

## Note Reading, Take Two – the “Why”

By Anne Sullivan

If you are a monster sightreader and have perfect pitch, don't read this article! Everyone else, read on...

After [my last article on becoming a speedier reader](#), I received some interesting comments and questions, mostly about why and how we should be practicing reading notes. Let me try to address those issues here.

The “why” is all about connections. At a fundamental level, every note has four attributes: one dot on the staff that locates it, one pitch, one name, and for us harpists, one string.\* (For non-harpist musicians, you would use the particular way you produce that sound, whether it's by fingering, or piano key, etc.) When all four of those attributes are equally apparent and meaningful to you, you have made solid connections and you actually “know” the note. If you haven't made all the connections, you will not be reading music as quickly or accurately as you could. Here's a quick self-test: sit at the harp, put a piece of music in front of you, and begin to play in random places, measures in the middle of phrases or even the middle of measures. Readers with solid skills can start anywhere with ease. If you have difficulty or hesitation starting anywhere but the beginning of a piece or phrase, or some other spot where you have practiced starting, then your skills could use some sharpening.

*\*There are at least five other attributes of a note that come into play when a note is in a musical context, but that's a subject for a different article.*

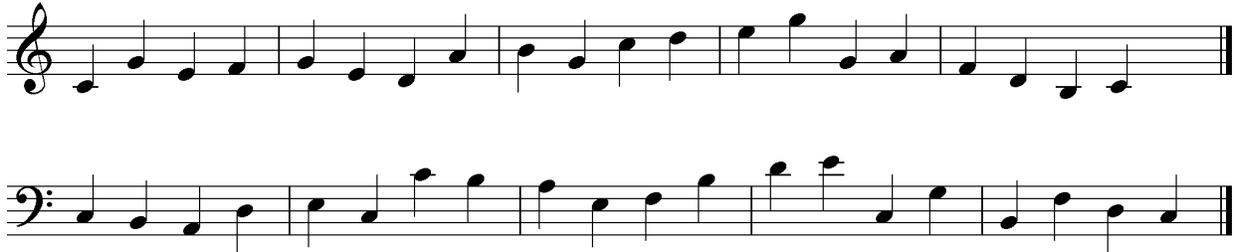
Here's a story about connections: a tale of my first piano lessons. I was four years old, but that first book of John Thompson and the stickers my teacher put on each page as I completed it, are embedded in my memory. The book started with middle C and worked outward, adding notes up and down from middle C, one by one. The drills were disguised as little “pieces” with catchy names, and my teacher insisted on correct performance. That meant having the correct finger on the correct key in the best hand position my little hands could manage. And it meant saying the name of each note as I played it, to ensure that I made the connection between the dot on the staff, the key on the piano, and the note's name and pitch.

At some point much later, I was considered proficient enough that I didn't have to say the notes anymore in my piano lessons. Was I surprised to start my harp studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, and discover that my ear training classes were to include three years of advanced note-reading! That's where I began to see exactly how important those connections are.

Another example: have you ever taken a touch typing course? Many typing instructors tell their students to say the names of the keys as they practice their drills. Sound familiar?

One more quick self-test: look at the musical fragment below. Sit at the harp and set your metronome to 100. Do the following three things, using the metronome click as the quarter note:

1. Play the entire fragment.
2. Say the letter name of each note.
3. Sing each note.



Analyze your results. Are playing, saying and singing equally easy for you? Which one is hardest? What metronome speed would allow you to play, sing and say with complete accuracy? Given your results, which connection or connections do you need to strengthen?

Ask any teacher and they will tell you how much they learn from their students. Helping a student identify and address a problem or learn something difficult provides the teacher with wisdom it is hard to gather any other way. And somehow it is always more interesting to solve someone's problem than to look at our own. But suppose we took that same "teaching" approach to our own practice? Would we settle for the weaknesses in our musicianship, or would we address them to improve our skills, confidence and pleasure in playing the harp? Are you ready to address your note reading? If you are, here's how...

You can start anytime by saying the names of the notes as you play. Saying every note in anything you are playing. It will work. But if you are looking for something more systematized, try the ["Become a Speedier Reader" course](#). This three-week course guides you through all the practice techniques you need to start making those vital connections between dot, pitch, string and note name. Or if you like drills and no-frills give-it-to-me-straight practice, try my new [Note Reader Challenge](#). This is intense work on note-reading that you can do at the harp or not; the only tool you need is a metronome. It comes with a progress chart to help you measure your progress in terms of speed and accuracy, and tips for putting your new proficiency to work for you every day.

*Questions? Comments? Let me know either by email – [ars@arsmusica.us](mailto:ars@arsmusica.us) - or on Facebook where you can like the ARS Musica page.*

*Also, please share this on your social circles, with students and colleagues. We want to make the world a "harpier" place!*