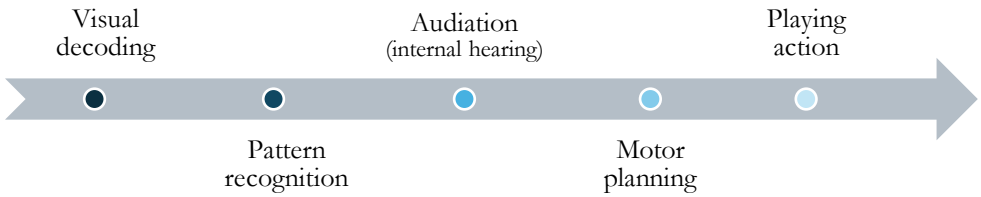
Developing Strong Readers at the Piano:
From Decoding to Fluency

November 5, 2026 ***Sara M. Ernst**, PhD* *GMTA State Conference*

Reading music is the act of decoding visual symbols and processing them into meaningful sound.

Eye–Ear–Hand Connections

The process of music reading—Sensorimotor integration—Visual, Auditory, Proprioceptive



Eye/Brain:	**Ear:**	**Hand:**
Tracking the page	Sound	Instrument
Music to instrument	Anticipating	Stimulus to action
Perceiving patterns	Responding	Proprioception

Ease in reading is determined by ability to decode notational elements, familiar versus unfamiliar, at versus above level (technically).

Implications from research

- What we "see" depends on musical knowledge: Chunking, Structure in music, Ability to predict
- Eye-hand span: Relies on musical structures, Increases with ability
- Readers develop sensitivity to the clarity/precision of the notation: Readers are distracted by other elements, Visual perception can be trained
- More time spent in reading correlates with skill

Those learning to read need . . .

- Scores with layout that is: Not too compressed, Consistent with musical structures, Without visual distractions
- To know all symbols on the page
- To develop skills in decoding patterns: A process for visual decoding → playing action
- To spend consistent time reading

Knowledge and Skills: Learning to Decode

Pitch Pattern
Direction
Intervals
Short Groups
Motifs
Sequences
Phrases
Sections

Harmony
Intervals (dyads)
Triads
Inversions
With sevenths
Four notes (+)

Rhythm
Symbols convey:
Duration
Frequency
Patterns result from meter

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Learning patterns: Chanting rhythms

- Encourage voice-based approach to rhythm when isolating lines
- Training eye and ear for rhythmic groups
- Neutral syllables, lyrics, or words
- Existing "rhythm solfège" systems: Gordon (Du-te-de-te), Kodaly (Ti-ti), Ta-ka-di-mi

Visit takadimi.net for more information on this system.

Learning new rhythms

A simple process, over several weeks, using patterns from music to be learned.

- Listening, Moving, Chanting
- Listening, Moving, Chanting, Creating
- Listening, Moving, Chanting, Creating, Reading
- Listening, Moving, Chanting, Creating, Reading, Practicing

Learning Benchmarks

Habits for developing strong readers

- Pattern recognition, increasing in difficulty
  - Ear–eye–hand
  - Learning pitch through visual pattern
  - Learning rhythm by aural patterns
- Balanced assignments in early years
  - Learning "new notes" every week
  - Guided process of decoding in lesson
- Use of "On Own" or "Self Study" pieces to check comprehension
- Integration of sight-reading curriculum when appropriate

**Technical skills and keyboard theory (5fp, scales, triads, arpeggios)
are critical for developing the young pianist's bank of familiar patterns.**

Sight Reading: A Related but Different Skill

Reading for learning	**versus**	**Reading at sight**
Decoding for practice		Decoding for immediate action
Internalizing the same music		Rehearsing the decode → play
Expanding pattern awareness		Using pattern awareness
Expanding technique		Using technique

For time in sight-reading to be most productive, select music where the student can successfully decode notation through a simple process.

Beginner
Count off, tap rhythm at reading tempo
Point and say intervals
Find position
Count off, play 3x

Late Elementary
Study score for meter, key, repeated patterns
Count off, tap rhythm at reading tempo
Shadow play RH and LH
Count off, play 3x

Intermediate
Study score for meter, key, repeated patterns, difficult places
Tap/audiate rhythms where needed
Shadow play where needed
Play 3x

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Helpful sight-reading guidelines

- Play a wrong note? Get the next one correct. (No fixing.)
- Lots of mistakes? Go twice as slow.
- No mistakes? Play more expressively.
- Need a challenge on the third time? How much can you recall by memory? Transpose to another key!

Sight-reading "grades" to track ease
Sight-reading studio goals to build accountability

Comprehensive sight-reading materials
Right at Sight (Johnson, Edition Peters)
Improve Your Sight-Reading (Harris, Faber London)
Four Star Sight Reading & Ear Tests (Royal Conservatory of Music)
Piano Marvel (app) and Standard Assessment of Sight Reading

Elementary sight-reading materials
Sight Reading Cards (Piano Safari)
Piano Adventures Sightreading Books and Sightreading Coach (app)

Special use: Developing pattern reading
Step, Skip, & Repeat by Covello (FJH)
Be A Star! by Costley (FJH)

Strategies: Addressing Common Struggles

The memorizer
Sight reading curriculum of excerpts with musical markings
Writing curriculum (theory)

The ear player
Dictating pitch and rhythm patterns
Sight reading curriculum of short excerpts

The improviser
Composing and notating work
Reading curriculum with creative application

The online learner/non-reader
App-based sight reading
Three-level practice: sight-read, quick-learn, stretch pieces

Other considerations
When playing level is far beyond reading level
Parents who teach children the notes
Students who have vision concerns or processing differences

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Surprised by Gurlitt: Romantic Textures and Techniques

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Georgia Music Teachers Association Conference
Valdosta State University, November 6, 2026

Works Performed in Varied Textures (L=Level)

Waltz style

The Festive Dance (L3), Op. 140, No. 7
Waltz (L5), Op. 101, No. 11
Daffodil (L6), Op. 215, No. 4
Valse (L8), Op. 62, No. 11

Arpeggiated accompaniment

From the North (L3), Op. 130, No. 21
Missing Home (L6), Op. 131, No. 17
Moderato (L8), Op. 107, No. 8
Elegy (L10), Op. 113, No. 5

Broken figures between hands

Loss (L3), Op. 130, No. 32
Songs without Words (L5), Op. 117, No. 34
Allegretto (L8), Op. 107, No. 1
Animato (L9), Op. 132, No. 21

Blocked dyads and chords

Grave Moments (L4), Op. 140, No. 9
Impromptu (L5), Op. 130, No. 26
Con moto (L7), Op. 107, No. 10
Andantino con sentimento (L9), Op. 132, No. 22

Single-line figuration

The Little Northerner (L3), Op. 140
Scherzo (L4), Op. 101, No. 16
Tale (L6), Op. 62, No. 20
A Steadfast Resolve (L7), Op. 131, No. 13

Layered textures

Even-Song & Catch Me (L3), Op. 117, Ns. 20–21
Andantino con moto (L5), Op. 199, No. 11
Allegretto scherzando (L7), Op. 107, No. 11
Moderato, con energia (L9), Op. 132, No. 24

Collections (Number of Works), Range of Levels

Op. 62: Album for the Young (24), Levels 5–8 (IMSLP)
Op. 101: Album Leaves for the Young (20), Levels 3–6 (Many editions)
Op. 107: Buds and Blossoms (12), Levels 7–8 (Many editions)
Op. 113: Mimosas (12), Levels 9–10 (IMSLP)
Op. 117: First Lessons (34), Levels 2–6 (Kalmus)
Op. 130: 35 Easy Etudes, Levels 3–7 (Schirmer)
Op. 131: 24 Melodious Studies, Levels 6–8 (IMSLP)
Op. 132: Chrysanthemums (24), Levels 8–10 (IMSLP)
Op. 140: Album for the Young (20), Levels 3–7 (Many editions)
Op. 199: 10 Melodic Etudes for More Advanced Players, Levels 5–8 (IMSLP)
Op. 215: Spring Flowers (6), Levels 6–9 (IMSLP)

Reference

All publications are available on IMSLP, exclusively where marked.

The leveling system used for this lecture is that of Jane Magrath, as described in her most recent publication, *Piano Literature for Teaching and Performance* (Piano Education Press, 2021).

For an annotated listing of currently available collections by Gurlitt visit www.saraernstpiano.com. This listing includes all works performed and additional collections readily available.

Repertoire that Resonates: North American Music for Developing Pianists

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Contemporary piano music can "expand [students'] interpretive capacity" and "confirm and reinforce the musical and technical concepts they are learning in their other repertoire." Helen Marlais, editor of The FJH Contemporary Keyboard Editions

This curated list is arranged in increasing level, using Jane Magrath's leveling system, and includes music from beginning to early advanced pianists. It contains a wide variety of styles, although all are accessible and contain expressive and palatable use of dissonance. All music is readily available for purchase through music retailers.

***Weaving Sounds*, various composers** (The Frances Clark Center)
- pîwan, Method 1, V. Jessica Sparvier-Wells
- Mushroom Ballet, Method 2, Beverly McKiver
- Beading Song, Level 1, Charles Shadle
  - See also Charles Shadle, *Choctaw Animals*, Levels 4–6
- Also note: Volume 2 (forthcoming)

***The 20th Century Upper Elementary*, various composers, ed. Richard Walters** (Hal Leonard Schirmer Performance Editions)
- The Bad Mister, Level 2, by William Bolcolm (b. 1938), from *Monsterpieces (and Others)*, 1981
- The Missing Beat!, Level 2, by Morton Gould (1913–1996), from *At the Piano*, 1964

Vincent Persichetti (1915–1987), ***Little Piano Book***, Op. 60, 1954 (Theodore Presser)
- Capriccio, Level 3
- Dialogue, Level 3
- Humoreske, Level 3
- Also see *Poems for Piano*, Levels 8–10

***The 20th Century Early Intermediate*, various composers, ed. Richard Walters** (Hal Leonard Schirmer Performance Editions)
- Birthday Bells, Level 4, by Morton Gould (1913–1996), *At the Piano*, 1964
  - Also note: *Ten for Deborah*, Levels 3–4
- Toy Dance, Level 4, by Paul Creston, *Five Little Dances*, Op. 24, No. 3
  - Also note: *Five Two-Part Inventions*, Op .14, Level 9

Karen Tanaka (b. 1961), ***Children of Light***, 1999 (Chester Music / Music Sales America)
- Green Paradise, Level 3
- Sea Turtle, Level 4
- African Elephant, Level 4

Lowell Liebermann (b. 1961), ***Album for the Young***, 1994 (Theodore Presser)
- Ostinato, Level 4
- Boogieman, Level 4–5

Hale Smith (1925–2009), ***Faces of Jazz***, 1968 (Marks Music), also found in ***Piano Music of Black Composers, ed. Leah Claiborne*** (Hal Leonard)
- An Asphodel for Marcel, Level 5
- Blooz, Level 5

Juhi Bansal, *Travels*, 2021 (Theodore Presser)
Mirror the Stars, 5
Deep as the Sky, 5–6

Emma Lou Diemer (1927–2024)**, *Reaching Out***, 2004 (FJH)
Surprises, Level 6
Minor Serenade, Level 6
Chatter, Level 6
Also see *Travels Through Sound*, Level 3–7

Dianne Golkasian Rahbee (b. 1938), ***Modern Miniatures for Piano Solo Volume 2***, 2005 (FJH)
Five Toccatinas, No. 1 and No. 3, Levels 6–7

Robert Starer (1924–2001), ***Sketches in Color*, Sets One and Two,** 1964 and 1973, **ed. Carolyn True**, 2010 (Hal Leonard)
Aquamarine, Level 7
Purple, Level 7
Crimson, Level 7

Valerie Capers (b. 1935), ***Portraits in Jazz***, 2012 (Oxford)
Bossa Brasilia, Level 7–8
Billie's Song, Level 7
Blue-Bird, Level 7–8

Wallace McClain Cheatham (1945–2021) from ***Piano Music of Africa and the African Diaspora Volume 2: Intermediate*, ed. William Chapman Nyaho** (Oxford)
Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, Level 8
Poor Mourner's Got a Home, Level 8

Connor Chee (b. 1987), ***Sandpaintings*** (Alfred)
No. 8, Southern Mountain, Level 9
No. 10, Western Clouds, Level 9

William Bolcom (b. 1938), from ***Three Popular Rags***, 1971, in ***Complete Rags for Piano*** (Edward B. Marks Music Company)
Seabiscuits Rag, Level 9–10

Alexina Louie (b. 1949), ***Music for Piano*,** 1993 (Alfred)
Changes, Level 10
Once Upon a Time, Level 10
Also see *Star Light Star Bright*, Level 7-8

"There is no better way to keep the art of music alive and refreshed—for ourselves as teachers and artists and for our students—than by embracing the newest notes, and thereby celebrating the music of our own time." Judith Lang Zaimont, "Embracing New Music," American Music Teacher (Aug/Sept 2008).



RESOURCE
Jane Magrath, *Piano Literature for Teaching and Performance* (Piano Education Press, The Frances Clark Center, 2021).

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