprehension not just of the notated elements but the music itself, and where students are able to self-diagnose and self-correct errors.

Working Memory Load

As we saw from Scarborough's Rope, reading requires many simultaneous processes, and introducing something new taxes the student even further. In neuroscience, the phenomenon of "working memory load" has been investigated heavily. We all have a limited amount of mental focus and power available to do the "heavy lifting" of thinking and processing. Like the fact that we only have two hands to work with, we can only hold so much in our working memory at any given time. Once our hands are full, we have to put something down before we can pick something else up. Similarly, if our working memory is overloaded, we have to take things out, set them aside, and then try to recall them later. As you can imagine, adding too much to working memory at once increases the chances for a catastrophic failure!

Think of it like your computer—try to open all the applications at once and it slows to a crawl or crashes.

Thankfully, the human brain is an incredible and miraculous machine. Even very complex tasks can be brought to a point of automation through repetition. Many facts and ideas are committed to permanent storage through this same process (I can still recall childhood phone numbers or my multiplication tables!). Most of you probably experienced this on your way to work this morning as well. If you're like me, you're busy thinking about all the things you have to do in the coming hours, and all the while operating a complex machine and navigating through town in traffic while sometimes barely even thinking about the actual drive. In fact, the more we repeat a process, the more we can call on our permanent storage to do it on "autopilot" in the future, freeing up our working memory for other things.

So, when we are learning something new, we can only really manipulate one or two new pieces of information at a time without becoming overloaded. Now, think about what we're asking our students to do in their music classes: decoding notes and rhythms on the staff, interpreting vocabulary like dynamics or tempo markings, understanding and applying articulation symbols, deciphering style and expressive markings, and all of that while executing a complex series of physical activities in order to sing or play an instrument with a good tone! These are just SOME of the things our young musicians are thinking about, not to mention what drama happened last period, or whether or not they're hungry or tired, the science test they have next period, or any number of other distractions. What we really need to do is get them to the point of automating more of their music-making so as to reduce the load on their working memory.

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Automation and "Sight Words"

Study after study has shown (and the *Science of Reading* attests) that the best readers have been exposed to a large vocabulary of words before they've even begun to read. They are simply attaching symbols to a catalog of sounds and meanings already on file. In preschool and early elementary school, new readers work on

building up a repertoire of "sight words," words they can recognize automatically without having to go through the process of decoding (in other words, moving them out of working memory and into permanent storage).

Can we apply this same idea of sight words to our music reading? If we can help our students build an aural library or catalog of pitch and rhythm patterns, and then learn to recognize those patterns at sight, they will have a whole anthology of musical "sight words" that they won't even have to think about. Pitch patterns such as Do Re Mi (1 2 3) or Do Mi Sol (1 3 5), or rhythm

patterns like quarter-two eighths, can easily be taught by rote. Various articulation styles can be drilled in a warmup. Musical vocabulary words can be taught and tested so students know them well. All of these small building blocks of music then come together and help our students be more successful, whether it's something they've worked on for a while or truly reading a new piece at sight. Even more importantly, when our students know what the music is *supposed* to sound like, when they have established that library of reference pitches and rhythms, they are also much more likely to self-correct and fix their own mistakes. More independent

musicians equates to saved rehearsal time (there's never enough anyway, is there?), freeing you and your students up to fine tune, go deeper, focus on other things, and overall be less stressed about the upcoming performance.

Practical Applications

Hopefully by this point you're already thinking about ways you can APPLY this knowledge of how we learn to read. After all, I hold to the belief that the value of any professional development is tied directly to how useful it is in my classroom! So, here is a by-no-means-exhaustive list of practical ideas you can use in your music classroom at every level and ensemble:

- Introduce new concepts or skills by rote first. Focusing on the sound only, while eliminating the burden of decoding musical notation from students' working memory, allows them to better concentrate on the new idea. Once students are building toward a level of mastery, then add the notation so they can see how that sound is represented on the page.
- Call-and-response activities can be incorporated at ALL levels and in all ensembles! It develops the EAR and active listening skills (and has the added benefit of compelling students to pay attention in class so they aren't lost!). Draw attention to the differences in sound between major and minor, simple and compound meter, etc. Open up their ears and prompt them to actively listen for those elements as you rehearse.
- Contextualize trouble spots. If there's a particular note out of tune, put it in a tonal context. Why are they playing A-natural too low in B-flat Major? They're most likely thinking of discrete notes and not hearing it as a leading tone. and have them play F-G-A-Bb instead so they can listen for the A better. Or, tune it vertically by making it the perfect fifth above a D played by other lower-voiced instruments.
- Sing, sing, sing! Yes, even us instrumental people!! With dynamics, articulations, etc. If you can sing it, you can play it, and the converse is also true. You will probably encounter some pushback from older students who aren't used to this, so start it with them early.
- Play scales: All tonal music is based on scales! If students know their scales, they can play or sing their music, and their pitch will be better as well. How many times do my students play a piece in G Major and play C-sharps instead of C-naturals? If they were really thinking and listening contextually they would realize C-sharp doesn't belong in G Major!
- Pitch and Rhythm Pattern Warmups: Major and minor, simple and compound meter. These can be pulled from the current repertoire or from a book or other resource. Think of warmups as your bellringer activity to get students in gear for the class period, but also to help them anticipate what it is they should focus on during rehearsal.
- Articulation and Style Warmups: Choose a small pitch or rhythm pattern that isn't technically demanding for your students, and have them play it with different articulations, bowing styles, dynamics, etc. Even better if the styles are also found in the music they're working on.
- Read lots of music! Even if you never rehearse or perform it, students need to get used to pushing through, recovering from mistakes, and just SEEING a lot of different music! When we spend

two months on one concert cycle, kids aren't really reading anymore. They've already memorized it and stopped "exercising their reading muscles!" Initiate "Sight-Reading Friday" and dust off some old tunes from the library for the last ten minutes of class each week. It's also a nice change of pace and can help reinvigorate you as well!

- Invest in the individual with technique and aural skills work. Lay a solid foundation and keep building on it. Don't neglect this especially as students move into the upper grades! You say to yourself, "but when will I have time? I have a concert coming up!" If you have stronger musicians, the rehearsal time dividend pays off! Your ensemble is to a large degree the sum of its parts, and you'll spend less time fixing problems in rehearsal if your students are each better players and singers.
- Choose Repertoire Wisely. Select pedagogically-appropriate repertoire that reinforces important skills but also strengthens the weaknesses in your group. If I go to the gym regularly but skip leg day every week, I'll never have a complete physique. We all want great performances, so we need to build great performers!

Parting words and unsolicited advice

You can't do "Everything Everywhere All at Once." If you found something useful here that you'd like to try, choose ONE new thing to incorporate into your teaching this semester. One thing, implemented consistently and to a high degree of efficacy, is better than fifteen mediocre attempts without follow-through. And, if you are making some changes or trying something new, give yourself grace to try and fail and try again until you find the things that work for YOU and YOUR students!



Casey Buck is an ardent performer and music educator. He began playing cello in the third grade, and through his experiences in the public school orchestra and youth orchestra programs, as well as the inspiration of many of his teachers, he decided to pursue music in college. Mr. Buck earned Bachelor of Music Education and Master of Music in Performance degrees from Loyola University New Orleans, where he studied cello with Allen Nisbet. Since 2006, Mr. Buck's principal performance engagement has been as a member of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra cello section.

As a music educator, Mr. Buck's commitments are broad and diverse. The greatest share of his activity is through his work with Conway Public Schools, which began in 2006. Mr. Buck is the orchestra department head, directs the Conway High School Orchestra, and teaches Advanced Placement Music Theory at Conway High. He also assists with the orchestras at all four of Conway's middle schools and the junior high campus. This affords him the privilege of working with students from their beginner year in sixth grade all the way through graduation. His students consistently receive the highest ratings at adjudicated performance assessments. In 2013 he completed the rigorous candidacy process to attain National Board Certification in Music. Since 2016 he served as a Reader, Table Leader, and Question Leader for the College Board's annual AP Reading, helping to score the free response questions on the AP Music Theory exam. In addition, Mr. Buck has produced instructional videos for the College Board's AP Daily program, available to students across the country and around the world.

In addition to his work in Conway, Mr. Buck directed the Preparatory Orchestra (one of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Youth Ensembles, serving first- and second-year string players across central Arkansas) from 2008-2020. He has also directed the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra's Summer Strings program (formerly the UALR Summer Strings Camp) from 2011-2022, and has been a clinician for the UCA Summer String camp from its inception in 2009 until 2015. Mr. Buck's teaching experience also extends to the university level, where he was a Visiting Lecturer of Music at Arkansas Tech University from 2006-2012, teaching String Methods and Applied Strings. He has served as a region clinician and most recently as the guest conductor of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra on the annual Pops on the River concert on July 4th, 2023.

Actively involved with the Arkansas School Band and Orchestra Association, Mr. Buck has held board positions as State Orchestra Chair and Region Chair, and continues to serve as senior high orchestra manager and audition host for the South Region Orchestra. A 2020 GRAMMY Foundation Music Educator Award quarter-finalist, he has helped train current and future music educators by presenting workshops across the state on the Arkansas Fine Arts frameworks in partnership with the Arkansas Department of Education, as well as music theory pedagogy and ensemble best practices. Mr. Buck is passionate about public school music education, and honored to be a small part of the long legacy of teachers affecting the lives of students from one generation to the next. He lives in Conway with his wife, Kristina Rose Buck (a classically-trained mezzo-soprano and fellow music educator), and their two amazing daughters, Abigail Rose and Adia Shalom.

Developing Black-Belt Musicians

TRANSFERABLE LESSONS AND METHODS FROM BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU

Dr. Jeffery Wall

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) is a grappling martial art that is often used as a vehicle to impact practitioners positively, building resilience, patience, confidence, and discipline through terraced skill-building in a community of individuals from all walks of life. A form of submission grappling, it has been described as having many of the mental challenges of chess with physical consequences via pins, joint manipulation, and strangulation holds. It is an effective method of self-defense, a competitive sport, a hobby, and a lifestyle for many. The physical and mental benefits of this art form deserve our attention in the music education world. In this article, we will explore the unexpected lessons and methods from the jiu-jitsu mats and how they can be effectively transferred to the rehearsal room. As a black-belt with over thirty-years of martial arts experience, some of these concepts come from the author's own experiences and others have been adapted from a book by Renner Gracie titled, *The 32 Principles: Harnessing the Power of Jiu-Jitsu to Succeed in Business, Relationships, and Life*.

Connection

It is important to understand the principle of connection. In order to effectively control an opponent, one must control distance. BJJ players must physically connect to their opponent and leave no space for movement or counter-attack until they are ready to move or elicit an expected movement from their opponent. It is also true that BJJ players often share a connected camaraderie. Having traversed through difficult training together, they share a bond with their training partners and mutually share aspects of their lives. Connection allows the “ability to communicate, listen, negotiate, observe, problem solve, escalate, deescalate, empathize, pacify, praise, embrace, or perhaps totally avoid [to help] maintain control in everyday social situations” (Gracie). Connection is the catalyst principle upon which all ensemble music learning occurs. After all, musicians must connect with each other first to effectively communicate with an audience. Additionally, think about how important connection is for recruiting and retention of student-musicians in ensembles. It is paramount to foster an environment that prioritizes connection. After all, ensemble members that are connected, often play or sing much better together because they experience a form of creative symbiosis.

Detachment

The principle of detachment conversely allows deliberate disconnection from an opponent. Even if momentarily, detachment creates opportunities to avoid stagnation, maintain advantage, or perhaps elicit a desired movement from an opponent towards attack or submission. This principle is applicable to rehearsals in knowing when to push musicians further, and when to allow them to work independent of the director. It is important for student-musicians to be equipped

with skills and then, be given the latitude to develop independent and collective musicianship.

The jiu-jitsu mats are a place where mistakes are welcomed. The entire art form is built upon the premise of making mistakes. The “tap” is the BJJ player’s way of saying “I surrender.” Then, the two opponents slap hands to indicate readiness again, and they continue the roll (sparring). Afterwards, they exchange ideas and ask questions, trying to discern their own mistakes or draw upon the knowledge of their opponent. Failure breeds success and falling short is an opportunity for growth. These are the lessons that BJJ teaches. Directors of music frequently default to minimizing mistakes. Allow students space to make mistakes in a forgiving environment and identify the mistakes themselves whenever possible. Gently correct but give them ownership over their own musical journey. Instead of telling them that they missed a rhythm, directors should detach and ask leading questions that provide direction for students to discern their own mistakes. Experience is the greatest teacher, and directors must not rob students of the opportunity to self-correct. Finally, detachment is relevant to letting go of the disciplined monotony related to musical skill building in rehearsals towards expressive communication in performance. Detachment is often called the flow-state in other realms and is important for internalization and ultimate enjoyment.

Stability

A pyramid always has a stable foundation with three points of contact. Even if flipped on its side, a pyramid still maintains those three points of contact. This principle is valuable in a fighting or combat scenario for balance while standing or while trying to maintain a dominant position once the fight progresses to the

ground. This lesson transfers to the rehearsal room as directors attempt to equip student-musicians with facility on their respective instruments, music literacy, and repetitive intentional practice of literature. These three points of contact allow for stability amidst performance anxiety, distractions in concert, and the inevitability of something eventually going awry musically. Imagine the two sides of the ensemble somehow realize they are a measure apart momentarily because they misread a gesture or counted incorrectly. How will they react? With a stable foundation, they can rely on their practiced skills to quickly realize the error and take steps to rectify without the audience ever knowing.

Method of Instruction

With few exceptions, jiu-jitsu academies across the world employ a similar approach to delivering instruction: learn it, drill it, troubleshoot it, apply it, repeat.

Learn it: Players form a circle around the instructor who will demonstrate the technique from the center of the mat.

Drill it: Players break into pairs (upper belt with a lower belt) to drill the technique. The upper belt goes first to demonstrate proper execution. Then, assists the lower belt with terminology, positioning, body mechanics, and details. The instructor walks around to help individuals struggling with the technique.

Troubleshoot it: Based on feedback and what the instructor saw while walking around during the drilling portion, the instructor re-circles the group oriented to the center mat and cleans up common mistakes and answers questions.

Apply it: The latter half of the class is usually spent attempting to integrate techniques learned that day with other known techniques in a live “roll” (sparring session), making synaptic connections, and chaining larger contextual movements with the “move of the day.”

Repeat: Each technique is usually taught throughout the week at each training session. Purposeful repetition is imperative. The curriculum is cyclical, returning to key foundational concepts throughout the year and connecting to new concepts.

In the music classroom, this method is transferable by giving instruction and reading an initial pass as a group. Then, students work independently or in small groups by section. The director keeps a watchful eye and walks around to see how they are doing, troubleshooting with them and making small adjustments. After a few minutes, students reorient to the podium as they rehearse as a full ensemble again. Directors can provide feedback and allow opportunity to apply the techniques in a larger context by reconnecting the concepts to the repertoire. This allows students to connect the theoretical to the practical and apply it in rehearsal with stream of consciousness within a larger section or the whole piece. Returning to the independent/small group drilling portion may be necessary. Concepts can be repeated in new ways each day, but with mindful return to the passage or piece of music.

Ratcheting

Whether in BJJ, fitness, a novel reading challenge, developing a savings account, or in the music classroom, the ratchet principle applies. “Small, persistent advancements will add up to significant gains over time” (Gracie). BJJ can be very dynamic and

fast-moving. However, it is also said that BJJ is an art of inches. This applies to the techniques themselves – by advancing superior positioning little bits at a time to place oneself in an advantageous scenario to pursue submission from the opponent. It also is relevant to the advancement in rank, which is discussed in a later section of this article. High-level musicianship, building large programs with multiple ensembles, or achieving superior ratings at festival does not happen overnight. Macro advancements do not occur without the necessary daily, persistent, disciplined micro advancements. Therefore, be certain to allot a few minutes of time in every rehearsal for sight-reading, music literacy, and pedagogy. It only takes the short, focused effort in each rehearsal to yield grand results in the long term. Additionally, encourage musicians to embrace short term discomfort in digestible bits towards security and ease in performance. No growth occurs without challenge and adversity. If progress stagnates, return to a previous stage of the music-learning hierarchy and ratchet back up. Repetitive daily actions ratcheted, means freedom to enjoy performances without stress. Students have prepared daily so that the performance is just a display of their small, but meaningful progress.

Cross-Training and Seminars

In BJJ, each person has a uniquely different training style and a different “game” that they are developing. Dropping in at different academies intentionally at the local level or while traveling, allows the BJJ player to absorb a different methodology, teaching style, and the opportunity to meld it with their own style. Even if there is only a single take-away, it is valuable to the journey as it provides context, and another tool for the “bag of tricks.” Directors should actively seek opportunities to drop into other rehearsal rooms, source new teachers, veteran teachers, large ensembles, small ensembles, and classrooms with completely different cultures. Better

yet, exposing the entire ensemble to another school’s rehearsal lends perspective. Learning concepts from other musical or performance areas (band, choir, orchestra, music theater, dance, etc.) will equip the ensemble with new and innovative techniques for immediate implementation. Likewise, seminars from experts brought in to lead instruction are valuable. Exposing student musicians to alternative methods of instructional delivery at all levels of preparation can often shorten the learning curve.

The Grandmaster Principle

The journey in jiu-jitsu is a long one. On average, it takes a BJJ player ten years to achieve the rank of black belt – much longer than most traditional martial arts. All associations have slightly different criteria, but there is a standard from the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation. It is usually predicated on time in rank, proficient display of skills/technique, and character with possession of a moral compass. The adult belt ranks in BJJ are white, blue, purple, brown, and black. Each belt has the opportunity to earn four stripes at every rank until black belt as a way to measure progress through the rank. At black belt, there are eight degrees. These benchmarks provide a support system with those to look up to and those to bring up in their own respective journey, easily identifiable by the belts. It also provides teaching opportunities. After skills are acquired, upper belts are often offered opportunities to pass on knowledge to lower belts (perhaps with some far away oversight). It develops resilience and patience. Ranking up in BJJ is not guaranteed. It is only through persistence and recognized self-improvement that one is considered for a level change. It is always amazing to see grown adults get excited over a little piece of white tape placed on the black bar of their belt for the stripe. Even adults are not so different from kindergartners. Everyone likes that “gold star” of recognition that signifies

progress in effort and goals. Many ensemble directors employ a council of student officers or chair positions, but that usually only accounts for a small portion of the ensemble. Directors should consider a ranking system for the entirety of their ensembles. Perhaps it is simply pairing mentors with mentees or perhaps it is a visible sticker on their folders. It can identify higher ranking individuals as someone to approach for help and direction. White belts training with other white belts is where most injuries occur in jiu-jitsu. Pairing upper belts with lower belts allows for learning to occur proficiently and efficiently. The same can be true in music ensembles. When done properly, the ranking system develops a strong sense of community with encouragement across the ranks. Students who level up to the next rank are applauded by their classmates, moving up in formation for commencement and conclusion of class. It creates a healthy sense of camaraderie and competition, inculcating a never give-up attitude. Advancement in rank also comes with added responsibility, so it is important to hold upper levels to a standard of expectation commensurate with the rank.

Once one achieves the rank of black belt, the journey is not over. It is just the beginning. This is the point where one realizes that there is always more to learn by utilizing the grandmaster principle (i.e. “living with the confidence of a black belt, while learning with the humility of a white belt”) (Gracie).

In the end, the two art forms of jiu-jitsu and music-making are not too far apart. Both develop creativity, community, and focused skill-building – all basic tenets of prosperous humanity. There are valuable cross-discipline lessons in instructional delivery, but also anecdotal reminders of connection, detachment, stability, advancement,

and motivation present in both art forms. Lastly, it is important to keep the play in the work and make it enjoyable for directors and students. Both jiu-jitsu players and musicians typically come to the respective art forms because it is fun—and it should be. Play on, sing on.

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Gracie, Renner, and Paul Volponi. *The 32 Principles: Harnessing the Power of Jiu-Jitsu to Succeed in Business, Relationships, and Life*. Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2023. eBook.



Dr. Jeffery Wall serves as Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma where he conducts the University Singers and University/Community Chorus. He also teaches undergraduate conducting among other courses.

He has served as conductor and clinician for choirs of all types throughout the U.S., The Republic of Ireland, and in the Baltic nations of Latvia and Estonia. On three occasions, he has conducted the NSU choirs as prelude performance for the North Texas Metroplex Children's Choir Annual Festival at the Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas. He has served the Southwestern Division of the American Choral Directors Association in several capacities: 2020 Performing Group Liaison, 2022 Interest Session Chair, and 2024 Conference Chair.

Dr. Wall is in demand as a conductor, teacher, clinician, adjudicator, and baritone soloist. He is conductor of the professional-level chamber choir called Vox Solaris, headquartered in Broken Arrow/Tulsa, Oklahoma. He has experience in collegiate, high school, professional, community, and church settings. He has served as a faculty member at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, Georgia State University in Atlanta and New Mexico Junior College in Hobbs, New Mexico. He has also taught public school, grades 7-12 in Lubbock, Texas. He frequently sings with the semi-professional chorus, the Ken Davis Chorale, based out of the Dallas area. Dr. Wall is an active member of the American Choral Directors Association, the College Music Society, and several other professional choral and music education organizations where he has presented at state, regional, and national levels.

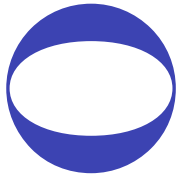
He holds a Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal Music Education from Texas Tech University. Dr. Wall received his Master of Music degree in Choral Conducting from the University of Tennessee. His Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Choral Conducting was earned at the University of South Carolina.

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Skills for Classroom Teachers**

By Dr. Jenna Braaksma



One of the most useful skills for music educators is the ability to utilize the piano as a teaching tool. Achieving proficiency at the piano can equip teachers with functional piano skills to effectively play in a variety of instructional situations. Regardless of your piano experience level, integrating functional piano skills into your classroom instruction can support and elevate your everyday teaching.

What are Functional Piano Skills?

Developing a strong technical foundation at the piano helps build a performance toolbox so you can play exactly what is needed in the moment. Proper technique starts with a whole-arm drop motion that sends power and energy through the fingers into the keys followed by a small upward rebound to reset the arm and fingers to play again. Playing with this approach produces a warm, round tone while also releasing any tension in the arm and hand. The speed or attack of the drop will produce different dynamics and tone qualities on the piano. This technique allows you to better control the timbre of the instrument or add any necessary articulations, which can be an effective way to model a desired sound for your students. Here is a short list of functional piano skills that can easily be used during instruction:

- Harmonizing Melodies
- Sight-Reading
- Transposing
- Playing by Ear
- Playing Chord Progressions
- Score-Reading
- Improvising
- Reducing Complex Accompaniments

Scales and Arpeggios

Learning specific fingerings for scales and arpeggios can lead to improved facility and versatility at the piano. Breaking down the fingerings into groups and patterns can help you choose which fingers to use in exercises or pieces you play for your students, or give you a starting off point when choosing the fingerings that are most appropriate and comfortable for you.

The following guidelines help organize the fingering patterns into groups to make them easier to remember:

- C, G, D, A, and E scales and arpeggios share the same fingering patterns.
 - ◊ RH thumbs play the tonic and subdominant notes of the scale.
 - ◊ LH thumbs play the tonic and dominant notes of the scale.
 - ◊ If the thumbs are in the right places, the scale will play itself!



C major (RH)



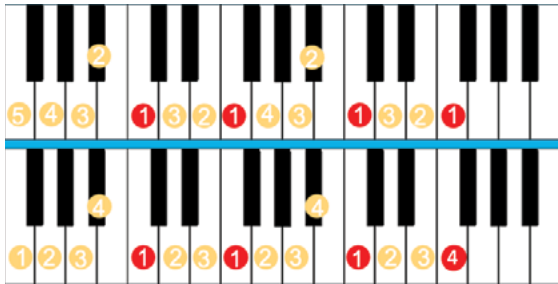
D major (LH)

- ◊ Use LH fingers 5-4-2 when playing triads that contain 3 white keys.

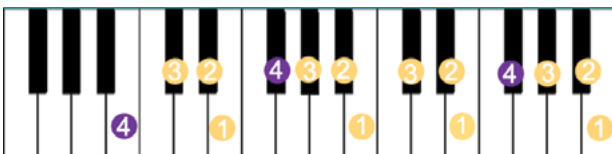


G major (LH)

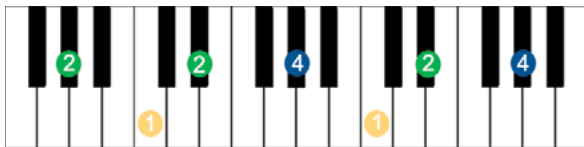
- The thumbs line up together in the F and B scales, as well as the black key scales.
 - ◊ B major in the LH should start on finger 4 so that the thumb plays a white key
- Black key scales and arpeggios should start with finger 2 or 3 so that the thumbs play the white keys (F#/Gb major and Eb minor arpeggios are exceptions)
 - ◊ Use V (2-3) & W (2-3-4) fingering patterns so that the thumbs play white keys.



F major (RH and LH)



B major (LH)



Ab major (RH)

Building Chord Progressions

When reading chord progressions that are already written, start by finding the common tones between chords. These anchor notes help you visually see the movement between chords and allow you to choose a comfortable fingering pattern to move fluidly from chord to chord. The moving notes in each chord will determine if the chords are in root position or inversion. Identifying the intervals (half-step, whole-step, skip, etc.) between the moving notes also contributes to which fingers should be used. Labeling the chords with letter names or Roman numerals will help make a stronger connection between your cognitive understanding of the chord and the physical hand-shape, fingering pattern, and location of the notes on the piano.



I IV6/4 I V6/5 I

Based on the position of the chord, use the fingering patterns listed below:

- Root Position: 5-3-1 in the LH; 1-3-5 in the RH
- 1st Inversion: 5-3-1 in the LH; 1-2-5 in the RH
 - ◊ Look for the 3rd interval at the bottom of the chord
- 2nd Inversion: 5-2-1 in the LH; 1-3-5 in the RH
 - ◊ Look for the 3rd interval at the top of the chord

When building chord progression on your own, such as from a lead sheet, start by finding the most efficient way to move from chord to chord using a combination of root

position chords and inversions for smooth voice leading in both hands. Chord tones can be divided between hands in keyboard style, with the chord played in the right hand and a single bass note in the left hand. The single bass note can be the root note or other note from the chord played in the right hand. A second option is to play all chord tones in both hands. Chord progressions can be included in short improvisations used to set the tone of the day's lesson as your students enter the room, or as a send-off when they leave for their next class.

Here are common chord progressions that can be played during instruction:

- I IV I V7 I
- I V vi IV
- I vi IV V
- I vi I V
- I ii7 I6 IV
- I vi ii V

Harmonizations

Harmonizing melodies is one of the functional piano skills that can be integrated into your classroom teaching most often. Harmonizations can be found in 2 different formats: Lead sheets or 2-hand accompaniments.

Lead Sheet:

If the chord symbols or Roman numerals are provided on a lead sheet, play the melody in the RH while the harmony is provided by chords played in the LH. Based on the chords that are given, consider what options are most appropriate for the LH using inversions, movement by step, or pedal tones in the bass line. Using any of those strategies will provide efficient movement in the LH that allows you to smoothly change chords within a similar octave and hand position. When adding an

accompaniment to an existing melody or exercise without a provided chord progression, refer to the melodic notes as a guide. These notes can be the basis of your chord choices by matching the melody first with primary chords, then expanding to secondary chords as you become more comfortable building chord progressions.

- Harmonization Patterns: Blocked chords, broken chords, arpeggiated pattern, waltz pattern, Alberti bass, lament bass, boom chuck, Boogie pattern, walking bass line, western, tango, syncopated, etc. Select patterns are provided below:



Boom Chuck Pattern



Alberti Bass Pattern



Waltz Pattern



Boogie Pattern



Boom Chuck Pattern



Walking Bass Line



Broken Chord or Arpeggiated Pattern



Western Bass Line



Syncopated Pattern

2-Hand Accompaniments

Similar to building chord progressions, the right and left hands can play the 2-hand accompaniments in keyboard style or identical blocked chords in both hands. In addition, chords tones can be divided evenly between the left hand and right hand. Depending on the style of the accompaniment, chords can be played in blocked or broken patterns.



Blocked Pattern (Keyboard Style)

Sight Reading

With the many responsibilities that come with teaching and directing music programs at the primary and secondary levels, finding extra time to practice your piano skills can be a challenge. When speed-learning an exercise or sight-reading a piece during class, consider following these quick analysis strategies:

Music Specific :

- Check the time signature
- Check the key signature
- Find similar melodic and rhythmic material
 - ◊ Find repeated measures
 - ◊ Find melodic or rhythm patterns
 - » Triads, chords, inversions, intervals, and scales

Piano Specific:

- Find hand position changes
- Find large intervals
- Find challenging rhythms
- Leave out or reduce musical material that will affect the overall tempo

Transposition

If you are a choral instructor teaching students with changing voices, or an instrumental teacher working with students playing transposing instruments, transposition is a skill that can be approached in several different ways. Here are the quick analysis strategies for transposition:

Music Specific:

- Check the time signature
- Old key signature vs. new key signature
- Find similar melodic and rhythmic material
 - ◊ Find repeated measures
 - ◊ Find melodic or rhythm patterns
 - » Triads, chords, inversions, intervals, and scales

Transpose by:

- Scale degrees
- Intervals
- Chord names or chord progressions using Roman numerals
- Solfège syllables to identify notes
- Identify general 5 finger patterns for hand placement (thumb and pinkie extend up/down, if necessary)

Accompaniment Reduction

The following are strategies to reduce more complex accompaniments:

- Play only outer voices (bass line and top line)

- Block chords using half, quarter, or eighth notes
 - ◊ This will depend on the character of the piece, or what rhythmic support you feel your students need
- Outline chords following the harmonic rhythm
 - ◊ This allows students to hear the harmonic movement at the correct time
- Eliminate inner voice movement
- Condense wide intervals or revoice chords to avoid awkward hand position shifts, octaves, or large intervals
- Eliminate fast repeated notes or substitute slower notes values
 - ◊ 8ths for 16ths
- Pedal often to avoid blurring harmonies
- If all else fails, keep playing the bass line to provide the foundation in which other notes can be found

Where do my hands go on the piano?

Identifying the appropriate hand location and fingerings are often questions that come up when reading a piece for the first time. Middle C serves as the dividing line between the upper and lower registers and can help determine where to place your hands in the treble and bass clefs. When you quickly analyze the music, look for any identifiable 5-finger patterns, scales, chords, or triads. The thumb or pinkie can be extended up or down by step or skip when necessary while maintaining the original scale or 5-finger key area. This serves as your home base, helping you feel grounded and centered at the piano. Following this process will also help in choosing appropriate fingering patterns that ultimately make piano playing more comfortable.

How do I know what fingers to use?

Similar to the approach for finding the correct hand position on the piano, start by looking for any recognizable note groupings such as triads, chords, or

any form of scale patterns. These two questions can also help determine hand placement and fingerings: 1. Where do you need fingers on the piano? and 2. Where do your fingers need to be at the end of the passage? If the notes are centered around a certain area or follow an ascending or descending pattern, that will affect where the fingers are placed on the piano. It is often helpful to compare where patterns start and end. If you start at the end of the musical line and choose which fingers you need to finish the passage, try to work backward to determine which fingers should play specific notes to successfully execute the entire phrase.

How can my hands play together at the same time?

Coordination between hands is one of the biggest challenges when playing the piano. It is very common to hear, “I can play the RH and LH separately, but I struggle with hands together.” Rhythm tapping off the keyboard is an efficient way to practice this skill. Start by working off the keyboard by tapping the treble clef rhythm in the right hand while the left hand taps the bass clef rhythm. Next, play the RH while the LH continues to tap the bass clef rhythm. You can follow this up by switching which hand plays while the other hand taps the rhythm. If possible, group any notes that can be blocked together (triads, chords, or scales) in one hand while playing the other hand normally. Depending on the harmonic rhythm of the piece, blocked chords can be played using whole, half, quarter, or eighth note rhythms to practice coordination between hands before playing all notes simultaneously.

Conclusion

Among the many benefits of incorporating functional piano skills is the flexibility in how they can be used during classroom instruction. As teachers, you always have the ability to choose which skill is utilized and how it is included in the lesson. No matter where you are in your current skill level, educators can easily use the piano as an effective teaching tool in the classroom to strengthen and enhance your students’ musical experiences every day.

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Dr. Jenna Braaksma serves as class piano coordinator and instructor in the piano pedagogy laboratory program at the University of Michigan. Her responsibilities include overseeing the class piano program and curriculum for undergraduate music majors and non-majors, working with graduate student instructors, and teaching group classes and private lessons in the laboratory program. Dr. Braaksma previously served as piano faculty at Buena Vista University

where she directed the piano program, taught private piano lessons, instructed group piano classes, and collaborated with choral ensembles. At Dordt University, Dr. Braaksma taught the Piano Pedagogy and Introduction to Music Literature courses.

*In addition to her teaching, Dr. Braaksma is an active collaborative pianist, guest speaker, adjudicator, and researcher. She is in high demand as a presenter at regional, state, and national conferences. Her primary research interests combine the fields of collaborative piano and piano pedagogy by developing a curriculum with pedagogical collaborative repertoire, as well as strategies for teaching accompanying skills by incorporating collaborative piano activities in private piano lessons and group piano courses. Dr. Braaksma has also given presentations on teaching functional piano skills to preservice and current classroom teachers. Her publications can be found in *American Music Teacher* and the *Music Teachers National Association e-Journal*.*

Dr. Braaksma holds a PhD in Music Education with an emphasis in Piano Pedagogy from Florida State University, Master’s degrees in Collaborative Piano and Piano Pedagogy from the University of Missouri, and a Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance from Iowa State University.