

MINI ESSAY 27

Super Awesome Sight Readers! Part 5: Ingredient #2 - Contours and Intervals

By Dr. Julie Knerr

In this Mini Essay, I will focus on #2 of the four ingredients that lead to confident and fluent music reading, Contours and Intervals:

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

INTERVALLIC READING APPROACH

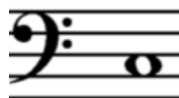
Piano Safari uses an intervallic reading approach. This means that students are trained to read the intervals and see the relationships between the notes, rather than reading by note name one note at a time.

We have found that of all the reading approaches, the Intervallic Approach produces the highest percentage of students who become confident and competent music readers.

In Piano Safari Level 1, students begin with pre-staff reading (the importance of which will be discussed in another blog post), and then move onto the staff.

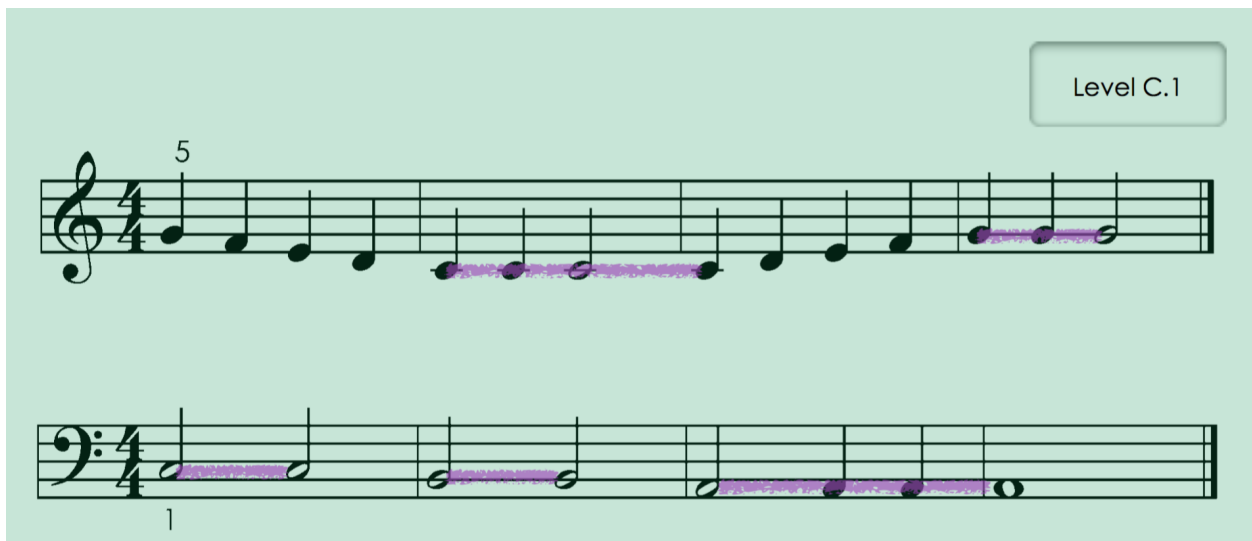
2NDS, UNISONS, AND LANDMARKS

After the pre-staff portion of their training, students are introduced to the interval of a 2nd on the staff, and also to unisons (“same”) in Unit 3 of Book 1. We use the landmarks of Treble G and Bass C, and all the Reading Pieces and Sight Reading Cards in Level 1 begin on these two landmark notes. Students begin on these notes using different fingers, so that they do not associate a specific finger with a specific note, falsely assuming, for example, “1 is always G.”



MARKING INTERVALS

We found it extremely beneficial to have students mark the same (unisons) in each Reading Piece and Sight Reading Cards. This is harder than it might seem for many students. They really have to search to see which notes are unisons. After analyzing a whole unit of Reading Pieces and 16 Sight Reading Cards to find the unisons, they definitely have had plenty of practice at recognizing same quickly! Repetition builds confidence and fluency.



The image shows a musical exercise on a light green background. In the top right corner, there is a rounded rectangular box containing the text "Level C.1". Below this, there are two musical staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a finger number "5" above the first note. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature and begins with a finger number "1" below the first note. Both staves contain a sequence of notes. Purple horizontal lines are drawn across the staves to highlight unisons: one line connects the 5th line of the treble staff to the 1st line of the bass staff, and another line connects the 2nd line of the treble staff to the 2nd line of the bass staff.

STEPS FOR READING

After a student has analyzed the same, we can use the following Teaching Strategies to teach a Sight Reading Card or Reading Piece:

- Track with a pencil over the notes as the student plays, saying “up, down, same”
- Track with a pencil without saying anything
- Have the student play alone without you pointing. Say “Ta-2 in the long notes,” and tap the rhythm while the student plays. Seeing you tapping the rhythm while playing helps the student play the rhythms correctly.
- Have the student play along while you step back and drink some tea.
- Tell the student, “Wow, you played that so well, I think you might be able to play it while I cover up your hands!” Hold a book above the student’s hands to cover the hands. The student plays without looking at their hands. It is important to train the students not to look down when reading unless absolutely necessary (i.e., there is a large leap).
- You can also be creative by having the student play while you create an accompaniment, or have the student play the exercise faster.
- If a student has extra trouble reading or is very young, you can add the step at the beginning of playing the exercise for the student while he points to the notes on the page. Hearing it once will not hurt the reading process. Indeed, it will help the student form connections between their ears and eyes. Do not do this all the time, but only if necessary.

Each student will need more steps or fewer steps, according to their ability and age. Once you have gotten to know your student, you will be able to guess at the correct number of steps, so that the student will have the support he needs by having enough steps to be successful, but not have too many steps, which will make him bored.

CONTOUR STORIES

I also often tell Contour Stories.



For example, in the sight reading melody above, I might say, “You are sledding down the hill. Then you walk along with your friends and climb back up another hill. Then you go inside your house and have some hot chocolate!” The students love this, and it really helps them see the melody as a whole.

3RDS

In Unit 4, the 3rds unit, students practice reading only unisons and 3rds. Again, we have students mark the unisons (“same”).

A musical staff in 4/4 time, treble clef, with a key signature of one flat. The melody starts on G4 (labeled with a '5' above it), goes up to A4, B4, C5, then down to B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The notes from G4 down to G3 are connected by a purple brushstroke, representing a descent down a hill. The notes from G3 up to C5 are connected by a purple brushstroke, representing an ascent up a hill. The final notes, C5, B4, A4, G4, are also connected by a purple brushstroke, representing staying inside a house. A button labeled "Level D.1" is in the top right corner.

Level D.1

2NDS AND 3RDS COMBINED

In Unit 5, students finally combine 2nds and 3rds. We delay combining these two intervals until students have thoroughly become confident with each interval separately. We have found that many method books do not have enough repetition in reading 2nds and 3rds separately before combining them, leading to students who guess at the notes (what my college theory professor used to call, “poking and hoping.” “Don’t poke and hope!”).

At this point, students are very adept at marking same, so we have them choose a “3rds color” and mark the 3rds instead. We continue to track on the page with a pencil and help the student in their reading by saying up, down, same, etc. as necessary, reducing the amount of help as the student becomes a better reader.

The image shows two musical staves in 4/4 time. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. A box in the top right corner is labeled "Level E.1". The top staff begins with a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a first finger (1) above the first note. The bottom staff begins with a bass clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a fifth finger (5) below the first note. Green lines connect notes between the two staves to show intervals: a 3rd from G4 to B4, a 3rd from B4 to D5, a 3rd from D5 to F5, a 3rd from F5 to A5, a 3rd from A5 to C6, a 3rd from C6 to E6, a 3rd from E6 to G6, a 3rd from G6 to B6, a 3rd from B6 to D7, a 3rd from D7 to F7, a 3rd from F7 to A7, and a 3rd from A7 to C8. The notes are quarter notes, and the piece ends with a whole note on the final line of each staff.

One of the reasons we chose a line landmark (Treble G) and a space landmark (Bass C) is to allow students to see that 3rds move from line to line or from space to space.

All the Reading Pieces and Sight Reading Cards in Level 1 are single line melodies. This gives the student plenty of practice at reading the intervals in a melody before adding the complexity of moving from clef to clef. Levels 2 and 3 add grand staff reading and various textures. Students are playing on the grand staff in their Rote Pieces in Level 1, so technically and musically, they are playing much more complicated music than they are reading. Eventually, toward the end of Level 2, the Rote and Reading Levels merge, and by Level 3, students are reading all their music.

The benefits of this systematic intervallic approach are the following:

- We have found that students who read using an intervallic approach see patterns in the melodies much more easily.
- Students are able to transpose easily.
- Plenty of reinforcement with one interval before adding others provides the vast amount of practice that most students need. There is nothing haphazard about the approach, and it works with children and adults alike.
- Reading intervallically most closely resembles how advanced pianists read (by shape and interval) rather than training students to read note by note with note names alone, where they may or may not see the relationship between the notes and the patterns and melodies formed by the notes.

Katherine Fisher had an interesting experience with the intervallic reading approach idea this past week. She received a high school transfer student who is playing early advanced music. She is a fabulous sight reader, but reads by note name. After all, reading by note name can work for some students, and it definitely worked for this student. However, when Katherine asked her to transpose a simple piece that stayed in one pentascale position, the student could not do it. Because the note names were different when transposing, she was clueless as to how to do this. In contrast, students who have been taught to read intervallically can easily transpose. In fact, many of our Piano Safari students transpose their pieces just for fun!

Because I have been reading music longer than I have been reading English (from the age of 6), it is sometimes hard for me to know exactly what my students are experiencing when they are reading. However, I recently had a taste of what intervallic reading is like. I was reading an obscure Baroque piece, and the left hand changed from bass clef to tenor clef. Since I do not know the note names in tenor clef at sight, reading it was difficult. But once I figured out the first note of the passage, I was able to play the piece based on interval and contour and my knowledge of theory. It was an interesting taste of how my Piano Safari students read intervallically. It was definitely not easy, but I realized that if I did not read intervallically, it would be nearly impossible to read fluently while decoding the note names of an unknown clef.