

Keyboard Companion - Summer 2007, Vol. 18 #2

It's not what aids we use, but rather how we use them

by Stephen Reen

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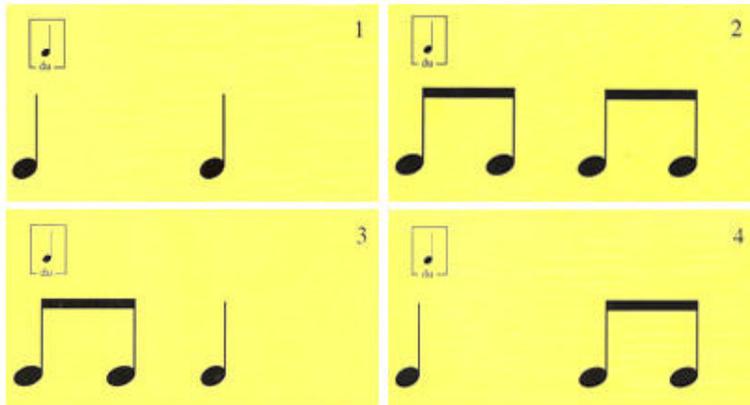
Each of us must choose the pathway to music literacy that we are most comfortable teaching, and each of these pathways needs its own set of materials. I believe it's not what aids we use, but rather how we use them, and in what order we introduce them. To use an exercise analogy: just as a barbell only makes your muscles stronger if you lift it properly, flash cards are only effective if used properly. We use barbells in different ways to strengthen different muscles. How many of us have barbells under the bed or sofa, collecting dust because we're not comfortable using them? We must be comfortable using note-reading cards in a variety of ways. The aids that we use must be introduced in sequential order, not before the students are ready.

Audiation before reading

Since my approach is to teach the students to audiate before reading, I never label a sound that the children have not first experienced through singing and moving. Students are only shown the symbol for a sound if they can label what they hear using a tonal language (such as *solfege*) and a rhythm language. (For more information on audiation, visit The Gordon Institute for Music Learning website at www.giml.org. See "Learning Sequence Activities" under Music Learning Theory).

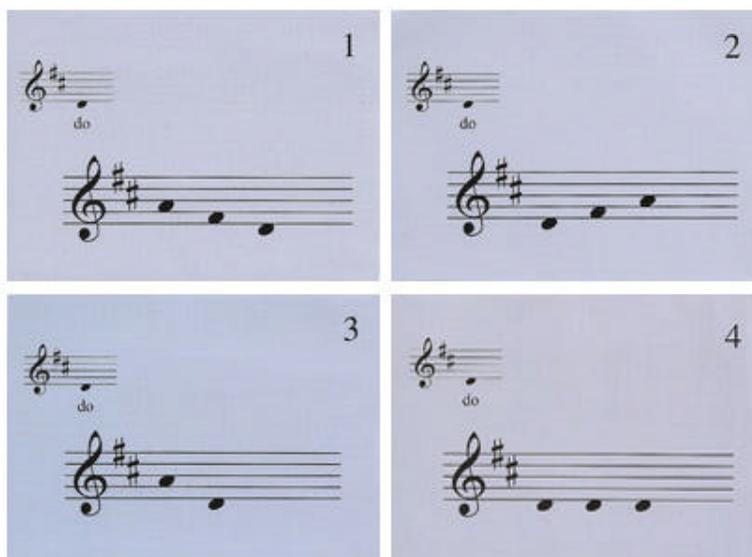
According to Suzuki, reading must be introduced *after* aural skills are developed. If we want our students to *speak the language of music fluently*, we must teach them to sight-sing the symbols *before* playing the keys. This can be accomplished by using a carefully sequenced pathway to music literacy, with age- and developmentally-appropriate accompanying materials.

Flashcards and other games



Rhythmic Notation Cards from Music Makers: At the Keyboard, published by Musikgarten. Used by permission.

When my groups of children, usually age 4 or 5, can correctly identify tonal patterns using *solfege* and rhythm patterns using a rhythm language, I know they're ready to see staff and rhythmic notation cards. I show the children two of the rhythmic patterns and ask them to correctly identify which pattern they heard, allowing the children to visually discriminate between the two (see Example 1). After students are able to chant longer patterns, I play a detective game. I tap a 2-4 measure pattern as they read, and ask them to find my mistake. Another game is to give the children several notation cards and ask them to put them in order as they listen.



Melodic Notation Cards from Music Makers: At the Keyboard, published by Musikgarten. Used by permission.

I use 5 ropes on the floor to introduce the staff. We make a game out of jumping up and down the staff, to demonstrate tonal patterns such as “*Do, mi*,”

sol” (skipping), and “*Do, re, mi, fa, sol*” (walking). I sing the pattern and they “jump” it, then I jump a pattern and they sing it. Next, we play the game using paper plates to represent notes. When I introduce melodic flash cards (shown in Example 2), I sing one of the patterns using the neutral syllable “bam”. The children echo using *solfege* and identify which card they heard. Later, melodic dictation can be done on clefless staves (I use a dry erase board) with the first note given on the third line, allowing space for the melody to go up or down.

[Group Solfege Singing](#) 

Flash Video, 1.2MB.

[Rhythm Flashcards](#) 

Flash Video, 2.2MB.

[Solfege Listening](#) 

Flash Video, 1.45MB.

When the children have built a large repertoire of patterns (both tonal and rhythmic) which they can read, sing, play, and improvise, we begin to memorize the letter names of the staff. I prefer the “Middle C-outward” approach. To accomplish this, I use flashcards in class and a computer game at home. I found a free game called *Notecard*, which students can download from <http://www.familygames.com/freelane.html>. *Notecard* begins with Middle C and adds one note per level. This game is reinforced in class with flashcards. First, the students quickly name only two cards: C and D. Then we add E, and so on. Next, the students play the flashcards on the piano. When they can quickly identify two octaves of notes, I use a stopwatch to time each student playing 16 cards. This friendly competition in class creates a desire to practice the game at home.

When students have been prepared aurally by singing *solfege* and chanting rhythms, they will *understand* what they read. I believe that the teaching aids I use have value because they truly represent *sound*. When students know what the symbols will sound like, they become more fluent and versatile musicians.