MINI ESSAY 28

Super Awesome Sight Readers! Part 6: Ingredient #3 - Rhythm

By Dr. Julie Knerr

In this Mini Essay, I will focus on #3 of the four ingredients that lead to confident and fluent music reading, Rhythm:

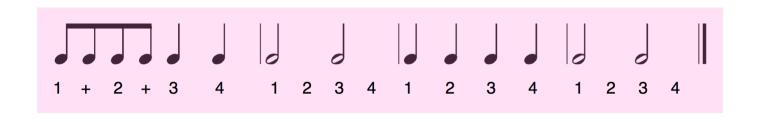
- Ingredient #1. Patterns and Theory
- Ingredient #2. Contours and Intervals
- Ingredient #3. Rhythm
- Ingredient #4. Note Names

I have long had a hunch that rhythm was an important component for good sight reading. All the good sight readers I have ever known have an excellent sense for rhythm. I am blessed to be included in this camp. I don't know how it happened, but I have always been able to understand almost any rhythm immediately. In fact, when I was 8, I was in a weekly theory class with three other little girls. We had a book of rhythms to tap, and we were supposed to practice them ahead of time before class. I never practiced them. I could always tap them correctly at sight with no practice. I always wondered why my fellow classmates had trouble with the rhythms sometimes. I suppose it is similar to a person with perfect pitch wondering why everyone can't hear immediately that a D is a D.

Not only can good readers intuitively read any rhythmic pattern immediately, but they have a great sense of the macro rhythm. When reading, they do not feel all the subdivisions. Instead, they are able to feel the large beat and fit all the subdivisions between the large beats almost automatically. How do we teach this? I believe that again, it has to do with patterns, this time rhythm patterns. It also has to do with counting rhythmically.

COUNTING RHYTHMICALLY

First, let's look at what it means to count rhythmically. It is quite possible for a person to metrically count this rhythm with all the correct numbers, but with all the wrong rhythms. I have even heard teachers demonstrate counting metrically in very unmusical ways that make it very difficult to understand the rhythm.



This is why we believe in a syllabic system of counting. When counting syllabically (with Ta's), students tend to count with a musical rhythmic inflection that aids the student in developing a basic sense of pulse and organization of the rhythm. They rarely count incorrectly when using Ta's. Little explanation is necessary. Teachers can just tap and say the syllables with students, and after a number of examples, the students just pick it up easily. We use syllabic counting in Piano Safari Level 1 and introduce metric counting in the beginning of Level 2. In Level 2 we gradually transition students from syllabic to metric counting by using both systems until students are comfortable with metric counting. Truth be told, I never fully stop using syllabic counting, as I find it so musical.



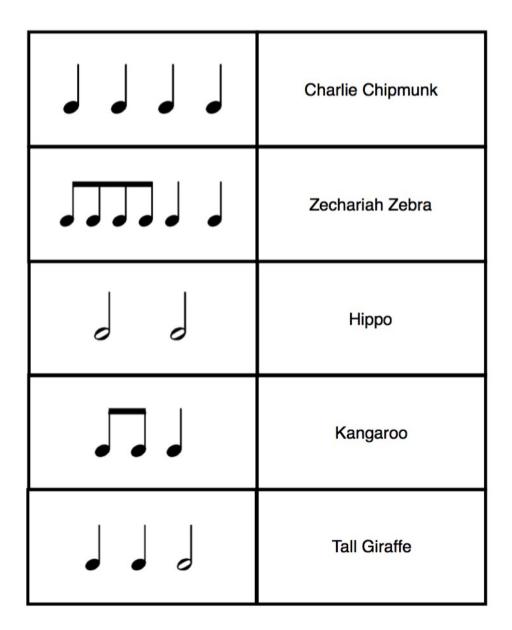
RHYTHM PATTERNS

Secondly, Rhythm Patterns. We use animal patterns in Piano Safari to further reinforce the macro sense of rhythm. Many of the patterns tie into their Animal Technique Exercises as well. Students count both with Ta's, with a rhythmically musical inflection, and we also ask them to find the animal rhythm patterns in their pieces and Sight Reading Exercises. I often draw the animals in the score, or I use my stuffed animals to tap the Rhythm Patterns.

The example above counted with Ta's can also be counted with Animal Rhythm Patterns:



Here are the animal and syllabic patterns that are found most commonly in Piano Safari Level 1:



Internalizing these rhythmic patterns and practicing tapping and saying rhythm patterns at the bottom of each Sight Reading Card separate from melodies really enhances the ability of a student to decode music.