

# Vision and Music Making

By Frank Kowalsky

Four years ago I had the good fortune to meet Paul Harris, a behavioral optometrist who is also a trained musician. Since then we have spent many hours talking and corresponding about a subject of mutual interest: the relationship between eyesight and musical ability. From these discussions and material I have read, I have become convinced that visual therapy can significantly improve reading speed and comprehension. After all, therapist have used visual training to improve spelling and arithmetic skills, enhance overall school performance, and correct those behavioral problems that originate from poor vision. By using some of these visual training procedures; it stands to reason that instrumental music teachers, too, can help students improve their skills.

By far the most dominant of our senses, vision is a more complicated process than many people realize. Bruce

Wolff, a widely respected optometrist and researcher in the field of visual training, writes:

Vision is a tremendously complex information process that dominates human behavior. The bits of information that can be identified and processed in one glance is enormous and points to one of the reasons vision is dominant. It supplies maximum information in minimum time. It is so much a part of us that it is difficult to stand back and look at it. We reveal how much vision is a part of us by correctly using expressions such as "he is a man of vision," "it looks hot," "let me see if I can remember," "he failed to foresee," "do you see the point?". Vision is all of these: sight, hindsight, foresight, insight.  
*(About Vision, Noel Center, Inc.)*

The more quickly a musician can combine sight in all the stages Wolff names, the more time he has to respond.

With the goal of increasing the student's speed of determining the meaning of musical symbols, I began experimenting with visual exercises. One of my first discoveries was the difference between concentration and attention. Concentration, a drawing into one's self, implies effort and tension. We work at concentrating; it takes energy. Attention, a moving toward something outside one's self, requires less effort; in fact, it is closer to simply a state of being. I tell students to put their attention on their task rather than concentrate on it.

Many students play wrong notes, lose their place on the page, skip lines, have trouble sight-reading, and continually stop for mistakes. These students read note by note; consequently, they are unprepared for what is coming up next. While the age old admonition "read ahead" is excellent advice for these students, merely telling a student to read ahead may not help. The

skill of focusing the eyes directly on the part of the page that will give him the information at the precise moment he needs it.

One way to train students to look ahead is for the teacher to cover the measure the student is playing with a piece of paper, forcing to focus his eyes on the beginning of the next bar. As the student plays on, the teacher always covers the bar being played, moving the paper across the music at a speed determined by the tempo of the music, as well as by the student's reading ability. Sometimes an entire measure, and in some etudes or solos he covers whole phrases. The instructor should always move at the student's speed or slightly faster, pushing him just enough to challenge him. Once the teacher and student find the best way to go through the music, they should continue with the method for the entire etude. This exercise dramatically increases accuracy, and the invested time has always proven worth the effort.

For teachers whose departments have the resources, working with a tachistoscope might prove worthwhile. This machine flashes a word, a picture, musical notes, or any other visual material for a pre-

determined time period, usually between 1/20 to 1/150 of a second. The device trains a student to understand a word or entire phrase at a glance. The musical application is obvious – the faster a player can understand musical notation the more time he has to direct his actions in playing.

Peripheral vision (sometimes referred to as peripheral awareness) is another important concept that I had to redefine for myself. It implies more than merely seeing off to the sides; rather, it is an awareness of the entire background – the space to the sides, the top, the bottom, and the depth of field. Peripheral vision is a consciousness of everything that is not the object specifically being attended to. Some students, often those who try hard and concentrate intently, tend to block out everything but the music. They read with tunnel vision and tend to build up tension as they play. A large part of the student's energy goes toward blocking out everything but the music. A student with this problem needs to increase his peripheral awareness while playing, thus making his efforts more efficient.

A sophomore clarinet student of mine provides a good example. Rodney had difficulty playing etudes. The symptoms were frequent note errors, but three other problems existed as well. First, Rodney took too long to learn his music; second, he sometimes seemed lazy, working at a level below his ability; and third, he didn't seem to believe in himself. This puzzled me; obviously, he was talented and appreciated his accomplishments, but he could not picture himself advancing or succeeding in the field of music. Suspecting that these problems were somehow related, I tried to try to understand why this student held himself back.

When I asked Rodney to show me how he read music, I found that he was attempting to concentrate as hard as he could. I told him to put his attention on the music rather than concentrate on it. I asked him to gaze at the page rather than stare at it. I suggested that rather block out his peripheral awareness he should be aware of himself, the room he was in, other sounds, and other movements while looking at the music. In short, I asked Rodney to be aware of his world.

As an exercise, I told him to play a few lines of an etude. Once he started I strolled around the room, stopping here and there to pick something up, look at something, and do those things that are usually considered distracting. Rodney understood that he was not to look directly at me, but just be aware of me. With a little practice he was able to observe all the things I did while he was playing and then recount them to me. He told me he felt more at ease while playing – the pressure was off – and he was more accurate in his performance. (This was his reaction, not mine.) An interesting experiment? Yes. I was not prepared, though, for the ensuing dramatic breakthrough.

At his next lesson, Rodney came into the studio, sat down, and flawlessly played his etudes. I was astounded. He related that he had done exactly what I had told him to do in our project the week before. This was the proof I needed! As often as I could, I worked with the idea that attention, not concentration, was required for efficient performance.

We began to prepare for an audition for a summer job. Rodney's

goal was to play accurately, keep his attention focused on the task at hand, and feel good about playing. I suggested that he continue to practice his peripheral awareness in the ways we discussed, and reminded him not to stare at his music. We used the slogan, "Eyes On Easy." I suggested that he take a moment before playing to look around the room and make an inventory of what he could see – the color of the walls, the height of the ceiling, the texture of the floor, the picture on the wall, the chairs, the man sitting behind the desk, and so on. I told him to not shut out the world while preparing to play. This simple activity offers a relaxing way to stay calm and avoid the tunnel vision that can occur during times of stress.

Rodney returned from the audition feeling great. All that he had wanted from the experience had come about. He had played accurately, his attention had remained on the music, and he felt good about his performance. He did not get the job, but the experience was still a personal victory. He had taken a giant step forward in his growth as a performer.

Rodney now works more efficiently than he ever could before and is developing into a fine artist. He learns music more quickly and has more confidence in himself. Today he is willing to accept challenges that would have scared him off a year ago. My suspicion that his laziness was related to his vision may have been correct. The laziness, however, may have been his response to the difficulty he had focusing his attention efficiently.

I have experimented with other ways to expand the attention and peripheral awareness of students. One technique that creates a sensation in master classes involves expanding the space that a student perceives. Have the student sit in a position that affords a view out of a window. Ask him to play from memory an excerpt from a solo or etude, stressing that he should try as hard as he can to do well. Tell him to concentrate on what he is doing and to try hard. After he plays the excerpt, have him look out the window and choose a distant object to focus on. Then have him play the excerpt again. Make sure the student understands that you are not asking him to

concentrate on the object, but simply to direct his attention to it.

The usual response from one class after the second performance is amazement; the player's tone quality is richer, deeper, and smoother than the first time. The listeners perceive a tone that is more focused and with more projection while not actually louder. Interestingly, the player is less likely to notice these differences than are his classmates. Perhaps the player who projects attention away from himself is less aware of every detail of his actions. Regardless, the purpose of the experiment is to show the student that under the proper conditions, trying less hard can produce more of the results we seek.

Using vision to expand the student's world seems to have a relaxing effect that allows a more efficient use of both mind and body. Choosing an excerpt that the student knows thoroughly is important for this exercise; he should not have to think to play the correct notes. For students who cannot play their solos or etudes from memory a simple scale works just as well. The experiment encourages students at all levels, for it shows them

how to improve the performance skills they already possess.

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*Frank Kowalsky is a faculty member of the music school at Florida State University. He taught at the Interlochen (Michigan) Arts Academy for ten years, and in 1984 was named a "Distinguished Teacher" by the White House Commission on Presidential Scholars.*

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