

Teaching Score Reading – *Ilona Dobszay-Meskó*

Interview on 26 July 2024

Could you share your experience in teaching score reading?

I teach score reading and mix it with sight-reading and transposition. For example, I use the first book of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, which contains very simple piano pieces. I tell my students to play a passage a second or a fifth lower, and then we move on to another section.

This reflects what happens in a conductor's mind when reading transpositions – decoding the written notes. Playing a fifth lower, is it like...?

English horn.

Do you ask your students to imagine and play every note a fifth lower, or do you have them approach it by changing the clef?

That is why I use Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* rather than a Haydn-period piece – because we don't change the key; instead, we focus on counting the fifths. I also use the first book of *The Russian School of Piano Playing* every week. It includes very simple folk songs and short, eight-bar pieces by Mozart. I give the same instructions – play it a second, third, or fifth lower – and then we change the key. I mix different approaches rather than sticking to just one. Sometimes, I give an exercise where I play a short and simple Wiener Klassik period piece on one of the two pianos in the room and say, "Please play it in another key, starting from this note, without looking at the score." With every lesson, there are more exercises.

When looking through old textbooks on score reading, one finds them filled with exercises in various clefs – soprano, mezzosoprano, baritone, and others.

That is so unnecessary.

Do you think that when music is chromatic or atonal, reading transpositions with the interval of transposition is easier than substituting clefs?

Yes. For choral music or Palestrina, reading with mezzosoprano and other old clefs is fine, but for orchestral conductors, it is not important. If you practice these exercises regularly every week and analyze how your brain processes them, everyone can find their own best way of reading transpositions and clefs.

When you have a score with cellos notated in tenor clef, how do you read it? Does your approach depend on the type of music? Do you compare the notes to other clefs, or do you just read from the middle of the clef, which is c1 [middle C]?

I apply the second approach.

Do you think a piano is useful for reading scores?

Absolutely. Although, when you sent me the questionnaire, my answer was that I don't use the piano. It is an interesting question; I can read a score playing it immediately on the piano, but as a conductor, I don't use the piano when studying a piece. Like Maestro [Yuri] Simonov⁹⁸, I prefer using colored pencils.

Do you hear the score in your imagination?

Yes, I do hear the music while reading it.

Do you find the piano useful in the process of teaching score reading to students?

Of course – always. But when I study by myself, I don't use it.

What kinds of things do you mark in the score when studying it?

I mark the entries of instruments after a longer rest. I also mark the part of the soloist – always in yellow. Recently, I've changed how I indicate dynamics. Maestro Simonov taught us to mark piano and forte by writing p and f or drawing a circle around them. However, I find it simpler to color the piano bars blue because, when I turn the page, I might forget the dynamic marking. For example, if the bars have a slight blue color, I immediately see that the sforzatos are within a piano passage, which is helpful.

Do you draw a blue line to mark it?

⁹⁸ Ilona Dobszay-Meskó and the author both participated in Professor Yuri Simonov's masterclasses in Hungary in the early 2000s.

Not a line – I color the whole bars. This is new for me this year. Sometimes, it distracts me to see circled *sforzatos* and *marcatos* and I forget that the entire passage is in *piano*. So, this coloring method has been helpful.

You associate blue with piano – what color do you use for forte?

In case of *forte* passages, I mark the starting barline in red to see that from here it has to be played *forte*. However, if there is a *crescendo* leading to *forte*, I do not use a red barline – that serves only for *subito forte*. So, for terraced dynamics, I color the barline red for *forte* and blue for *piano*. But if there is a *crescendo* or a *diminuendo*, I just mark the respective sign in red or blue.

Does coloring the score help you when conducting from it?

Yes, it makes it much easier. I feel really stressed when I see a blank page with no signs or markings.

Besides entries of instruments, singers, and dynamics, do you mark anything else in the score?

A lot. For example, I always add metronome markings. If I see *Allegro*, I imagine the right tempo and write down the corresponding number, for example, a quarter = 116.

So, while reading the score, you plan the performance tempo and write it into the score as metronome markings, is that correct?

Yes, that is helpful for me.

Do you follow these metronome indications when conducting?

I know metronome markings very well. When I teach conducting, we do exercises to memorize them and control the tempo.

Have you ever had a situation with an orchestra when you needed to change the metronome numbers, or are you usually able to keep them as planned?

If there is too much reverb, for example, in a church, I change the tempo. However, I don't erase and rewrite the metronome numbers – I just know that everything has to be slightly slower.

You conduct based on your work with the score, and your markings are an integral part of your conducting. Are there any other methods a conductor can apply?

For example, my husband, who is also a conductor, writes the entire form analysis into the score.

Does this refer to phrases?

Phrases and structural elements, such as in a sonata form the introduction, exposition, and everything else. I never do that.

If you conduct the same piece again with a different orchestra, do you use the same score with your earlier markings?

Yes.

In the questionnaire, you mentioned that you often sing while reading a score. How does singing help you with score reading?

One of my conducting teachers said that it is very beneficial to be able to sing through the piece. It doesn't matter which part – the flute, cello, or any other – but don't interrupt; just sing the piece.

From beginning to end? Changing instruments, but singing the whole piece?

Yes, just sing and conduct.

Do you do this with hand movements?

Of course. Those also need to be practiced.

When studying with Maestro Simonov, I remember he recommended using colors to mark different groups of instruments in the score – woodwinds in blue, brass in red, strings in green, and percussion in brown. Do you use this color-coding system?

No, but I use colors for different singers, which is very important. I always mark the soprano part in rose and the baritone in green – this is very useful for me. I also use strong colors for significant melodies. For example, if everyone is playing *mezzoforte*, but there is something important in the horns [*sings a fanfare*], I highlight it with a strong color, like green – not just red for *forte* – because otherwise, I might overlook it. I use special colors, but only rarely, because if I use them too often, I stop noticing them.

Do you change colors to make certain elements stand out in the score?

Yes, just to create an “attack” on the brain. It is good to use the same color, notation, and markings for the same things, but if everything always looks the same when conducting a long piece, you might forget something – like

a bass drum beat. That is why you sometimes need to use a strange, one-off color. For example, if I keep seeing the same markings for more than 15 minutes, I start tuning them out – unless I see a different color or sign. So, I am not always consistent with my markings because if everything is always marked the same way, it loses my attention. I know I need some variation in the score. For instance, if I use red for *forte* and blue for *piano* throughout the score, and there are standard signs for instruments, I might, in a certain spot and only once, draw a circle, use green, or add a sign to attract attention – to highlight the important part. However, I do this only in long pieces. In a short overture of five or six minutes, I don't need it.

Do you prepare and send your version of orchestral parts to the orchestra?

Usually I don't – only when the orchestra orders the parts of the edition I request the score to ensure we use the same edition, for example, Universal.

When you receive a contemporary music score that you have never heard before, how do you begin reading it? Do you first listen to a recording, play it on the piano, imagine it, or start marking it?

Nowadays, every composer has a MIDI version of their piece, for example, from a program like Sibelius. There is always some kind of recording available.

Do you listen to that first?

Yes, of course. You cannot hear a contemporary piece just by reading the score. I often serve as part of a jury, I have a good ear and I am a composer myself, but honestly, you cannot say anything about the piece without listening to it.

Do you ask composers for a MIDI file when conducting their pieces?

Always. Ten years ago, some of my colleagues used to say, "Oh, we don't need the MIDI because we can read the score."

Why has this changed? Is it because conductors have less time, or has notation become more graphic and complex?

If instruments are used in a non-traditional way, that can't be heard in the MIDI file – you have to imagine it. What you hear by these MIDI programs is not an accurate result, but it helps in getting an idea of what happens in the piece. I always ask for a MIDI file.

What kind of information can a MIDI give about the music?

Not everyone is able to abstract from the MIDI. Some people listen to it and say, “Oh, this sounds strange, it’s not good, it’s not music,” because they can’t abstract – they just believe what they hear. MIDI is just a ground, a basis, and you have to imagine the rest.

Can recordings be helpful for reading scores?

They are helpful, but after that, you still have to create your own concept of the piece.

Is it a good idea to practice conducting with recordings?

That is not so important.

What about reading the score while listening to a recording?

That’s a useful method.

When reading the score of an older, well-known piece, do you only listen to your favorite recording, or do you explore several ones?

I am interested in many recordings, and after listening to them, I form my own idea. These days, recordings are often uploaded to YouTube along with the score, which is very useful. Being able to see and hear the music simultaneously is not enough, but it helps when practicing score reading.

Do you only use printed books for teaching score reading or do you add electronic technology?

I use only books, but some of my students use iPads. I believe this is the future.

Are there any particular challenges in score reading – something especially difficult?

Yes, when your ten fingers are not enough. The biggest challenge in score reading is deciding what to skip. For example, you may want to play the harmonies and the melody, but there are some very interesting eighth notes in there, too [*sings fast figures*]. This is difficult for me because I want to play everything but also stay in tempo. The biggest challenge is making that decision.

What do you do when playing everything is not possible?

I always tell my students: “Make a decision.” The problem is deciding which part to skip while playing and I would never expect my students to

play everything by themselves. Score reading lessons always have two students; we use two pianos, and we take turns playing different things. The result is important – everything must be there, but one person doesn't need to play it all.

Do you use piano reductions in teaching score reading? Are they helpful for reading orchestral scores?

Yes, they are very useful. First, we play the four-hand piano reduction of a piece, such as a Beethoven symphony, once through. After that, we move to the full score with two students switching instruments.

What do you do when you have a student who doesn't play the piano?

I teach only composers and conductors, so they have to be able to play the piano. They may not have advanced technique, but that is okay – rather than focusing on the smaller voices, they should prioritize the harmonies and the pivotal elements of the score. They may also need to play a bit slower.

Do they have to imagine the technically difficult parts without playing them?

Yes, because those who don't play the piano can still play the harmonies. Everyone can play the harmonies and the music theory they know – one voice in the left hand and three voices in the right hand, or combine chords and melody. There is always something they can play, and I am very patient. Everyone should keep working on their skills and improve gradually.

Do you have any tips on how to achieve fluency in score reading?

Fluency comes from the same idea I mentioned earlier – just sing the piece. Sometimes, I recommend this exercise: here is the piece, now sing one line in tempo. It doesn't matter whether it is the flute, violin, cello, or bass part – just go [*claps a tempo*] and keep it simple. It is liberating. You are not expected to play the whole score – just focus on one part, like the timpani or another instrument – but keep going.

Does this help with feeling the flow of the music?

Yes, it does. When there are four students, and you tell the non-pianist, “Okay, just play the double bass or the timpani part,” it is okay. If you say, “Go slowly through the score, and you can jump between parts with your eyes,” that is also very useful because you can imagine the rest. This is also

beneficial because it forces you to decide what to play and what is most important to you.

Earlier you mentioned harmony, the chords...

We do exercises where you have to play all parts of a six-bar section, including transposing instruments' parts, but slowly. Being able to play everything slowly is important, but it is also necessary to be able to stay in tempo and play just one voice [*whistles*]. I always switch between these approaches because sometimes you need one, and sometimes the other. When working with an orchestra, you must be able to identify mistakes in the score – you might find a wrong note or two. To recognize the problem, you have to read all the details in the score. For example, in the cello part, a clef change might be missing – instead of tenor clef, it remains the bass clef. You always have to read the entire score and identify any problems.

Is there anything you would like to add on score reading?

One thing I forgot to mention is the importance of enjoying the process. In an instrumental lesson, whether it's cello or piano, you play, of course, nice pieces, you are an artist, and you feel good about it. But in score reading, you cannot get complacent – there is always something missing: the tempo, certain parts, or details. You somehow still have to find the fun in it. Confidence is very important. Never stand up from the piano thinking, "I practiced, but it is not quite good." That is why it is helpful to set smaller goals. For example, tell yourself to just "play these four bars with everything," or "I want to hear which notes are in this chord," or "I will just whistle the piece," or "I will play something with one finger." Define your goal – "this is what I want to achieve today with the piece." If you just sit at the piano and try to play something, you will never be satisfied, and you will come to hate the project. Change it up after 15 minutes, otherwise you will get tired and frustrated, feeling that you are not good enough. When that happens, try another exercise.