

Sometimes Students Want to Know. . .What is Sightsinging?

Sightsinging is the performing of music at first sight, without practicing or familiarizing oneself with the music beforehand. So, the sightsinger has to be able to imagine the sounds of the music internally, without the aid of other singers in a section (as often happens in choral groups) or without fellow instrumentalists (for band and orchestra players) or without the support of an accompanying keyboard instrument (for those playing solos).

Methods used for sightsinging include solmization syllables, scale degree numbers, “nonsense” syllables and note letter names. “Solmization” refers to a system that originated when Guido d’Arezzo modified Greek practice and used 6-note scales with the syllables Ut, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, and La. Do later replaced Ut and Si was added as well. The syllables came from the initial syllables of seven lines of the Latin text to a plainsong hymn from the year 770. Singers who knew the hymn could use the association of a pitch with a syllable to learn new music with those linked pitch/syllables.

Various aural skills classes are included in nearly all college music curricula in the U.S. Students need a firm base of skills and knowledge in this area in order to be fully prepared for advanced musical studies. Typically, students in Europe and some other countries begin systematic sightsinging sooner and continue over a longer period of time than students in the U.S. do, so often some work is needed in order for American students to bring their aural skills up to the level of their performing abilities.

Sightreading for singers will obviously be strengthened by our classes (Music 1A and 1B), but they will also strengthen the sightreading of instrumentalists. It’s usually best to know where we’re going before we try to go there, and being able to hear internally what we want to play or sing, before we play it or sing it, is an incredible advantage. As the music we learn becomes more complex, we’ll want to be able to verify whether we’re correct in what we’re playing or, as teachers, in what we’re hearing.

In Music 1A and 1B, the ability to sightsing is not assumed (although the “just do it” method may have its merits), but the skills which lead to confident sightsinging are isolated and practiced in a systematic way. The instructors work to make the classes effective and interesting, and believe that the active participation of students through in-class drills, brief presentations, group projects and so forth will lead to the best possible understanding and retention of concepts.

See you in class!