

Chapter 18

Sight Reading

Playing at sight music you have never seen before is a skill and pleasure every guitarist can cultivate. By following the guidelines in this chapter, you can develop and improve your sight reading ability.

Many novice musicians forgo useful preparatory steps in this process. If you learn to do a few things *before* actually playing that will make the endeavor much more successful.

Before Playing

1. Check the key signature. Be sure you know which notes are sharp or flat throughout the piece. See if you can determine what key you are playing in. For example D major, or A minor.
2. Check the time signature. How many beats are there per bar? What kind of notes are to be counted? Usually you will count quarter notes (for example: 3/4 time) or eighth notes (for example: 6/8 time).
3. Also it is helpful to review the tempo markings (Allegro, Lento, etc.) Tempo reflects the character.
4. If there are accidentals within the piece that are not in the key signature, locate them on the fretboard.
5. Make sure you understand the rhythms and other musical symbols (such as repeats, harmonics etc.).

During Playing

1. Try not to get bogged down. Sight reading is more like a rough sketch than a finished painting. In the initial stages, just try to develop a sense of the overall character of the piece.
2. Play the melody line alone. Usually the note stems of the melody will be pointing upward.
3. Play the bass line alone. Usually the note stems will be pointing downward.
4. Look at each measure to determine if the musical design is primarily:
 - a. Scale motion
 - b. Arpeggio motion (notes of a chord, one at a time)
 - c. Chordal (two or more notes played at the same time)
5. Now play the whole piece. Try to focus more on the music's overall shape than on all the details.

Scale Motion

If the passage is primarily scale motion, look for the beginning note, whether the scale rises or falls (its contour), and the ending note:



Chordal Passages

There is no easy way around the effort it takes to learn to read chords. This is because the eye tends to "bounce" from note to note. And, the more notes there are, the longer it takes to place the fingers for the chord. Single notes are easy to read. Vertical stacks of notes take longer to decipher.

But there is a way to organize your eye and hand. Over time, if you follow this method, you will learn to read chords much more quickly. Here outlined is a method that many guitarists find useful.

When sight reading chords:

1. First, locate the highest note of the chord and place it down. Usually this is the melody note.
2. Second, locate and place down the lowest note. This is the bass note and often gives the chord its name.
3. Once you have placed the melody and bass notes, fill in the interior notes between these boundaries.

Try the following examples, placing the chord notes down one at a time in the order indicated:

A musical staff in treble clef showing a chord. The notes are G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and C5 (quarter). The notes are grouped into three categories with arrows and labels: '1st: highest note' points to C5, '2nd: lowest note' points to G4, and '3rd: middle notes' points to the A4 and B4 notes. Fingerings are indicated: 1 for G, 2 for A, 3 for B, and 4 for C.

Arpeggio Motion

Arpeggios are notes of a chord, played one at a time. When you see an arpeggio, practice placing the fingers on the notes all at once in the chord shape that the arpeggio outlines:

The diagram is divided into two parts. The top part, titled 'Chord Shapes', shows four chords on a treble clef staff: G major (G, B, D), A major (A, C#, E), D major (D, F#, A), and E major (E, G#, B). Fingerings are indicated: 1 for G, 2 for A, 3 for B in G major; 1 for A, 2 for C#, 3 for E in A major; 1 for D, 2 for F#, 3 for A in D major; and 1 for E, 2 for G#, 3 for B in E major. The bottom part, titled 'Arpeggios of the Chord shapes above', shows the notes of each chord played one at a time in sequence. The notes are G, A, B, A, G for G major; A, B, C#, B, A for A major; D, E, F#, E, D for D major; and E, F#, G#, F#, E for E major. The notes are written as quarter notes with stems pointing up. The first note of each arpeggio is marked with a 'p' for piano.

Waltz

CD track # 5

from *Complete Method for the Guitar, Opus 59*

Above each bar is an indication of the various musical elements Carcassi employs to create this Waltz. Before playing, using the guidelines for sight reading, review the musical design of each bar. For the bars marked with 3rds or octaves (abbr: 8ve) review the exercises on page 105 for the key of A minor. See how skillfully Carcassi employs all these elements within the Waltz.

MATTEO CARCASSI
(1792-1853)

arpeggio arpeggio scale

4 scale arpeggio arpeggio scale 8ve

9 arpeggio arpeggio arpeggio

13 arpeggio 3rds

17 (3rds) arpeggio arpeggio scale

21 scale arpeggio arpeggio scale 8ve