Sight Reading

Is sight-reading an innate ability or a skill that can be developed?

Experts in the field of Sight-Reading all agree that the following aspects play a role in the development of sight-reading as a skill:
- Music Study (years of experience)
- Music Knowledge: theory, style, pattern recognition
- IQ….
- Ear Training development
- Perception (Where is Wally?)
- Psychomotor skill (reaction time)
- Personality
- Practicing habits
- Technical ability
- Attitude
- Memorisation ability (working memory)
- Creative skills: improvisation and arrangement

The GOOD NEWS is that most of the above aspects are skills that can be developed!

Sight-reading is part of the Art of Interpretation. Therefore instant comprehension is necessary of what you see on the score to have meaningful 'communication' with the listener. There is strong link between music theory, ear training, keyboard proficiency and sight reading.

MUSIC KNOWLEDGE

In order to read music with comprehension, one has to have a thorough knowledge of music theory. Here is a comprehensive list of concepts.

A. NOTATION
- Pitch: staff, clefs, space and line notes, stem direction, leger lines, sharps, flats, natural signs, key signatures, enharmonic 'spelling'
- Time: note lengths, rests, time signatures, pulse/beat, counting methods, anacrusis, dots, ties, irregular note groups, grouping rules, syncopation, rhythm patterns
- Style: dynamics, accents, articulation

B. DEFINITIONS
- Rhythm: beat/pulse, bar, syncopation, rhythm patterns, time signatures
- Timbre: tone quality
- Melody: ornaments, shape/contour, conjunct/disjunct, motif, phrases, subject, theme, 'paired' phrases - antecedent, consequent (question, answer)
- Texture: thick/thin, many/few layers, monophony, homophony, polyphony
- Harmony: chords, chord progressions, harmonic rhythm, cadences, diatonic, chromatic, dissonance, consonance
- Counterpoint: canon, fugue, countermelodies
- Range: refer to octaves

- Classifying music: Western and Non-Western; Jazz, Blues; World Music; Tonal, Atonal, Modal; Classical Music; Art Music; Folk Music; Popular Music etc.

C. NOTES AND SCALES
- Half steps, whole steps
- Major keys and scales
- Minor keys and scales: natural, harmonic, melodic and dorian
- Intervals
- Circle of 5ths
- Other scales: chromatic; whole-tone; blues; pentatonic

D. HARMONY AND FORM
- Triads: major, minor, diminished, augmented;
        root position, 1st inversion, 2nd inversion
        blocked, broken, alberti-bass, waltz pattern, arpeggio patterns
- Sevenths: dominant 7th, diminished 7th, major 7th, minor 7th, half-diminished 7th
- Cadences
- Other chords: 9th, 11th
- Form models: binary, ternary, theme and variations, rondo, sonata form etc.

Unfortunately we often teach these above-mentioned concepts away from the piano and the students don't learn to 'link' the theory with the practical. The ideal is that every student should be able to instantly recognise any concept in any context. This skill is possible through patience, considerable mental effort (active learning), cumulative work through regular and effective practice.

When a new concept is learned, the following activities can be explored:
- ear training games: it links a sound to a symbol/concept
- making up keyboard games: it develops a keyboard sense and link the concept with the practical execution thereof
- instant recognition games: flashcards, making up your own exercises, playing the theory exercises, instant recall of any given note, chord - development of the psychomotor skill (teacher points to a note/interval/chord, and the student must instantly respond by playing and naming it)
- continuous 'assessment' of the student's vocabulary
- the student must be able to elaborate on what he/she sees and learns (being the teacher..)
- playing lots of repertoire to reinforce the new concept(s): Piano Adventures has an extensive Supplementary Library.
- listening to music, following the score
- being creative: improvise by making up a motif using the new concept(s); transpose

CHUNKING is a very important part of piano playing. To chunk means to put together more than one idea. The best way to explain it is to compare it with any language. We start with the alphabet (individual note recognition), then we start reading and writing short words (intervals, triads…). The next step is to chunk a few words together to read a sentence with ease and understanding. The same happens in music reading. Chunking improves the working memory! But in order to chunk, the student's understanding of theory, the inner ear and the application thereof on the keyboard should be developed simultaneously. Even technical motions (feeling and executing many notes as one idea) are the skill to chunk things together. Without an instant recall of theoretical concepts, chunking is almost impossible.

Another skill that can be developed over time in a very systematic way and with discipline and patience, is the ear training skill.

EAR TRAINING

The instant recognition of theoretical concepts on the score refers to the VISUAL aspect of sight reading. But the ultimate goal is for the eyes to HEAR and for the ears to SEE. Ear training can be divided into two sections.

Step 1: to 'open' the ears
- To listen to music we hear and to talk about the things we hear.
- To listen to ourselves as we play. It takes a long time to develop this skill!
- Technology is a very helpful tool today…… YouTube (to listen to music) and WOLFIE (to record oneself so that one can develop the skill to listen to oneself)

Step 2: to recognise the detail that we hear
- Again, the understanding of theoretical concepts and having the correct vocabulary is crucial.
- One can use the traditional aural tests as material to teach this details.
- Solfege and dictation: a necessity to develop the inner ear (audiation)
- Method books such as Piano Adventures incorporate the ear training in the theory books.
- Technology! Again a helpful tool. A very user-friendly and excellent programme is Meludia. Go to their website for more information. It is www.meludia.com

The focus should be for the eyes and ears to guide the hands and not the other way around. The aim should be to play the correct key and sound because we hear it in our mind's ear. One's inner sound concept must always guide the fingers. It is the main goal of technique as well. One's understanding of harmony must be so ingrained so that one's ear automatically tells one's fingers which notes to play.

As with the development of musical knowledge, ear training also takes huge mental effort, and it demands regular practice.

I made a list of some 'types' of sight readers. In each case one or two skills are lacking, but the reading skill can be improved through cumulative work on a regular basis.

Case 1: Looking down all the time
- note-for-note reading (no chunking)
- weak keyboard sense (not secure with the keyboard topography)

Case 2: Stop at every barline
- the ear is not involved
- the barline is a visual 'barrier'
- note-for-note reading (no chunking)

Case 3: reading fluently but without comprehension/meaning
- good eye-ear-hand coordination, but no comprehension of what the eye sees
- lacking understanding of style
- quick psychomotor skill but no understanding of meaningful chunking

Case 4: read well in certain keys, but 'fail to read' in some keys
- keyboard sense problematic; no tactile feeling of keyboard topography
- too little experience in the problematic keys
- fingering issues (technical)

Case 5: incorrect rhythmic playing
- no or little understanding of time signature, beat and grouping
- no aural conception of the rhythmical grouping and patterns
- technical difficulties

Case 6: read certain styles well, others not
- no aural conception of problematic styles

PROBLEMS……

• Where do we find the time to teach all these important skills?
• Do you have sufficient and appropriate material and other resources?
• Are you as a teacher PATIENT enough to work systematically through every student's weaknesses?
• Is it really necessary to follow the examination route every year?

There are many more questions and problems. But I believe that we all have a choice between teaching product or process. Do we educate our students or do we teach the few things needed for an examination result?