Researching Music Literacy

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Recently I had an email inquiry from a student in Quebec about research on music reading strategies. She referred to a research report published in the *Canadian Journal of Research in Music Education* Vol. 37, No. 4 Summer 1996, "Reading Strategies and Miscues: Two Small Music Studies Exploring Connections" (L.R. Bartel, L.M. Cameron, T. Mathers, & B. Buczkowski). Her basic question was: is there more research on this. My quick answer was, “no, there is almost no useful research in this area.” There are research studies related to sight reading but sight reading is not the same as general reading ability. And, music reading may not be the same as music literacy.

Literacy is a concept that has been undergoing change over time. At one time literacy was defined as very basic phonic decoding ability, reading words like “stop,” and being able to write your name. In some of the data reported from developing countries this is still the case. Although we use more sophisticated standards in our country now, the practical definition often falls short of the ideal of “understanding the meaning of the text.” So, today “comprehensive literacy” goes beyond the written text and includes visual “text,” media “text,” musical “text.” Nancy Telfer (2004) says, “Musical literacy means more than just reading the pitches and rhythms. It means reading the meaning of the music.” This “meaning” of music includes all aspects of its expressive dimensions and the ability to determine and produce appropriate to the specific music what Jack Heller calls the “supra-segmentals” of music – those subtle, moment to moment changes in accentuation, dynamic level, attack, release, that essentially carry the subtlety of communicative meaning in spoken language and similarly carry the expressive meaning in music.

Because we are unsure how to conceptualize meaning in music, we do not seem to really understand music literacy, so, we do not really understand music reading, and, therefore, we basically have little useful research in this area. Don Hodges (2002) observes, “In music there is no theory devoted specifically to an explication of music reading: thus the bulk of research appears to be devoid of a theoretical underpinning” (pp. 468-469).

In language reading there certainly is theory and research. We might look at the development of language literacy for some clues. For example, research in language literacy shows that it is crucial for caregivers to read to children from infancy. In the very act of seeing the caregiver read and looking into the book being read, the child develops important early understandings of how text and the process or reading works. Children need consistent modeling and demonstration of reading. How many parents, including musician parents, ever read music to their child while holding a score with
them. Or even follow a score while music is being played? Practically zero. With music we miss one of the major factors that contributes to the ability to learn to read.

Another important research finding from the early years of education is that there is a strong reflexive relationship between learning to read and writing. This does not refer to copying the alphabet, or practicing printing. It refers to composing stories. And this is important before the child can even spell properly. Children’s ability to write goes through a stage of invented spelling and approximations of words. How often do we do this in teaching children to read music? In most cases music teachers rarely give opportunity for composing and if they do, do not encourage or even tolerate “invented” notation. We approach reading and writing primarily through the study of the notation system.

At one time language reading was taught by thoroughly learning the alphabet, learning the sounds of all letters, and then applying the “sounding out” grapho-phonemic approach with sequentially contrived written material. Many children had great difficulty learning to read. Now in a research based, balanced literacy approach, teachers realize good readers employ multiple cuing systems and to learn to read well you must develop abilities in all of these. The basic cuing systems employed in reading language are: phonologic, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. These are complex and interactive and so my discussion of them here is sparse and merely introduces the basic ideas.

In English we have 45 phonemes but fewer “graphic” representations. This is of course a problem. But none-the-less, the relationship between graphic and phoneme is drilled extensively in the process of learning to read. At first this is each individual letter but becomes letter pairs or simple combinations. That system alone, however, does not lead to fluent, “literate” reading. To be literate a person must be able to extract and communicate meaning from text in the process of reading.

Semantics is essentially about meaning. You have probably observed a child sounding out the letters in a word – it sort of sounds like the word, the child listens to the sounds, and suddenly hears a meaningful word, and on repetition says the word with understanding. That reveals the process of going from the graph (letter symbol) to phoneme (sound) to the semantic (meaning) level. When a person can read well they see the letter combination and connect instantly to the meaning of the word. Semantics, can, therefore, have another very important function -- the predicting of words that follow. If the child has read “The woman drove the ?????” and has basic life experience today the child can likely predict that the word coming is “car.” It might be bicycle or snowmobile, but if the word is short and the child recognizes the onset, the word will be known since a prediction can be made on the basis of semantics.

Syntactics refers to syntax, the rules, or "patterned relations" that govern the way the words in a sentence come together. Sometimes thought of as “grammar” it is a more complex dimension of language that allows us to predict what is coming in a sentence from its structure. This works together with semantics to help predict what word is coming, making it easier to “sound it out.”
Pragmatics is the context dimension of text or language that cues how it is to be interpreted. Pragmatic understanding of spoken language recognizes that there may be “informative intent” or the literal sentence meaning of an idea, and also “communicative intent” or the speaker’s implied meaning. Pragmatics in written text leads, for example, to a different way of reading and making meaning if the text is written in a series of short lines and “looks” like a poem or whether it is written in “prose.”

Do these four dimensions of the reading process have counterparts or application in music reading? Certainly the grapho-phonemic dimension does. We see a note and need to know its sound – pitch and duration. In music this is complicated by the fact that on instruments we can often play the pitch without really knowing inside what the pitch should be (hearing it ahead of playing). And to make matters worse we usually need a coordinated kinesthetic response to push the right finger down at the right place. What about the semantic dimension? There is not the same denotative meaning association with sets of pitches as there is to words. But if we combine the semantic with the syntactic, we do see that operative in music. For example, we apply knowledge of tonality in terms of what pitches can be expected or what chord may be next in the harmonic progression. We can predict the logical continuation of a rhythmic pattern. Perhaps style is part of this system as well, or it may be considered part of the pragmatics.

Do we use all four of these cuing systems when we read music? Competent readers probably do. Do we “teach” with and for them? In some ways, but probably not with the consciousness of how these dimensions interact and contribute to reading ability. We do not often approach reading development through systematic musical syntactic and semantic exercises. We talk about having students “get it off the page” by which we mean putting together the sounds into meaningful, expressive, communicative sound. In language this is called reading at the “flexible consolidated” level. But in music we think the “text” gets in the way. That is probably because few students really learn to read fluently, consolidating all four cuing systems.

We tend to teach music reading only grapho-phonemically. We “decode” the musical phonics to “sound out” the musical “words.” Our goal simply is to learn to decode very rapidly and very accurately. We usually believe that aspects of tonality and style and musical prediction (that develops through composition and improvisation) are the domain of the more advanced musician. “First you must learn to read!” But no wonder so few people learn to read music fluently. No wonder our research on music reading is not particularly useful. Perhaps if we developed our theoretical understanding of music literacy and the reading process more fully to incorporate multiple cuing systems, the role of modeling and demonstration, and the interactive processes of writing (composing) and reading, we might find reading music to be more complex that language reading. We might also find ways to increase the real functional music literacy rate in our society.
References
