

The Importance of the Two-Line Staff

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The commonality between open strings on a string instrument and the line to space relationship of notes on the staff gives string players a unique opportunity when learning to read music. Consider first position on any string. In first position, the notes on the violin and the viola are written; open strings as a space, 1st finger as a line, 2nd finger as a space, 3rd finger as a line and 4th finger as a space. The notes on cello are written open strings as a line, 1st finger as a space, 3rd finger as a line and 4th finger as a space. Bass players read space, line, space on 2 strings and line, space, line on the other 2 strings. The finger pattern on a single open string can be written on just two lines of a staff. By studying the two line staff we train our minds to read, recognize and respond to the relationship of notes to one another. For example, we think, "If this note is open, then the next note is played with 1st finger..." We do not assign a clef so that we learn to read in note-to-note relationships rather than in fixed pitch recognition. Of course pitch knowledge and recognition of the five line staff is vital and students will go on to study that, but training them to process note-to-note relationships prepares them for fluency in a different way.

If we consider our sight reading process as a trained musicians, we don't think, "This note is B. It's played with 1st finger. B!" Instead we see the symbol and react. John Kendall said, "Sight reading is a physical response to a visual symbol." The danger with initial training students to see and think, "This note is B. Play 1st finger." is that this will not always be the case. Consider position work or different clefs. In positions, different fingers can play that same note "B" and in different clefs this note is written differently on the staff. For instance, if violin students can read the two-line staff, reading viola clef is just a matter of identifying the open strings and then reading in relationships.

Benefits of the Two-line Staff

- 1. Develops and reinforces recognition of common melodic pitch patterns.
- 2. Develops recognition of note-to-note relationships in sight-reading.
- 3. Facilitates finger to staff (line & space) relationships for ease of sight-reading.
- 4. Prepares reading on ledger lines.
- 5. Prepares reading in alternative clefs.
- 6. Prepares finger-to-finger and finger to staff relationships for position reading.