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# Examining Sound and Symbol to Leverage Musical Literacy

The great jazz trumpet player Chet Baker died on May 13, 1988. Shortly after, I walked into my jazz piano lesson with the brilliant Harold Danko (who had toured with Baker) to offer my condolences. Danko shared that although Baker could read music at a functional level, for him it was all just sound and emotion without relying much on notation. Danko described playing with Baker as the "purest musical experience" of his life.

As instrumentalists we strive for that transcendent form of expression that Baker and all the greats achieved. We also embrace the fact that much of the world's music is played without any formal notation. It simply organizes sound, moves bodies, and creates community. This music stands as equal alongside that which is formally notated and can be reproduced with some degree of exactitude.

Hopefully, we know that there is no reason why any musician has to choose between reading notes to make music and just playing by ear. We find connections between what we see on a staff, what we hear in our head, and what buttons we press to create sound and, ultimately, personal expression. Just as the written words of a great novel evoke visual images and emotions, a great piece of music in notation creates images and feelings within our ears and our hearts, perhaps even before we play or sing it.

For students and teachers the question then is how to learn the symbols of music most effectively while connecting with Baker's experience of pure sound and emotion. In this article I will attempt to clarify some issues connecting early literacy education and reading music in a meaningful manner, while preserving the emotional nature of our art form. I will also try to provide some specifics on making the transfer from early general music education to playing all kinds of instruments.

## Current assumptions

Carl Orff and others stress that students in early stages of music instruction need to experience "sound before symbol." Dr. Suzuki discussed experiencing music like a child learns language from a parent from birth ("mother tongue").

With these great musicians we understand that music can be passed down well before children start to read in an intuitive and lasting manner. In Western music, however, there is a complex notational system that has evolved

over time and functions remarkably well on many levels, pointing us toward a rich emotional experience. Allowing a child to tap into this system, I would argue, should correspond with their standard education in decoding any written language. Consequently, as they start to read and write their native language, they should also start to read and write music.

To go beyond our current assumptions and practice, perhaps we should also reconsider the fundamental linguistic and cultural separation of "word" and "deed." This inseparability of word and action has roots in ancient Jewish sources with the word "davar" ) ) and asserts that, ideally, word and action are intertwined into one whole. Isn't this very unity of conception and creation the heart of musical composition and, for that matter, any enduring work of art?

I assert that once a child starts to read, we must go beyond "sound before symbol" and realize that THE SOUND IS THE SYMBOL. The sound and emotion of the musical experience can and should be directly and immediately linked to the symbols associated with them.

## A new model

So, if we typically start basic solfege in first grade with call and response of "Sol-Mi-Sol-Mi," perhaps we can make an immediate transfer to experiencing that these sounds may be SEEN on the standard treble clef staff by singing "G-E-G-E." (Now before you accuse me of advocating for fixed "Do," stay tuned and just go with me for the moment ...)

Returning to the connection with standard literacy education, historically children are routinely taught a series of "sight words," that is short words, such as "and," "but," "him," "her," etc. With proper scaffolding and repetition, the child learns to immediately identify combinations of letters with sounds and meanings. While we think of this as basic to early literacy education, it amounts to something of a miracle relative to how our brains are built to function:

*Reading science has established that learning to read is an acquired process, not a natural process — it's not like learning to walk or talk. There are no brain systems evolutionarily designed for reading. Rather, neural circuits for language and visual processing must be repurposed and reorganized to support literacy. — Stanislas Dehaene, Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read. Penguin Books, 2009*

Much of the debate in early literacy circles tends to focus on how much time is spent on these sight words and how much is spent on truly connecting oral language to print — the real process of decoding. Wherever teachers end up in this debate, we can agree that the very act of reading language is complex and needs to be started as early as possible.

If this is the case, how can we expect basic musical literacy to happen overnight when we begin playing recorder in third grade or the clarinet in fourth? I would argue that the youngster should experience this transfer as early as possible simply because it takes time to master this skill. Then, whether we are decoding words or musical symbols, our time can be applied to comprehension, critical thinking, and vocabulary development. I would also add the social and emotional development of each child to this list, especially in these pandemic times.

Some of our current practices are partially to blame for the lack of transfer. For instance, the way that we teach note identification in early grades is frequently taught as a "paper" activity, such as spelling simple words such as B-A-G or C-A-B with their corresponding notes on a full staff. To my way of thinking, this creates a disconnect between the musical note sitting there on a staff, and the true experience of the pitch, known here simply as the sound.

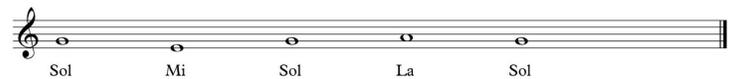
Part of the problem is also that we force a child to grapple with NINE possibilities (contained in the five lines and four spaces, not even dealing with the "Do" of middle "C") of correspondence of a letter name to its appearance on the treble staff, rather than starting with the notes they actually use and experience in their sound exploration. My teaching leads me to limiting the notes students read on a staff to that which they experience in their ears and their voices.

### **An alternative approach**

If we are teaching "Sol-Mi," let's just stick to G and E to get us started. We add "La" and we'll teach the "A," and so on. Getting back to the neural pathways of this process, we then can truly embed the learning in the brain (specifically the myelination of the axons, formerly known as "muscle memory") and turn the recognition of certain notes on a staff into the sight words of early literacy.

Now, it becomes more than a paper activity; it becomes deep learning. If we wish, we can then extend the experience to simple classroom instruments and begin to explore with some basics firmly in place.

So, how exactly might this work? Take the following simple example using these notes on a staff:"



If we are to embrace my assertion that the sound is indeed the symbol, we start with singing the solfège syllables while pointing to the notes. ("OK, I want to hear this nice and strong. It's OK to use your outside voice...")

"Sol-Mi-Sol-La-Sol"

After the solfège syllable is linked to the appearance on the staff, we immediately do the exact same exercise, substituting the letter name, sung with similar gusto:

"G-E-G-A-G"

Next, the voice can be supported by whatever classroom instruments are available. Add a rhythmic ostinato, and we have begun to experience and feel the power of music. We have also started to really read music as new language. Once we start other instruments, since these letter names are already deeply encoded with their place on the staff, they should never have to write a letter over the note on the staff. These symbols have been previously and deeply learned over multiple modalities and, perhaps more important, over time.

### **Instrumental implications**

In the current pandemic, we are all embracing remote learning, not only for the moment, but for the lessons that the practice can teach us for our pedagogy moving forward into better times.

Recently, I have been experimenting with these principles in an online "Instrumental Readiness" class. Here, we learn about instruments, and sing, both on solfège and letter names to set up potential instrumental students for success. As we now start to form embouchures, draw bows, or press keys and valves, we are better able to read and play notes that live on a staff.

These days, we have a new manner of rhetoric called "whataboutism." I can already hear the objections to this theory and its limitation to the world of fixed "Do" as cited above, specifically that "it might work with trumpets or clarinets, but not with other instruments." Again, please hold your objections for a moment, and allow me to proceed.

If my current experience of starting a group of beginning alto saxophone students is any indication, the jump from equating "Do" with the note "C" to equating "Do" with

*...how can we  
expect basic musical  
literacy to happen  
overnight?*

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the note "G" is fairly simple, provided that I reinforce the real sound and pitch of that note. Even with the simple exercise above, these students already recognize the notes "G" and "A" on the staff, and so they are already on their way to recognizing the ubiquitous "first five notes" of our instrumental method books. Once we make the "Sol-Mi" transfer to the notes "D" and "B," we are already four-fifths of the way there.

As a bonus, we are moving a maximum of little fingers between these two notes! With this basic exercise at an early stage, we tap into kinesthetic learning and begin the process of myelination cited above.

Another important aspect of this work is that we confine ourselves to only the notes we need for the moment. I am a firm believer that we generally learn the things we must learn for a specific purpose. (e.g. I didn't really need to get my German going until I was planning to travel to Germany ...) For the moment, we don't worry about random note identification on the entire staff; that can come later.

Furthermore, we may be able to dispense with our traditional mnemonic devices, such as "Every Good Boy Does Fine" (or its corollary Every Girl: Be Darn Fabulous!) The important thing is to reinforce the truth that THE SOUND IS THE SYMBOL and move forward bravely. This also provides us with an alternative to the habit of many students to scribble in the letter names over the notes

without even trying to read the music at sight. As many of us have learned, this unfortunate practice hampers a child's ability to progress beyond the simple music and decode musical language in a meaningful manner.

## **The road forward**

The pandemic has forced many of us to try new teaching practices out of necessity. The challenges of remote learning have stretched our imaginations as well as our patience. As some of the above has been born of this necessity, I invite other music educators to try them out and share your experiences with the ideas contained in this article. I may also already have some thoughts on possible implications for more advanced students.

For the moment, we simply continue to provide our students with all the support that our experience and creativity can muster. We examine the artistry of Duke Ellington, YoYo Ma, Chet Baker and others through the lens of "backward design" to lead children into a world of pure sound and emotion.

We believe that the artist's view of the world provides comfort, understanding and hope in our current situation. In terms of leveraging musical literacy, our goal is to unlock some of the keys to personal expression through making music. The equivalence relationship between sound and symbol can help fulfill that goal. ||