

# Preparing To Sight-Read

## A Simple Tool for Success

by Larry Hudson

For many years I have observed teachers as they present new music to their bands and I have noticed that many do not have a process for teaching sight-reading. I can still remember the first time I took my band to a sight-reading contest. It was at our district festival. My band had performed very well in the concert hall but my students and I were totally unprepared to sight-read. I remember the music being passed out in envelopes and receiving the score. I was given a few minutes to study the score and then five minutes to talk to the band about the new work. From there it went down hill. I had no idea what to say or do. I told the band about the composer and read the notes provided but did nothing to help them play the new music.

Since that day I have worked hard to develop a concise and positive method for presenting new music. Not just for the sight-reading contest but for teaching the skills necessary for students to become better readers. This method has been very successful in both middle and high school and I hope you will find it useful too.

### **KEY, TIME and FORM**

#### **a sight-reading process**

Key, Time and Form is what I call this exercise, because this is the information your students need, to read a new piece of music. Understanding the “Key” signature is first. I ask the students to look through their music and find all the key signatures. They need to be able to name the key in concert pitch and name any measures where it changes. I ask for “concert pitch” because that is how I would describe the key from the podium. These skills need to be taught anyway and this activity gives us an opportunity to do so. As the students find the “Key” I ask them to raise their hands. When most or all students have responded, I look for a student who might not be participating and question them. This way I am working on responsibility skills too. When the “Key” has been established I move on to “Time”.

Again, I ask the students to raise their hands when they can describe the “Time” signature and locate any changes. I use the word describe because I expect the student to be able to explain the “time” signature as well as name it. All of these tasks need to be done in silence. Each student must be responsible for the answer, so I ask the band to not speak with their stand partner or others around them. After “Time”, I move on to “Form”. “Form, in this description, refers to the road signs. I ask the students to look for repeats, D.S., D.C., Codas, etc. They need to be able to describe these signs and tell the class how to follow them. Again, this is done in silence to make sure every student can find their way. When most of the hands are up, I pick a student to describe how to follow their part.

This description may sound complicated however it will only take your students 30 to 45 seconds to complete these tasks once they have acquired the skills. The final task prior to playing is to have the students count and finger through their parts while watching you conduct the new music. This experience gives students the opportunity to practice their fingerings and rhythms as well as see how you might handle a fermata or tempo change.

### **Things to remember:**

1. Do not waste time giving your students unnecessary information. A composer’s biography and style/period descriptions are needless, if time is a consideration in the sight- reading room.
2. Teach the skills needed to accomplish the task. Be sure your students understand key signatures, time signatures and form. And make sure they have a system for counting. Be sure to question students knowledge rather than telling them the answer
3. Develop a classroom and podium procedure that teaches students to watch you conduct. Make sure your students are very familiar with your conducting gestures.

Many great teachers have said that reading is the most important skill a musician can have. I hope this simple tool will help develop better reading skills in your bands.