

But I Don't Have Time!

A case for teaching music literacy

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(Part 2)

In the first part of this two-part article, I described the three phases I use for teaching music literacy. Phase One is to “Prepare the Ear,” Phase Two is to “Prepare the Eye,” and Phase Three is to “Integrate Tonal & Rhythm Patterns.” It is essential that this preparation work be immediately reinforced and applied to the music we are learning. This makes the connection and purpose of the initial work clear to students and will eliminate the “why are we doing this?” questions! I have resolved that I will not teach music by rote except in special instances such as where learning by rote is a part of a cultural tradition. Because I want students to sight-read most of the music we learn, I must choose repertoire that reinforces the specific literacy skills that I am teaching.

Choosing Repertoire

With my less experienced groups, I have to start the year off with fairly simple music. Depending on the group, this could range from simple rounds to simple four-part music. However, as the year progresses and the group’s literacy skills increase, I can also increase the difficulty of the music. At the beginning of the year I sometimes find it necessary to teach certain passages by rote. However, I make sure there is at least one element in the music that reinforces reading skills. It could be that the music contains a rhythm pattern we have been studying but whose tonal patterns are beyond their current reading level. In that case, we will sight-read the rhythm, then I will rote teach the tonal patterns using the solfège syllables and vice versa. However, as I’ve become more experienced at teaching literacy and as I’ve discovered more and more suitable literature, I find myself needing to rote teach less often. With my more experienced auditioned group, I have a lot more flexibility in choice of repertoire.

In evaluating repertoire for use in class, I keep three primary goals in mind. First, is the music of high quality? Second, will the music work well given the vocal ability and division of voices within the group? For example, if I have a choir of 25 girls and 4 boys, then the music I choose is going to be different than for an evenly split group of 20 girls and 20 boys. Third, and most importantly, does the music I choose support my goal of creating literate, independent musicians? If I were to choose a piece that is beyond the students’ ability to read it, what would be the reason for doing so? Certainly there are many fantastic choral “standards” that I would like to conduct and that every choral singer should eventually know. However, if those pieces are far beyond the ability of the students to read, then why teach them? It’s akin to asking students with a first-grade reading level to read and perform a Shakespeare play – true, the students can speak English, but the work itself is simply too advanced for the current level of the students.

Teaching an Excerpt from the Choral Literature

When I find it necessary to teach certain passages by rote – particularly at the beginning of the year when the students’ literacy skills are still developing – there must be at least one element in the music that reinforces a particular reading skill that we are learning. The first tonal patterns I introduce to students all move diatonically by step (*drd, rdr, drm, mrd, drmfm, mfmrd, drmf, sfmrd*, etc). The first skips I introduce are within the tonic triad (*dm/md, ms/sm, ds/sd*) as these are the easiest for students to hear, sing and audiate in the early stages. Initial patterns include, but are not limited to: *drmd* (*m-d* skip approached by step), *dmrd* (*d-m* skip, the reverse of the previous pattern), *drms* (*m-s* skip), *smrd* (*s-m* skip, the reverse of the previous pattern), etc. Then I introduce direct skips within the tonic triad: *dms, smd, dm ds, smsd, mds, sdm*, etc. As I stated in part one of this article, these patterns are introduced daily in a very fast call-and-response fashion and can be done within a couple of minutes. They are followed up with tonal flashcards that use these same tonal patterns to connect and practice the aural with the visual.

Let’s say I find a piece that is suitable for early in the year. It is in the major mode, is completely diatonic and much of the melodic motion consists of either step-wise motion or skips within the tonic triad. However, some of the rhythm patterns are too advanced for the rhythmic reading level of the choir. Rather than teaching the entire piece or excerpt by rote, there are a couple of approaches for getting them reading the tonal parts.

One approach is to have the students read it “tonally.” This means that they only sing the pitch changes, ignoring the rhythm completely by skipping notes with repeated pitches. For example, the excerpt of the Zambian folk song *Bonse Aba* shown in Figure 1 would be read tonally as *mfmrdmrd* with each syllable given one slow beat. However, for inexperienced students, just skipping over a number of repeated pitches of various rhythmic values can be too visually confusing for their eyes to process quickly. Another approach is for the teacher to write out the pitches without any rhythm at all, as shown in Figure 2. Since it’s easiest to sing step-wise melodies, I filled in all melodic skips so that the entire excerpt in Figure 2 is stepwise motion. This particular excerpt of *Bonse Aba* begins on *mi*, which can be hard for inexperienced kids to audiate accurately. Since the tonic (*d*) is a much easier note for kids to audiate and sing accurately, I began Figure 2 on the tonic and added *re* to create a stepwise approach to the first melodic pitch (*m*). First, I ask the students to read Figure 2 exactly as it is written, giving one beat to each note. Once they can do this accurately, I then ask them to silently sing the notes marked with an ‘X’ in their heads. This helps them learn to audiate the missing pitch. Once the students can accurately sing the melodic skips while silently filling in the blanks with stepwise motion, the next step is to remove the silent notes completely and only sing the pitch changes as they are in the actual excerpt (see Figure 3). If I have written Figure 2 on the board before class begins, the whole process of reading this excerpt tonally typically will take less than three minutes. The students then have reinforced their ability to connect pitches on the staff to the ear preparation they have already been practicing (Phase One). The next step for me is to sing the excerpt in rhythm on solfège syllables (NOT on the words) and then have the students repeat it. Singing the solfège syllables in rhythm reinforces exactly when the pitch changes. It also aurally reinforces the relationship between these solfège syllables, which students will then be able to apply to other music in the future.



Figure 1

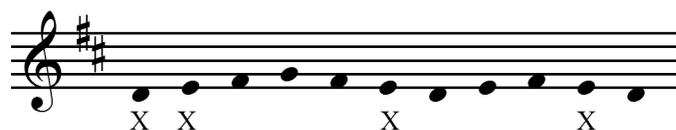


Figure 2



Figure 3

Techniques for Teaching Rhythm

After many years using the Kodály rhythm syllables, last year I switched to the Takadimi rhythm system (www.takadimi.net). For many reasons, I greatly prefer Takadimi rhythm syllables over the Kodály rhythm syllables. Although I think some rhythm systems are far better than others, it's important that you are consistent in using whatever system you choose.

Developing an internal feeling of pulse is extremely important. Large body motions that require a shifting of weight are most useful in developing an internal sense of pulse. I have my students keep with the beat with full arm movement or a side-to-side motion of their whole body. Clapping or tapping a hand, finger, or foot does not internalize the beat because it does not involve weight. Also, it's important that the beat always be inaudible – the goal is to develop an *internal* sense of pulse, not one that is reinforced aurally.

Some techniques I use for teaching rhythmic passages include:

- Ignore pitches and just read through a passage of music by reading the rhythm only.
- Break down tricky rhythmic passages into smaller, less complex elements on the board or overhead projector. Gradually add rhythmic complexity to the passage, making it more difficult until you have the actual rhythm from the passage being studied.
- Ties sometimes pose problems for students. If this is the case for a particular excerpt, ignore ties at first, then add them back once the rhythm has been learned without the ties.
- In an ensemble setting, once the whole group can read the rhythm using the rhythm syllables, have half the class read it on a neutral syllable while the other half sings it on the rhythm syllables. Have the ensemble members listen to each other to make sure that the two groups are matching each other rhythmically. Then have the groups doing

neutral and rhythm syllables switch. Finally, have the whole ensemble sing the passage on a neutral syllable.

Conclusion

Teaching music literacy is about more than just teaching sight-singing. My goal is to empower to students to become independent musicians. Training the students' ears must be done before reading can be done successfully. Students who have gone through this training can not only read well, but they also can easily dictate the tonal and rhythm patterns that they have studied. Teaching music literacy does not need to take large amounts of rehearsal time, but it does require good teacher preparation and consistent practice. In the long run, it actually saves time!

Michael Driscoll teaches music at Brookline High School where he directs three choirs, teaches Piano Class and AP Music Theory and advises three student-run a cappella groups. He also directs the 65-voice Boston Saengerfest Men's Chorus. He can be reached at mdriscoll@alum.wpi.edu. His website provides a number of free music literacy resources including rhythm and tonal flashcards and a list of suggested repertoire for beginning sight-singers: <http://michaeldriscollconductor.com/music-literacy-resources/>