

19. DIVERSITY IN PIANO SIGHT-READING: PREPARATORY INVESTIGATION

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Abstract: *Pianists of intermediate and advanced levels have previously been tested sight-reading different styles of piano pieces in Japan and Romania. The outcome vaguely indicated that the general fluency possibly not being the foremost importance as it is in the UK. A fuller analysis therefore has been undertaken, using the data from the test and the follow up questionnaires. From this small scale research, the Japanese subjects reasonably valued general fluency while not necessarily have achieved, and Romania subjects probably did not value it very much. This confirmed possibly different practices of sight-reading between countries.*

Key words: *piano sight-reading, music education, comparative education.*

This is a preparatory analysis of the diversity in piano sight-reading practices. Sight-reading is one of the major research areas in music education, and much has been reported in relation to `how to` sight-read and `what makes` successful or less successful sight-reading. It is also known that different elements influence the outcomes of sight-reading achievements, e.g. experience, personality, cognitive styles and so forth (Kornicke 1995). In many cases the pieces used for the tests are of elementary level. This research uses test pieces of the UK grade 7-8 sight-reading level, testing pianists of given level and/or above. The UK grade 7-8 piano examination repertoire consist of classical sonatas, Bach WTC or Partita excerpts, Romantic pieces such as Tchaikovsky Seasons, Chopin Nocturne or Mazurka, from Debussy Bergamasque Suites and so forth. For brief information, the UK grade examinations which have also been used in many commonwealth and other countries generally require sight-reading from an early stage. Very rich teaching material has long been available, which gives common ideas of `how to` sight-read. This has enabled students as well as teachers being well informed in terms of the UK practice. General fluency is the foremost value while accuracy of details and minor errors can be overlooked as necessary. For example, one of such materials instructs `Fluency is more important than anything else ...`¹⁴⁰, and another says `...ignore mistakes...play musically...`¹⁴¹. In contrast, in some other countries, sight-reading is not a very important part of piano tuition. In Japan, for example, the mainstream style and method of piano tuition follow the early period of the Japanese piano pedagogy, especially in the intermediate levels (Siromoto 2010, 2012). Learning large volumes of technical work, *solfege* or dictation have normally been given priority, and sight-reading often starts much later. Similarly, the Russian school of Anton Rubinstein`s tradition is known for its focus on the correct and precise interpretation of the score, as well as the matters of tone and touch (Simion 2010), while sight-reading has also been taught.

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¹⁴⁰ Trinity College London, (2011), `Sound at Sight, Sight-Reading for piano Book 4`, 2nd series, Grade 7-8. Trinity College London, England, p.28

¹⁴¹ Harris, P., (1993), `Improve your sight-reading! Piano Grade 8`, Faber Music, England, p.26

The preliminary report¹⁴² (2014) has indicated the possibly different practices in piano sight-reading between countries. 27 subjects have been tested in Japan and Romania, using the UK grade 7-8 sight-reading pieces from four different styles (1. Polyphony, 2. Classical, 3. Romantic, 4. Modern, atonal). The subjects learn or have studied the piano with different teachers. All subjects have learned the piano to the UK grade 7-8 or above levels. The outcome was that, while their self-evaluation scores often indicated positively, many subjects from both countries played either with frequent stopping for corrections and assurances and/or overly slowly in tempi, which could hardly make any sense of given music. This led to a question whether such stopping and over-slowness have been merely `unavoidable` or possibly intentional. A further investigation has therefore been undertaken, using the data from the test and follow up questionnaire.

1. Report from Japanese data

17 students have been tested as mentioned above, and 62 subjects (60 music students including the 17, and two members of the teaching staff) participated in the questionnaire in 2013. On average, they sight-read `sometimes` or `occasionally` (mode: sometimes, median: occasionally), sight-read `only when required for the assessments` (mode), and `dislike and have no confidence` in their sight-reading skills (mean, median, mode). Average age of initial formal sight-reading experience either in an assessment or a tuition was 13.9 (mode: 19, median: 15.5, SD: 5.134). Summary from the sight-reading test is as below.

JP1	time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type	JP2	time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type
A1	84	3	3	C	A1	154	2	2	S
A2	91	3	1	C	A2	144	3	1	SC
A3	102	3	1	N	A3	212	2	1	N
A4	45	5	4	T	A4	47	6	4	T
A5	45	2	4	T	A5	85	2	3	M
A6	53	4	4	T	A6	76	5	4	T
A7	36	6	5	T	A7	71	7	5	TS
A8	55	2	3	C	A8	89	3	3	S
B1	88	2	2	S	B1	134	3	2	S
B2	131	1	3	S	B2	209	1	2	S
B3	74	1	3	T	B3	110	3	3	T
B4	124	2	1	C	B4	153	1	1	C
B5	124	1	1	C	B5	193	2	1	C
B6	44	5	5	T	B6	45	5	5	T
B7	63	3	2	C	B7	55	5	2	C
B8	56	2	3	C	B8	49	4	4	T
B9	82	2	2	S	B9	150	3	2	S

¹⁴² Siromoto, T., (2014), `General fluency vs accuracy in piano sight-reading: preliminary report`, in „Integration of Science, Management and Music Education: innovative approaches, search and prospects”, the proceedings of the XII International Scientific and Practical Conference 17 December 2013, pp. 322-326, MGUKI, Moscow

JP3	time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type	JP4	time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type
A1	172	0(1)	1	C	A1	138	0(1)	1	SC
A2	174	3	1	C	A2	91	3	2	C
A3	229	0(1)	1	N	A3	118	2	1	S
A4	58	5	4	T	A4	51	2	4	TS
A5	145	1	2	C	A5	82	2	3	M
A6	83	4	4	T	A6	62	5	4	TS
A7	72	2	4	T	A7	74	2	4	TS
A8	126	2	2	C	A8	105	3	2	S
B1	57	7	3	S	B1	88	5	2	S
B2	119	2	2	S	B2	166	1	2	S
B3	68	2	3	TS	B3	78	1	3	TS
B4	112	3	1	SC	B4	116	2	1	SC
B5	105	4	1	C	B5	122	3	1	C
B6	26	5	5	T	B6	29	2	5	T
B7	62	4	2	S	B7	56	0(1)	3	T
B8	52	4	4	SC	B8	48	4	4	SC
B9	93	1	2	S	B9	96	2	2	S

T: playing through, phrase etc recognizable S: overly slow, music not recognizable
C: keep stopping, music not recognizable TC: keep stopping but general tempi not overly slow
TS: overly slow but with some indication of phrase or section etc.
SC: overly slow and keep stopping M: mixture
N: below assessable level

This group was majorly Type-S (S, SC, TS, overly slow, 42.6%) or Type-C (C, SC, keep stopping for correction and assurance, 33.8%) of 67.4% in total, while reasonable level of general fluency has also been observed. The duplicating Type –SC of 9% has been excluded. The general fluency score was assessed by the duration and general impression of the playing. Type-S is often seen in four pieces: the classical style piece with many rapid passages, the romantic piece and the atonal pieces of unusual times. Type-C is seen more in the polyphony piece and the Romantic piece than the two modern pieces. The link between the result and the characteristics of pieces, however, should be further analyzed in a separate occasion. Low confidence was very notable, exemplified by the 94.1% of 5 or lower scores. Correlations between self-evaluation and general fluency were 1. polyphony: $r(15)=.60$, $T=2.88$, $p<.05$, . classical: $r(15)=.80$, $t=4.659$, $p<.01$, 3. Romantic: $r(15)=.52$, $t=2.345$, $p<.05$, 4. modern: $r(15)=.18$, $t=.67$, $p>.1$. It was significant in the first three styles, while many cases have been identified either `overly slow` or `keep stopping`. This suggests that the subjects at least valued the grasp of the outline in the conventional styles, while they have not necessarily been able to achieve the objective.

Together with the questionnaire (N=17) answered by the tested subjects, correlations amongst the background elements such as frequency of sight-reading, like or dislike, length of experience have also been analyzed. Only between the length of sight-reading experience and general fluency of Romantic ($r(15)=|.49|$, $\alpha=.05$) and modern ($r(15)=|.42|$, $\alpha=.05$) styles found significant.

This may be a reflection of traditional piano learning tasks of the Japanese piano pedagogy in which classical and early romantic pieces have much greater weight up to a very advanced level. In addition, no significant correlations have been observed between self-evaluation and types of sight-reading in any piece. This indeed suggests that the subjects do not necessarily expect to grasp the outline in sight-reading.

2. Report from Romanian data

10 subjects (9 students and 1 teacher) tested and 26 subjects (10 students and 16 teachers) participated in the questionnaire in 2013 and 2014. On average, they sight-read `sometimes` (mode, mean), `sight-read for assessments and for pleasure` (mode), and `like and good` in sight-reading (mode). Average age of initial formal sight-reading experience was 9.5 (mode 7, median 8, SD 3.57). Summary from the sight-reading test is as below. This group has majority Type-S (S, SC, TS, 70.0%). The Type-C (C, SC, TC) 47.5%) was also notable, and Type-SC (overly slow AND keep stopping for correction or assuring) was 17.0%. However, low confidence (5 or less) was not much observed (10.0%), while high confidence (8+, 47.5%) was much notable with the majority being 7+ (67.5%). Type-SC more often appears in the classical and modern pieces, while Type-S dominates in most pieces. Correlations between self-evaluation and general fluency were 1.polyphony $r(8)=.745$, $t=3.16$, $p<.05$, 2. classical $r(8)=.106$, $t=-0.17$, $p>.1$, 3. romantic $r(8)=.46$, $t=1.45$, $p>.05$, 4. modern, $r(8)=.11$, $t=0.31$, $p>.1$. It was significant only in the polyphony. This suggests that general fluency may have been less valued.

RO1					RO2				
	time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type		time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type
A1	39	10	5	T	A1	59	7	5	T
A2	62	8	2	S	A2	95	9	3	TS
A3	50	5	3	TC	A3	110	5	3	T
A4	184	7	1	SC	A4	276	9	1	SC
A5	144	5	1	S	A5	358	4	1	SC
B1	42	10	5	T	B1	45	5	5	T
B2	106	7	2	SC	B2	137	8	2	SC
B3	84	8	2	SC	B3	163	7	1	SC
B4	64	4	1	C	B4	210	5	1	SC
B5	72	7	3	T	B5	117	6	3	T

RO3					RO4				
	time(s)	se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type		time(s)	Se(/10)	gfl (/5)	type
A1	74	7	4	T	A1	41	8	4	TS
A2	114	8	2	S	A2	84	8	2	S
A3	151	4	2	C	A3	72	8	2	S
A4	272	8	1	SC	A4	179	8	1	SC
A5	327	3	1	SC	A5	213	4	1	SC
B1	31	9	5	T	B1	21	7	5	T
B2	103	8	2	SC	B2	97	8	1	SC
B3	87	8	2	S	B3	89	6	1	SC
B4	136	6	1	S	B4	114	9	1	SC
B5	87	7	3	S	B5	70	8	2	TS

From the questionnaire answered by the subjects, correlation amongst the background elements such as frequency of sight-reading, like or dislike, length of experience have been significant only between the length of sight-reading experiences and general fluency in polyphony ($r(8)=.78$, $\alpha=.05$), classical ($r(8)=.73$, $\alpha=.05$), and modern pieces ($r(8)=.82$, $\alpha=.05$). No significant correlations have been observed between self-evaluation and types of sight-reading in any piece, and this as well suggests possibly different aims of sight-reading from that of the UK.

3. Comparison and discussion

Unlike the UK policy, both Japanese and Romanian data indicated less focus on general fluency in piano sight-reading. Romania in particular obviously valued slow playing as long as it covers the accuracy, while Japanese valued fluency yet could not leave assurance/correction. Levels of confidence, i.e. self-evaluation may well involve much of socio-cultural reasons. Yet the fact that self-evaluation and general fluency did not always correlate and, more importantly, that self-evaluation and types of sight-reading did not correlate, suggest general fluency being not as much valued as the foremost importance. Some other elements are likely valued, and the model of sight-reading may also be possibly considered `differently`. This becomes an important suggestion and question in the international comparison of sight-reading. Relationship between the type of sight-reading and style of test pieces should also be researched further.

References

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