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# Lyric Sheets to Music Notation: Music Literacy in Elementary and Beginning Choirs



**by Kyle J. Weary, Director of Choirs, Boiling Springs (PA) High School;  
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Musician-ship is essential in all ensembles, whether they are found in the community, elementary school, middle school, or high school. So often within the choral ensemble of the elementary school, we lose the educational tool that choir can be: a direct extension of the general music classroom. As educators, we should help the students transfer the learning from the general music classroom into the chorus rehearsal. There are potential problems with this model. The first problem would be a “one size fits all” mentality for music pedagogy. Using this “method” can stunt the learning of many students. Second, we compound this issue when we put a choral octavo in front of chorus students, but we haven’t introduced this in the classroom. This results in overwhelmed students who do not know where to look, what line they are on, and what all of the symbols mean. Many times, students are only following along with the words of the octavo or they are only listening to those around them to learn the music.

## Starting with the Basics

Quite often, we hear teachers explain Sound-Before-Sight methodology that they use in their classroom. But when it comes to their choral ensembles, the first thing they do is hand out music for the choir to sing. When looking at music, students must have it broken down for them in the beginning so we do not overwhelm them. According to Stephanie Standerfer (2019), we give our students too much information - and visual processing is needed to decode all of the symbols - and that can be overwhelming. Teach with a methodology in the choral rehearsal, just as in the classroom. William C. Woodbridge was the first American to speak about the Sound-Before-Sight skill sequencing in 1830. Speaking at the American Institute of Instruction, Woodbridge referenced Heinrich Pestalozzi, and his book, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*. From there, he synthesized how learning to read text can be applied to music reading. In his speech, he introduced a few pillars in the fundamental ideas of music pedagogy: teach sounds before signs (students should hear and imitate sounds first); teach one music element at a time (rhythm, melody, and expression before combining them together); assess student mastery of each step before going onto the next; and introduce principles and theory after the practice and mastery of each step (Jorgensen, 1984/2009).

Don Ester (2010) points out in his book *Sound Connections* that there are many challenges to teaching music literacy: there is no shortcut or quick fix - music literacy must be developed over a long period of time, methodically. Students must have consistent practice,

and if that practice is not carefully sequenced, it is of little value. He also points out that it is valuable to have common systems for tonal syllable and rhythmic syllable systems.

## Where to Start First

To start, choose choral repertoire in which the students can read tonal and rhythm patterns of the majority of music patterns without much aid from the teacher. If music learning is sequenced in a way that students are learning in order, mastering repertoire will come quickly and easily. With meter, compound and simple meters should be taught at the same time. Simple meter learning would include beat and beat division (quarter note/quarter rest), divided beat (paired eighth notes), ties and extension dots, syncopation, borrowed beat, subdivision (sixteenth notes), and subdivision with extension dots. Compound meter learning would include beat and beat division, subdivision, ties and extension dots, syncopation at subdivision level, and borrowed beat. For tonal learning, minor and major should be taught at the same time: major/minor pentachord, major/minor tonic triad, major/minor scales and tonic arpeggios, and major/minor chord functions (Ester 2010, Krueger 2017).

Separate the tonal patterns from the rhythmic patterns and teach one at a time. Breaking tonal and rhythm patterns apart from one another allows students to focus on one element at a time.

## Sound-Before-Sight Implications for the Beginning Singer in the Choral Rehearsal

Prepare the students aurally first, then train their eyes. Both Ester (2010) and Krueger (2017) suggest that by developing the ear first with a neutral syllable until students are able to reproduce those syllables is the foundation of music literacy. Most of this entails the teacher saying (or singing) the pattern on a neutral syllable (“pa” or “bum”) with the students echoing. The second level is then to say (or sing) the

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syllable (solfège or rhythm syllables) with students echoing. In the final level, the teacher will say (or sing) the pattern on a neutral syllable and the students will say (or sing) the pattern on the solfège syllables or rhythm syllables. After this is complete, and students can complete the third step, introducing the students to the visual aspects of music must be done in a carefully sequenced method as well.

Overwhelming students at this point of music learning is very easy to do. If you show students a measure of music notation, they will see many different symbols at once. A simple measure may consist of a clef sign, a time signature, the staff, different notes, etc. That one measure can overwhelm a beginning singer quite quickly (Standerfer, 2019). The teacher should use the rhythm and tonal patterns from the repertoire that the students will be singing. This is sometimes the step that is missing. Teachers will use a method book, but that book usually has very little to do with the repertoire that the students are learning. This is a way for students (and teachers) to be immersed in the repertoire, rather than seeing musicianship (i.e. sight reading) as a separate activity from the repertoire.

Introducing notation must be well thought out. If I am introducing a song that consists tonally of the major pentachord and rhythmically of paired eighth notes, quarter notes/rests, and half notes with my beginning choir then I have a LOT to introduce. Hopefully, they will have learned most of this already in the general music classroom. After doing all of the patterning, and I begin to introduce to notation, I would start with a single line instead of a staff of 5 lines and 4 spaces. This would allow the students to see there are three possible notes (in my case do, re, and mi). I would use the words written out with no staff first, then I would add the line, then I would change the wording to note heads. This allows the students to process each step individually. I would then add another line (creating a 2 line staff) so that students can see that do and mi can be on lines together, or spaces together. I would then move to a 5 staff line. At that point, students are ready to be introduced to the choral octavo.

### Introducing the Octavo

This can be the trickiest part of working with beginning singers who have no previous musical background since so much of elementary general music involves rote teaching. Train the singers' eyes to read an octavo. When students are handed an octavo, teachers may assume that students will immediately know how to read a choral score. Wrong! Just as we prepared their ears, we should prepare their eyes as well by breaking down the elements of an octavo for the students. Brooke Boswell Crego of Glacial Drumlin Middle School, Monona, WI, has a great bulletin board resource, "What's Our Address", for teaching singers how to know where they are in a score (see photo). The only addition I would suggest to this is having a part that adds what part the student is singing.

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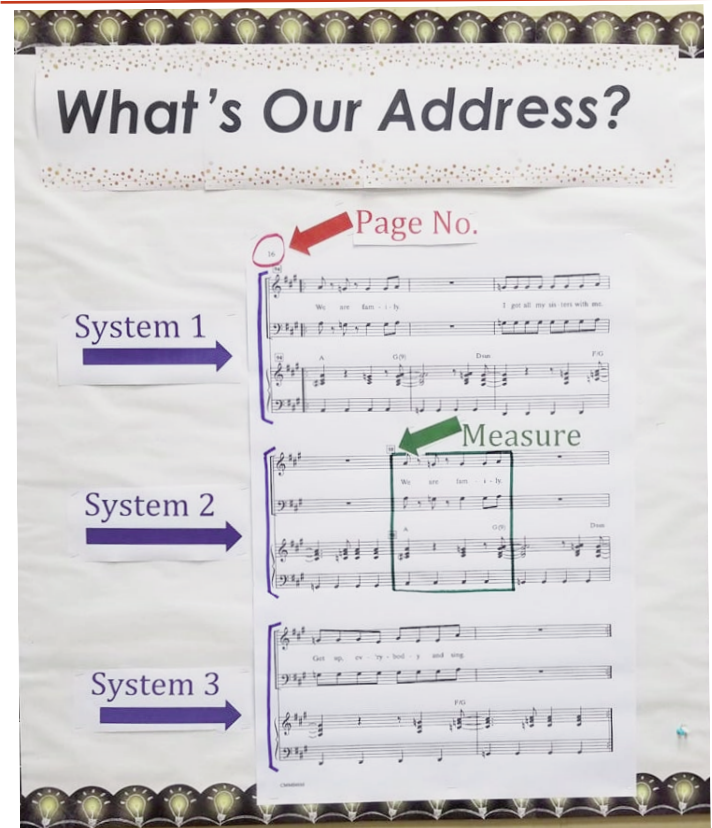


# MMEA

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<https://www.mmea-maryland.org/volunteer>



Developed by Brooke Boswell Crego,  
Glacial Drumlin Middle School, Monona, WI

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## Developing Life-Long Learners (and Singers)

The key to getting students to “buy in” is to make it fun. When I am teaching rhythm patterns, we “say it and play it”. The students are able to sit at tables or desks while doing the patterning and we say the rhythm and then they drum on the table. While doing tonal patterns, I use boomwhackers or bells, and the students play the tonal pattern as a group. This has also been great for differentiation in the classroom. I have put more advanced students on instruments first for playing the tonal patterns. When teachers tell me they “just don’t have time” to teach music reading skills in their choir, I respond with, “You don’t have time to NOT teach musicianship. With it, students are able to learn music faster and take ownership and pride in their own learning.”

## References

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**About the Author:** Kyle graduated with both bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Shenandoah Conservatory of Music in Winchester, Virginia, where he was awarded the 2018 *Distinguished Alumni Award for Young Career Achievement*. A current PhD music education student at Auburn University, Kyle is recognized as a leader in teaching music literacy and contemporary commercial music. Kyle has been invited to present educational sessions at the State, Regional, and National levels. Kyle’s articles on teaching music literacy and vocal pedagogy in the choral rehearsal have appeared in *Choral Director* magazine. Kyle has earned nominations for the *GRAMMY Music Educator Award* in 2018 and 2016 where he advanced as a quarterfinalist both times. In 2015, Kyle was nominated for Washington County’s *Teacher of the Year*. Kyle was the founder of the Vocal Music program at the Barbara Ingram School for the Arts in Hagerstown, MD. Vocal majors were selected as members for Maryland All State Junior and Senior choirs, All Eastern Choirs, and All National Choral ensembles. While at Barbara Ingram, he was the music director for the all-school musicals and conducted multiple choirs. The choirs performed at multiple regional and state conferences, and the Barbara Ingram Choral ensembles had their first Carnegie Hall appearance singing under the direction of Eric Whitacre in the premiere of his new opera: *Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings* in 2010. Kyle is the Director of Choirs at Boiling Springs (PA) High School, Artistic Director of the Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus, and the Director of Music at Silver Spring Presbyterian Church in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Comments are welcome and may be directed to [Kyle@KyleWearyMusic.com](mailto:Kyle@KyleWearyMusic.com).