



**Teaching Dyslexics How
to Read and Write Music**

DEBORAH ALOBA

This is an extract of 12 pages out of 192 pages of useful resources (including over 140 illustrations) for music teachers with students that have a problem reading and writing music.

See Contents for the whole range covered in *Teaching Dyslexics How to Read and Write Music*, which is available as:

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FOREWORD

Your passion and determination to find ways of reaching dyslexic people is inspiring and I hope that more music teachers adopt the invaluable techniques you have uncovered so that everyone can enjoy learning music.

C. Napper (student's mother)

I have Sjögren's syndrome and this causes me to suffer with visual stress, in the course of reading this book, I have realised that if I read on blue coloured paper this enables me to read with more clarity and my concentration levels are greatly enhanced.

Sally Clarke

*I have a scientific background and very early on working with Deborah we established that what I feel when I sing is different from what people normally experience – and is often completely backwards. Through her work in adapting her teaching to me and allowing me to process her instruction in my own way, my voice has grown and developed in ways I would never have thought possible. I don't think I would have made the same progress had I been forced into working with what I **should** have been feeling or without the visual imagery to help.*

Emma Walker

1. INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, a young student came to my music studio for her first lesson. She was nervous, but I wasn't particularly concerned, as I know I have a skill for putting my students at ease. I knew she had dyslexia, but as this was our first lesson together I did not consider this to be a particular problem.

As the lesson commenced, I could see her anxiety levels rising. I reassured her again and again, speaking gently, that we would just take it slowly, that there was no rush, no pressure. She was not reassured.

Her mother, who was with her, attempted to reassure her, it did not help.

She had a beautiful soprano voice, but nothing I said stemmed her anxiety. When she left my studio, she left in a state of anxiety. I was determined that no other student would ever have that experience with me again and so began my research into the impact that dyslexia has on musicians. I resolved to find a way of teaching that gave them the same opportunities as non-dyslexic musicians.

As I began to read academic papers, search the internet and look for books that would give me the information I needed about what aids and methods

were available for teaching the dyslexic musician, two things became obvious:

1. Much of the information on the benefits of aids and methods was based on anecdotal evidence
2. There was no one place that I could go to get the information I needed to assist my students.

So I decided to test the anecdotal evidence to see if the aids and methods referred to in the research literature actually worked. The information in this book is based on the results of those tests and the application of the aids and methods I have found to be most effective when teaching my dyslexic students.

The reason I have written this book is because I do not want any other music teacher, parent, or indeed any adult dyslexic student, to have to spend the many hours that I have spent, searching for effective aids and methods for teaching how to read and write music.

Furthermore, I do not want young musicians with dyslexia or any other learning difficulty to give up on pursuing a career in music using the traditional route. Having studied in both the UK and the USA, I can confirm that the traditional route of conservatoires and

universities requires students to have achieved at least a Grade 8 in their music exams. Even if a student is extremely talented and attains a place at their chosen conservatoire or university, without these grades, there is normally a proviso attached. What is the proviso? That they must get to grips with music theory in their first year.

The great news is that once they are at university in the UK, they will get a superb level of support. However, it is the years in between that can be difficult, as there is limited support, which largely depends on the school's and the individual's parent's/guardian's resources. If dyslexic musicians do not obtain effective teaching in their formative years, many drop out of music or give up on their dream of music as a career. I don't believe you should ever give up on your dreams.

During my journey to discover effective aids and methods to teach my dyslexic students I have observed the following:

- (a) Many music teachers, parents and adults have a very limited understanding of the causes of dyslexia.
- (b) There is limited knowledge of how dyslexia manifests itself or the impact it can have on a student's ability to read and write music and take music exams.

- (c) The causes and reasons for dyslexia have been researched for over 100 years and, although the purpose of this book is to provide an insight into aids and methods that can be applied when teaching a dyslexic student, I thought you might be interested in the 'Why'. So I have included a chapter at the end which gives a brief insight into the three main theories on why someone is dyslexic.
- (d) I have also been surprised that so few teachers and parents use assistive technology to help their dyslexic students. Although the benefits of assistive technology have been studied for the last 30 years, it is only recently that iPads, tablets, laptops, computers, apps and so on have been used in education to assist dyslexics with their reading and writing. The thought occurred to me some time ago that assistive technology incorporated many of the multi-sensory elements that were necessary for the effective teaching of dyslexic music students. As a result of this light-bulb moment I began to use Musescore, a free notation software program to prepare revision exercises and revision papers for my students. Without exception they love it. I had to explain that they would still need to take their exams on paper. However, just knowing that they could get

great results by using this method has given them confidence. It has also provided me with a greater insight into what they require when they do work on paper.

It is a constant joy to see my students' progress, pass exams, become excited about composition and gain confidence in their musical abilities. Yes, it can take longer sometimes to see results, but I have learnt so many new teaching skills on our journeys together, and I have gained a wonderful insight into how to look at music and life from a different perspective.

4. ASSESSING IF A STUDENT HAS A LEARNING DIFFICULTY

In 2019 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Dyslexia (ApPGD) published their examination of the support for dyslexics in education and found that it was in a very poor state. They acknowledged that diagnosis was poor, unless parents could afford a private assessment. The ApPGD report confirmed that over 80% of pupils were still leaving school without having been properly assessed and diagnosed. It accepted that support was either inadequate or non-existent.

Although parents are aware that their child may be dyslexic, in many instances they do not have a formal diagnosis because they simply cannot afford it. Assessments cost between £400 and £700. It is interesting to note that dyslexia can be a hereditary condition.

Many children who are dyslexic are incredible lateral thinkers and find ways of coping that can also mask potential problems at school. Within the classroom they may present as unruly or act as the class clown, to deflect attention from the difficulties they are facing. Teachers have limited training in how to deal with dyslexic students and heavy workloads. Therefore, children who do not have a formal assessment are not

always given the support they need with reading and writing, let alone with learning music other than by ear.

So how am I, as a singing/music teacher, alerted to the possibility that a new student may have dyslexia or a learning difficulty? If a parent, guardian or adult student says that a diagnosis has been made, I am starting from a solid, informed base. Even if a diagnosis has not been made a parent may still tell me of their concerns, but quite often they say nothing (especially if the child comes from certain cultural backgrounds).

If, after four or five sessions with my new student, they appear to be having problems processing my instructions, I am immediately alerted that there may be difficulties with their ability to unpack the information I am conveying.

You could say, 'Well, you might not be imparting the information clearly.' Although that is a possibility, I have been teaching for 25 years and during that period most students have understood my instructions and made progress.

You might say, 'Well, it is very early days.'

That would also be a valid observation. However, in those 25 years I have learnt that there are certain

instructions that the majority of students understand within a very short time.

When a new student is not making the progress I would expect, I make a note of the indicators that are causing me concern, such as:

- they don't want to look at the written music and would rather learn the piece by ear
- they can't seem to remember the melody or the lyrics of a piece we are working on
- they don't seem to understand the instructions I am giving them
- they appear to understand the instructions I am giving them, but they are doing something totally different when they perform the instruction
- they seem unable to concentrate for any length of time
- they hesitate when there is a rest in the music
- they avoid writing music
- they seem anxious throughout a lesson
- they get frustrated at certain points during the lesson
- there are moments when their body freezes
- they sing the lyrics but the words are incorrect, although similar to those written
- they want to talk a lot through their lessons
- when I ask them to clap a rhythm, they have difficulty clapping in the correct rhythm

- they are trying too hard.

I make a note of any of the above responses during the course of a lesson. If one, or a combination, of the above occur regularly, I begin casually asking questions in the course of our conversation to check if there might be a possibility of a learning difficulty such as dyslexia. At this early stage I do not make any reference to my concerns. I make sure that my questions are open-ended because that gives the student an opportunity to provide longer answers. This helps me to elicit more information for a better overview of any potential learning issues.

The sorts of questions I ask are:

- Would you mind describing what this music score looks like?
- What sort of books do you like reading?
- Would you like me to give you one instruction at a time or do you mind me asking you to do two things at the same time?
- Oh, I'm tired. I need to be careful as I get my words mixed up when I'm tired. When you get tired how does it make you feel?
- I noticed that you seem a bit worried when we got to that bit of the song, can you tell me what is worrying you about it? Why?

- We need to learn the lyrics to this song, can you read the first verse to me?
- Let's clap the rhythm of the verse.
- Could you please tell me whether you prefer the music on this size paper or this size paper?
- Can I ask you just to explain to me what you think I meant by that instruction?

My student's responses to the instructions during the lesson and to the above questions offers me an insight into whether there may be a problem.

The problem doesn't necessarily have to be dyslexia. I teach a young woman who is an astrophysicist, she is also a superb sight reader and musician generally, but after some time teaching her I noticed that if I asked her to raise her soft palette she would drop it, and if I asked her to breathe into her lower abdomen she would breathe in a higher position. I had provided a clear instruction of how to raise the soft palate and take the breath, and had even shown videos of MRI scans of the process. We had also discussed the position of the soft palate when she sang an 'ah' or 'eh' vowel, and the sensation she would feel when she took the breath into the lower abdomen. But she didn't appear able to perform the instructions and that did not make sense. I asked her to describe her understanding of what I was saying, and it very quickly became clear that when I gave her an instruction, she

was processing the information backwards. If I said lift the soft palate, she would lower it, if I said breathe into the lower abdomen, she would breathe further up, nearer to the chest. Once we established the way she absorbed information and I adjusted how I delivered that information we made swift progress.

If it is not clear from my conversations with the student that there is an actual problem, I gently ask the parent/guardian or the student themselves whether there are any issues with reading and writing. With my adult students I ask if they are having problems reading and/or writing music. Depending on their response, I ask what they find difficult about the process. If parents confirm there are difficulties, then this raises a red flag that the student may be dyslexic or have some other form of learning difficulty.

If a parent, guardian or the student themselves confirms a diagnosis of dyslexia, then I request a copy of the *Dyslexia Assessment Report of Diagnostic SpLDs Assessment*. In most instances, parents are happy to share this information with me, and it is invaluable. It details the impact of that particular form of dyslexia on the student's ability to read, write and process information, and whether the student has visual stress issues or difficulties with cognitive processing. This includes issues with phonological working memory, attention and concentration. There

could also be observations concerning difficulties the student has with writing, movement and coordination.

You need to be aware that this information is totally confidential and ensure that it is placed somewhere safe and is not shared with any other parties. The law requires us not to breach our obligations under the General Data Protection Regulations 2018. If I store this type of information on my computer I password protect it. If it is in paper form, I keep it in a locked drawer.

I read through the assessment report carefully and note the various issues my student may have. I then discuss the contents with them, and explain that I am going to tailor the lessons so that we can address the issues referred to in the assessment. I do this whether my student is 8 or 78. If there is any reference to visual stress, I immediately begin to explore with my student the various ways in which I can improve their issues with visual stress. Why? Because solutions can be found quite quickly (see the Visual Stress section of this book). As a student begins to resolve some of their visual stress issues, they become more confident and the teacher/student rapport should strengthen. This can lead to students feeling more able to confide when they are having difficulties during lessons. This saves time, enables issues to be pinpointed quickly and solutions to be explored – even if the solution is

accepting that an issue might take considerable time to resolve.

Sometimes dyslexics are embarrassed about their inability to read and write fluently. Many dyslexics I have taught have been excellent lateral thinkers. There have been times when it has taken me several lessons to work out that the student before me has not necessarily fully understood the instructions I have given. What they have done is made a connection between what I am saying and what they are seeing/hearing, which has enabled them to provide a correct, or almost correct, response to my query or comment. Once you have ascertained that your student may have one or more forms of dyslexia, you may want to discuss your observations with them. If you think that may undermine their confidence then, in the absence of a formal assessment, why not adapt your teaching and begin to use a multi-sensory approach?

There is no **one** method of teaching that will be successful. If a student has not been given a formal assessment you will need to be very aware of their body language. If you note a lack of concentration, their body momentarily freezing in panic or confusion on their face, you need to gently ask questions about what they are experiencing and why. Their responses will help you to understand what difficulties they have. Then you can begin to explore the best methods and

aids to overcome those difficulties. Throughout the process you will need to be patient and encouraging, but it will be worth it. All my dyslexic students have been hard-working, diligent and a delight to teach.

There is one golden rule when teaching a dyslexic student, and that is the need to provide clear and concise instructions. Time and time again I have found that my dyslexic students take what I say literally. For example, I was teaching a student chords and I had explained that she needed to use the 1st, 3rd and 5th notes of the scale to create the chord. I made it perfectly clear that she needed to count the first note as 1 in the chord. She was doing extremely well. As I checked her work, I noted that the 3rd note in the D major chord was incorrect. I informed her that she needed to change the second note. She looked at me puzzled and said, 'You want me to add an E?' I was equally puzzled, but remembered to rerun exactly what I had said to her in my mind and immediately realised that she had taken me literally. I meant the second note of the chord, but she had understood what I had said as the second note of the scale. She was absolutely right, the second note of the scale was E. Once I adapted my language, there was absolutely no problem.

CHECKLIST

1. Is your student making the expected progress in their lessons?
2. Have you noticed any indicators that they may be having difficulty understanding your instructions? If so, what are those indicators?
3. How can you gently explore potential difficulties?
4. Has your exploration raised any issues that may indicate a learning difficulty?
5. If so, is it appropriate to discuss those issues with the student?
6. Have you discussed with the parent/guardian if there are any issues with reading/writing/memory?
7. If you have been informed the student is dyslexic, have you asked for a copy of their assessment?
8. If you have read the contents of the assessment, have you noted the impact that dyslexia has on your student's ability to read, write and so on?
9. Which issue do you think can be addressed to provide relatively quick and positive results?
10. Have you discussed the contents of the assessment with your student and decided on a plan of action?
11. Are you monitoring the clarity of the instructions you are giving your student?