

Sight Reading For Drummers

BY FRANK DERRICK

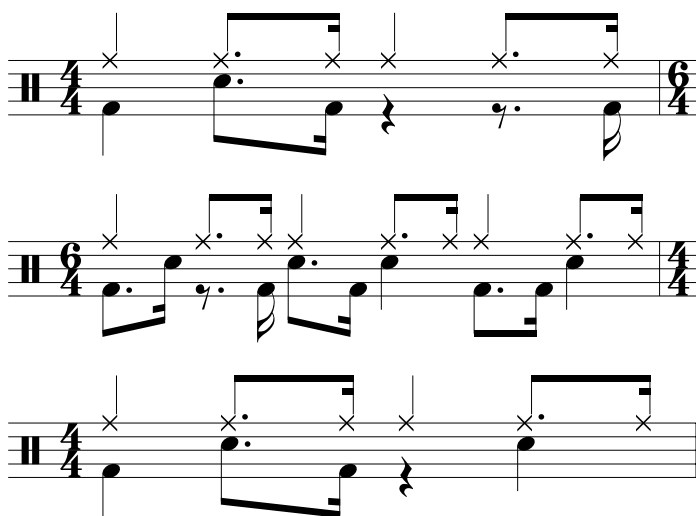
Sight-reading is one of the most valuable skills a musician can possess. If you can come into a situation, read a piece of music, and perform it in a minimum amount of time, you will be an asset to the project. Time is money, and most people try to save both.

Sight-reading is a combination of mathematics and familiarity. Like words, a group of notes is read as a sentence to make a statement. When you recognize a pattern, you have the freedom to perform it without all of your effort being devoted to reading. For instance, recognizing that the following three-measure pattern alternates on-the-beat notes with off-the-beat notes allows you to concentrate on the fills that would be added between the figures.

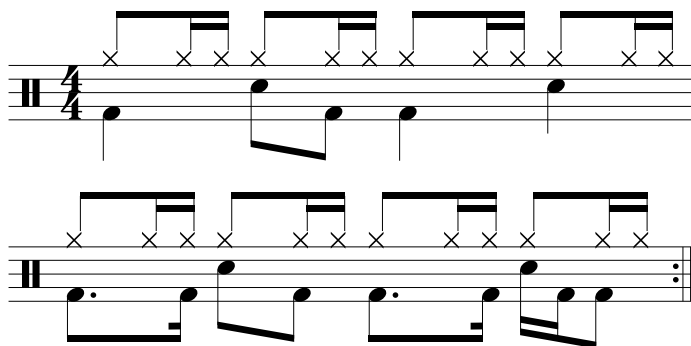


FOCUSING

When you have a new piece of music to read and perform, don't deplete your creative energy with unnecessary counting of a repetitive pattern. For example, below is an excerpt of the written part I played on a recent recording with the Rejoicensemble. The composer/arranger combined the musical accents within the drum score and created one of the most interesting and challenging parts I have ever read. With this part, the key was to ignore the consistent element (the ride cymbal) and concentrate on the snare and bass drum.



Many parts for live performance are created electronically on synths and computers. Many are no more than two- or four-bar loops, but each part is an integral part of the music. Look at this two-bar funk beat. The hi-hat remains constant while the snare and bass drum repeat a two-bar phrase.



Drum charts often contain repetitive measures and shortcuts. When this happens, take the opportunity to look ahead at any tricky measures. In the following example, there is no reason to stare at the seven measures leading up to the "tutti" measure. Just keep counting and prepare to nail the eighth measure.



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FAMILIARITY

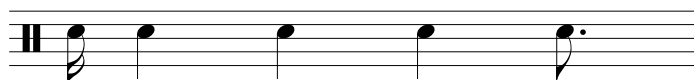
Since our work as drummers deals mainly with rhythms, we should strive to become familiar with different methods of notation so we can interpret each writer's style. In each measure of the example below, I have written the same rhythm two different ways. Remember, the more familiar you are with different methods of notation, the better your first reading will be.



Another way to work on your sight-reading is by transcribing parts you hear. Listen to the drum track on one of your favorite CDs or the radio and then write out at least a brief part of it. If you are not able to write it down immediately (like, for instance, when you are listening to music while driving), then you must visualize the part. That means counting-out the part mentally and picturing what it looks like. If you have a mental picture of what the part looks like and where the hits fall, it will be easier to recall when you are ready to write it out.

NUMBERS AND MEASURES

If the expression "numbers and measures" reminds you of a mathematics class, it's because the same thought process relates to music. When I show students how to "measure" the space to the next beat, their reading dramatically improves. It's a matter of remembering note values. For instance, a quarter note gets one count. Therefore, wherever a quarter note falls within a count, the soonest another note can be played is the same beat of the next count. Look at the example below.



Although the first measure of the above example is common, the next two are not. But all three measures follow the same principle. Once you know where the first quarter note falls within the beat, the succeeding notes in the measure fall on the same subdivision of the following beats.

Sight-reading is an essential part of being a successful musician. It is something that *can* be practiced. You can take a piece or an exercise in a book that you have not played recently and use it as a sight-reading exercise. Reading also helps in memorizing music and in being aware of where you are in the music.

Frank Derrick, a member of the PAS Drumset Committee, has performed on Broadway in *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *The Wiz*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, *Big River*, *Catskills*, and *Bring in Da Noise Bring in Da Funk*. He was Cab Calloway's drummer for ten years and the drummer for the original *David Letterman Show* on NBC. His current activities include working as assistant conductor and drummer for the Palm Beach Pops, and appearances with Maureen McGovern, the Louis Armstrong Legacy Band, the Hi-De-Ho Orchestra, and as a solo guest artist. He is the author of *Focus on Technique for Drummers* (Hal Leonard Corp.).

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