

Improve Your Sight Reading

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With any type of music, sight reading is essential. You miss out on so much when you are unable to grasp a tune from manuscript, but when playing in a band, there is nothing worse than progress and practice stalling to work with someone who can't follow the music. The frustrating thing is that music is made to be simple to follow. It is designed by nature to be quick to read and you should be able to follow a tune at speed if you are an accomplished player of any instrument.

Step 1 Learn the Notes by Pitch

The first step is to learn the names of the notes and how the note is made on the instrument. This is not hard, but just needs a little diligence. On the Great Highland bagpipe we have only nine notes, no key signatures to learn, no flats and sharps. All very simple! You just need to sit down and memorise where the notes fall on the stave of music. A little each day and within a few days you should have it off proficiently.

SCALE FOR THE BAGPIPE.

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At this ● the holes are closed.
At this ○ the holes are open.

Left Hand
Uppermost.

	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A
Thumb.	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
1 st Finger.	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○
2 nd do.	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
3 rd do.	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	●
1 st Finger.	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
2 nd do.	●	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	●
3 rd do.	●	●	○	○	○	●	●	●	●
4 th do.	●	○	○	●	●	○	○	○	○

Learning the note names and positions on the stave are essential as the first step

Step 2 Basic Theory

You do not need a lot of music theory to understand how to rhythmically follow a tune. Note values first, time signatures, bars and structure next. Lots of tunes have repeated phrases and passages. Understanding where these occur helps tremendously to follow tunes quickly. There are lots of books to help you learn about theory or it is easy enough to have a good musician sit down for 20 minutes or so and explain the basics to you, it really is very simple.

The more you understand about breaking tunes up the quicker you will grasp rhythm. Beat, pulse, phrase and parts. These all help to not only build the structure and rhythm in the tune, but help to play with more accuracy and musicality.

Step 3 Recognise Shapes and Patterns

It is usually not necessary to follow every note in a tune. Some of the “big notes” in passages have a shape. Downwards groups, upwards groups etc. This can help to quickly follow a passage and the better you get at recognising these shapes the easier you will pick up the notes in the passage if the sequence has a few notes missing, alternate notes etc.

Next are embellishments. For example some notes will only have so many types of embellishments before them. Doublings for example have a shape. You will quickly learn to recognise the shapes. A grip cannot be mistaken for a taorluath, tachums are note sequences that have shapes. D throws and very distinguishable from D strikes for example. It is this shape recognition that helps to read at speed.

Next is some common sense and learning why things go where they do in music. G gracenotes are strong and are often placed on the beat notes. Moving downwards from the beat you often have D or E gracenotes. There are regular patterns and when you come to expect them, you can see them easily.



Learn to recognise shapes as it is faster than trying to work out individual notes.

