

## MINI ESSAY 23

### Super Awesome Sight Readers! Part 1: It Takes a Long Time!

By Dr. Julie Knerr

When Katherine and I began writing Piano Safari, one of our goals was to provide a successful approach for teaching children to read music notation.

Sight reading has always been one of my strengths, so throughout college and graduate school I was dismayed to be surrounded by truly fantastic pianists who were very poor sight readers. How could this happen? How could I prevent this problem from happening to my students?

Over the years, we have come to see that teaching students to read music notation requires:

- Understanding what concepts are necessary to be a good reader
- Providing systematic instruction in reading
- Believing strongly in our chosen reading approach and teaching it wholeheartedly
- Providing large amounts of reinforcement for each reading concept over a period of several years

In this series of Mini Essays, I would like to explore some common misconceptions about teaching reading and present ideas for developing confident readers at the elementary levels of playing (first three years of study).

**Misconception. Students should be excellent readers right away, or at least after a year or so.**

**Truth: It takes at least three years for children to become confident readers if they begin piano study at ages 5 or 6.**

Just as we do not expect beginning readers of English to read easily and fluently after a few months or a year, we should not expect expert sight reading in this time frame. If a student begins reading English in Kindergarten, most schools aim for all children to be reading “at grade level” by 3rd grade. This means that although some children may become expert readers in Kindergarten (a small percentage), teachers realize that for most children, becoming a fluent reader will proceed slowly over a period of the four years of Kindergarten through 3rd grade.

As I have taught piano over the years, I have come to believe that this holds true for reading music notation as well. It takes an average of three years of diligent work for children to become confident music readers.

This means that as we work with students on their reading skill week after week, month after month, we should not become disheartened if a child who has been playing for a year or two still needs help to analyze and decode a piece or a sight reading card.

If the foundations for reading have been well laid, and if the child has practiced reading for several years, I have observed repeatedly that by the time the child is 8 or 9, something clicks, and the child suddenly blossoms into a fluent and confident reader.

I believe this blossoming is a combination of:

- Careful instruction in reading over the previous years
- Developmental maturity of the child that allows coordination among all the areas of reading

This leads to the question, “If a child blossoms at age 8 or 9 in their developmental ability to read, why not just wait until then to introduce reading?”

You may have come across students who had been taught solely by rote for the first few years of study with no reading instruction at all. You may have noticed that although some students may do just fine with this delay in reading instruction, many will always struggle with reading. Because the student’s aural ability is so far ahead of the visual reading ability, the student may never catch up in his reading ability.

Therefore, we believe that it is important to lay the foundation for reading slowly and methodically in the earlier years. We have found that this foundational work will pay off by the time the child is 8 or 9.

#### **IN SUMMARY:**

- It takes most students several years to become confident and fluent music readers.
- We should teach systematically and confidently and not become disheartened at this long term process.

In the next Mini Essays, we will explore the topic of how students should think about reading notation.



