

MINI ESSAY 26

Super Awesome Sight Readers! Part 4: Ingredient #1 - Patterns and Theory

By Dr. Julie Knerr

In Part 3 (**Mini Essay 25**), I presented the four ingredients that lead to confident and fluent music reading:

- **Ingredient #1. Patterns and Theory**
- Ingredient #2. Contours and Intervals
- Ingredient #3. Rhythm
- Ingredient #4. Note Names

From the beginning of a student's piano study, we need to establish the idea that **music is not a random collection of notes. Instead, music is made up of logical patterns.**

In the beginning of study, this is accomplished by teaching students Rote Pieces that are related to patterns on the keyboard. This may seem strange to say that teaching Rote Pieces actually helps students learn to read, but it is true! Students who have been taught patterned Rote Pieces at the beginning of study look for patterns in their Reading Pieces and Sight Reading Cards, because they are trained that music is made up of logical patterns.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BEGINNING ROTE PIECE?

Not every piece makes a good beginning rote piece!! We believe that the best Rote Pieces to teach to beginning students are those based on **easily memorable keyboard patterns of black and white keys, requiring no previous knowledge.**

A piece that is extremely melodic or that is based on theoretical concepts a student cannot yet understand will not be as successful as a piece that is based on easily memorable keyboard patterns.

For example, "Charlie Chipmunk" is a good Rote Piece because a young student at the first lesson can easily remember the pattern, "Two notes, two notes, going up." The black key groups make it easy for the student to remember what key to start on without knowing any white key names.

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Char - lie Chip - munk scam - pers by. Climbs the oak tree way up high.

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The melody consists of quarter notes with the following pitch sequence: G2 (labeled '2'), G2 (labeled '2'), A2 (labeled '2'), B2 (labeled '2'), C3 (labeled '2'), D3 (labeled '2'), E3 (labeled '2'), F3 (labeled '2'), G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4. The lyrics are: Char - lie Chip - munk scam - pers by. Climbs the oak tree way up high.

Another example is "I Love Coffee," a lengthy six-part work for beginners. Students easily grasp the pattern, "White black white black white black white." No background knowledge is required.

Traditional, arr. Bernard & Carolyn Shaak

I love cof - fee, I love tea, I love cof - fee, I love tea.

WHAT MAKES A BAD BEGINNING ROTE PIECE?

This James Bellak piece from his obscure 19th century work, *A New Method for Pianoforte*, would, in my opinion, be a less successful Rote Piece for a beginner, even though the hands stay in one position the whole time, because it does not contain easily memorable patterns for beginning student. Teaching this simple contrapuntal work by rote could be an exercise in frustration. (Ignore the old fashioned finger numbers.

This piece would make a poor piece to teach by rote because although it does have patterns, as most music does, **the patterns are beyond the understanding of a beginner.**

Harmonizing with tonic and dominant to match the melody may look basic to a teacher, but to a student at the very beginning of piano study, he does not have this knowledge. Therefore, the patterns are indecipherable to the beginner.

I Love Coffee, with its epic length (50 measures), constant changing of position, and use of black and white keys, is much easier for a beginning student to learn by rote than this 8-measure, stable hand position, white key piece by Bellak.

If we choose inappropriate rote pieces for a beginner, the student may form false assumptions about music, coming to believe that music is made up of a bunch of random notes that he has to memorize one at a time. For example, in this Bellak piece, a student may think...

“Wow. There are so many notes to remember, and they are all on the white keys. There is no pattern, but I don’t want my teacher to think I don’t get it, so I’ll have to think of a way to do it myself...”

I know, I poke this key with my pinky while I poke this other key with my thumb. Then I play the thumb note four times while holding my pinky. Then I play my thumb in the LH at the same time as my Finger 2 in my RH, which makes no sense. Why can’t I just play both my thumb, or both Finger 2’s? And then I play Finger 2 four times. And then I think I play my pinky again in the LH, but I can’t remember which key to poke in my RH, so I’ll just guess and glance at my teacher to see if she does that eyebrow thing. No eyebrows means I poked the right ones. Eyebrows up mean I should try poking a different key.”

Why not teach Rote Pieces that have patterns that actually make sense to a beginner, patterns the student can clearly see laid out on the keyboard that require no previous knowledge of theory or standard melodic behavior? The sets up the right way of thinking about music: **Music is made of patterns and is not a random collection of notes.**

STUDENT AS TEACHER

Valuable insight into the student’s thought process can be gained by occasionally asking the student to be the teacher and explain to you how to play a piece. If the student says, “You start on this black key, and then play two times, two times, and then go up. It’s a pattern,” you can be sure the student understands. If the student says, “You play this key and then this key and then I think this key? But maybe it’s this key,” you can be sure that the piece has a pattern that is indiscernible to the student.

PATTERNED ROTE PIECES = FINDING PATTERNS IN READING PIECES

Why am I spending so much time talking about Rote Pieces in a series about Reading?
When appropriate Rote Pieces are used at the beginning of study, they set up a way for students to think about musical patterns and their relationship to the keyboard. **They learn from the beginning that music is based on patterns, and they begin to apply this to their reading.** I have found that my students who are taught in this way are constantly pointing out patterns in their Sight Reading Cards, patterns I hadn’t even noticed.

This has ramifications even reaching into the advanced literature. For example, recently I was practicing a piece by Chopin called “Souvenir de Paganini,” B. 37. One spot, in A Major, is quite technically difficult.



I found myself thinking of this right hand section not in terms of the note names, but in terms of the patterns of black and white keys so that I could angle my hand appropriately to navigate the keyboard topography. This is similar to how students think about navigating the keyboard topography of “I Love Coffee”. By teaching students that the keyboard patterns of black and white keys matter right from the beginning of study, we are setting students up to think about other passages in this way. In contrast, students who are only taught note names may not try other ways of thinking about how the notes on the page relate technically to the keyboard. They may instead read and play this passage note by note.

PIANO SAFARI PROGRESSION OF PATTERNS

In Piano Safari Level 1, we strive to provide students with a feeling for the keyboard through the Technical Exercises and the Rote Pieces. As students are learning to read, they notice patterns in their Reading Pieces, because they have been trained from the beginning, in their Rote Pieces, that music is made of patterns. They often end up finding patterns I did not even notice!

In Piano Safari Level 2, this idea continues as students learn more complicated Rote Pieces, and the patterns become more formalized in Technique Book 2 through learning basic pentascales, triads, and other basic keyboard patterns in the Special Exercises.

Learning pentascales and triads is not only the basis for understanding of theory and key areas, but also forms the basis of standard fingering practices. This will later help students in reading, as they will already have these patterns with the appropriate fingerings in their hands. They can recognize the patterns, and immediately their hands will know how to technically execute the pattern.

In Piano Safari Level 3, theory and technique are integrated through the study of scales, chord inversions, and standard accompaniment patterns such as Alberti bass, waltz bass, stride, and broken chord accompaniments. It is amazing how students who have already been trained to look for patterns can immediately recognize the chords, scales, and accompaniment patterns in their pieces and Sight Reading Cards and be able to play them fluently. This is the point where all the foundational work in reading pays off. I have been astounded how students who have come through Piano Safari Levels 1 and 2 have been able to confidently swallow pieces whole in Level 3. In contrast, students who began with the idea that note names are the most important part of reading still default to figuring out the notes individually rather than grasping the patterns as a whole.

To summarize this Mini Essay:

- Teaching patterned pieces by Rote at the beginning of study trains students that music is made of patterns
- Students then automatically look for patterns in their Reading, which helps their reading
- Learning standard technical patterns sets up good fingering habits that also aid in reading
- Patterns from Rote Pieces combine with patterns in technical patterns to form a student’s understanding of theory, which leads to more fluent reading ability.

For Ingredient #2, Contours and Intervals, see Mini Essay 27.