

piano

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Vertical Reading

The **Soft Mozart™** Way

by Nancy Lee Harper, D.M.A.

Notice to the Reader: This article is interactive with videos. For maximum comprehension of this system's outcomes, please see the video list at the end.

Introduction

Since Guido d'Arezzo (ca. 991–1033), Western music notation has taken the road to horizontal music reading. The Italian music theorist's "Guidonian hand" – a mnemonic device to facilitate solmisation sight-singing while accompanying the Latin texts of the Catholic monks – possessed capabilities of vertical and horizontal reading in down-up, up-down, right-left, and left-right trajectories. In today's music staff with its five lines and four spaces, the horizontal dimension notates duration or time, and the vertical dimension notates pitch.



Fig. 1. Guidonian hand

Piano teachers have long admitted the illogical connection between the keyboard and the music staff. If only we could turn one of them 90 degrees, then the ease of note reading for the beginning piano student would be greatly facilitated. Finally, someone has presented a solution. Hellene Hiner (HH), creator of the *Soft Mozart™* system, has turned the music staff on its side to become a

vertical reading system during the initial reading stages. She is having marvelous results with children as young as two years of age to teens and adults with no previous experience.

Verticality – the *Soft Mozart™* Way

"All written languages on earth are linear. We read them from left to right, from right to left or from top to bottom. Music is the only written language that is multi-linear. The spaces between the lines of the music scores are not just a 'break' as in any other languages but are also an important track of information. Therefore, training the beginner's eyes to grasp all notes from all tracks at once can be simplified with the help of computer technology and the *Soft Mozart™* approach," says HH.

The Grand Staff lends itself well to verticality. It is completely symmetrical, a characteristic that is more clearly observed in the vertical position.

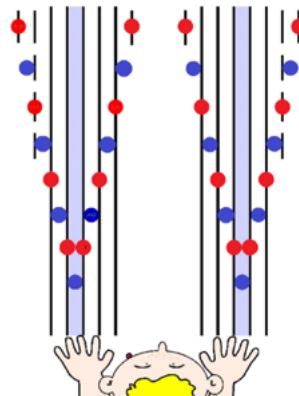


Fig. 2. Grand Staff in vertical position

“
my little students, when
on stage, run to the grand
piano. They think it is far
cooler to perform on the
real thing.”

advance to the next level if they have five mistakes or fewer; the computer easily tracks the mistakes, be they notes or duration. For learning to read, the students read at a level where their eye-hand span ratio of correct notes/time lag permits them to move on from vertical 2 to horizontal 4 and further. The students use levels 1 and 3 for building coordination to avoid the additional stress of looking for the notes/keys. In levels 1 and 3 beginners have a more flexible and relaxed muscle system.”

I was also curious if the *Soft Mozart™* approach is used with adults and varies in any way. HH replied:

“Vertical reading helps all beginners – kids or adults – to learn the notes-keys relationship much faster. We suggest that adults be on vertical notation for as long as they can to build strong awareness and solid skill of understanding that each note and piano key are interrelated. It helps adults to achieve results in sight-reading music much faster.”

I played devil’s advocate and asked HH about the dangers of introducing the computer to children at such an early age. She had plenty to say about that.

“Some people say that [the] computer is bad for child[ren] because they have way too much screen time. I say that the *Soft Mozart™* system uses the computer screen in combination with the piano keys and other off-screen activity. Eye doctors use such exercises for eyes to focus on different things - we do too. Another point [is] that we use computer technology to develop attention span and get kids off computers screens as quickly as possible. The system is built towards black and white notation with the regular acoustic piano being the goal and priority. So, the kids [and older pupils] try to get rid of all “childish” aids as quickly as possible. In fact, my little students, when on stage, run to the grand piano. They think it is far cooler to perform on the real thing.”



**Fig. 6. Games in groups.
Fingering and *Soft Mozart™***

Having experimented with the *Soft Mozart™* system for notational reading, I noted that no fingering was given while learning to read – an example of not bombarding the beginner with too much information. I asked HH about this and got the following reply:

“In the *Soft Mozart™* technology, we created an interactive tool that monitors the eye-hand span of each student in precise numbers. On the left bottom [of the computer screen] you can see the amount of correctly played notes to the ideal number. On the right side is the time lag. If the time lag figure is greater than amount of correctly played notes, the eye-hand span is not healthy enough to work on fingering (no ‘room’ in the mind to even think about it). If the amount of correctly played notes is greater than time, a student is mentally ready to manage his own fingers. Since my method includes basic exercises (Hanon, Chromatic scale, C Major, Triads, etc.) from the very start, most students find the fingering solution easily. If the fingering is still confusing for a student, they seek help from a piano teacher.”



Fig. 7. Note Duration Game

In the two examples below, fingering issues are encountered by the pupils with differing results.

Example 1:

A piano teacher recorded the moment when her 5-year-old beginner student achieved the stage at which she was able to manage her fingers on her own. The first minute of this video, "Fingering in the Making", shows the remarkable achievement. See '2' at the end of article.

Example 2:

In the next video, a young pupil refuses to fix her fingering because she was not ready for this stage. Since the *Soft Mozart™* approach gives students the necessary visual support, the girl's refusal did not affect her developmental path as you will see towards the end of the video. Because the *Soft Mozart™* approach is strongly visual, students don't rely on muscle memory as much as with more traditional approaches. This video, "Should we use strict fingering with *Soft Mozart™*?" shows two stages of development by the same student, beginning and advanced. See '3' at the end of article.

The *Soft Mozart™* Components

The pre-reading games of *Soft Mozart™* include Note Alphabet School, Note Duration School, Fruit Lines School, Guess Key School, Treble Staff Puzzle School, and Bass Staff Puzzle School.

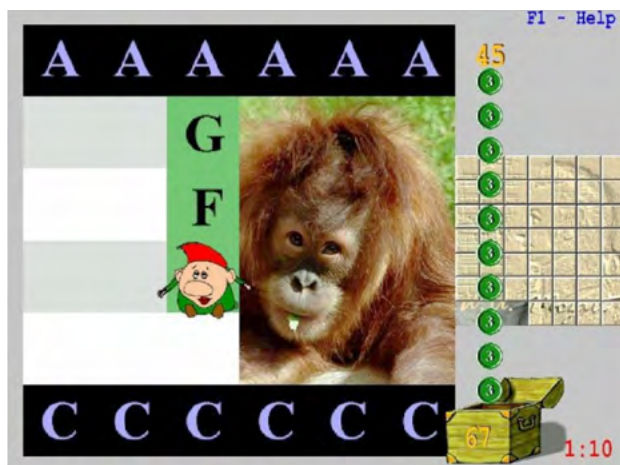


Fig. 8. Note Alphabet game

In the *Soft Mozart™* system, there are four figures that accompany the pupil on their learning journey. These are the flower, butterfly, dwarf, and spider. In vertical reading, the butterfly indicates that the pupil should release the piano key and shows the finger position on the staff. A Spider means that a wrong key was pressed and shows the finger position on the staff. The dwarf or small elf, lovingly called "Mr. Oops", appears when the piano key is released too soon and needs to be

re-pressed. Mistakes are observed in a positive manner during the learning progress – "oops".

All notes to be played have a reddish halo about them (flowers). A green halo means that the note has already been played by the pupil or the computer. When a key is pressed for a note on the yellow line, the note begins blooming. A longer note "blooms" for a longer time. This kind of automatic feedback is one advantage of the computer program that cannot be emulated in the same way by a music book. When the note is at "full bloom" and moves from the yellow line, the key is to be released. Mr. Oops also appears in the games as a friendly helper.

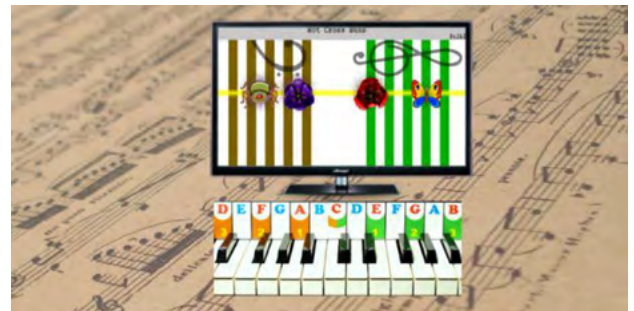


Fig. 9. Spider, flower, butterfly – teaching instructions and learning tools



Fig. 10. "Mr. Oops", dwarf or small elf figure in the "Fruit Lines" game

The student's progress is guided by the computer. Every time a note is pressed and held for the correct duration, a point is given that is indicated by a flower at the left bottom corner of the computer screen. An incorrect performance receives no point. The correct timing is shown in the bottom right-hand corner of the computer screen. A perfect score of 0 indicates the notes have been played to the correct timing of the piece. As mentioned above, when a pupil has a score of 5, it may be possible to advance to another level or even skip a level.

A progress journal, available from *Soft Mozart™*, can be used to register the student's progress of how the piece was played – left hand; right hand; both hands; score and timing delay scores. The tempo can also be adjusted to the student's needs. Currently, the entire *Soft Mozart™* system is available in multiple languages. These include English, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Turkish.

The *Soft Mozart™* reading system is adaptable for either "A-B- C" note name usage (Fig. 13) or the fixed Do solfege system (Fig. 11-12). Simply by indicating which system is preferred, the computer will present it in the chosen format.



Fig. 11. *Soft Mozart™* fixed do solfege memorisation helps



Fig. 12. Keyboard map with solfege symbols

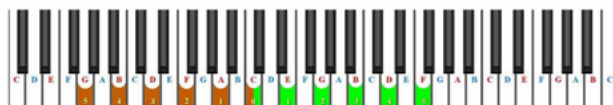


Fig. 13. Keyboard map with alphabet symbols. The green keys and numbers indicate the treble line of the notes; the brown keys and numbers indicate the bass line of the notes.

There are computer indications that must be learned by the pupil and/or teacher. In the game stage of learning the note names and the durations, the pupil uses the computer arrows to activate the game by going up, down, right, or left. For example:

- Down arrow key = move one measure forward;
- Right arrow key = move to the next note;
- Home key = move to the beginning of a song.

It is also possible to set off a section of a song or a piece for study purposes by using the control key with various directions. The *Soft Mozart™* handy manual that accompanies the license to the software is user-friendly. There is also a forum to answer teachers' and pupils' questions and to present ideas. Finally, online support is always readily available.

The repertoire component of *Soft Mozart™*, called "Gentle Piano", is beautifully coordinated with the beginning games. A curriculum is also available. In addition to the repertoire description that follows, there is a transposing course for the very young with exercises by HH.



Fig. 15. Hellen Hiner, creator of *Soft Mozart™*, with a beginning piano pupil

The repertoire consists of 10 levels, Level 0 – Level 9. Level 0 contains six introductory songs, such as the familiar "Hot Cross Buns", "Jingle Bells", "Ode to Joy", while level 9 contains classical masterpieces, pop music, and Keith Emerson works. Upon completion of these nine levels, the pupil is at an upper intermediate or advanced level. There are also graded sight-reading and ear training components of the *Soft Mozart™* system.

Summary

If after all of this, a computerised system is not for you, some of the *Soft Mozart™* materials are available in print in either published or downloadable formats.

They include books, flash cards, key guides, worksheets, stickers, and some sheet music. While no claims are made that the system creates perfect pitch and perfect timing in the students, the *Soft Mozart™* system seems naturally to predispose the pupils to these skills.

The wonders that can be accomplished by little children, teens, or adults if given accessible tools is evident from the videos presented in this article. There are many more on YouTube. Look for them there under "*Soft Mozart™* Academy." By making learning fun, the pupils become motivated, engaging in their own progress.

Any doubts that the reader may have about the *Soft Mozart™* approach may be quelled by viewing, along with 2 million others, a video of a very young beginner. In it, you will see the progress of Sophiyka, a pupil from Belarus, during a 1.5-year span of time, from age 3 until almost 5 years old. Her progress is remarkable. In the final stages you will see that she is reading music in the traditional manner. No problems with fingering or hand position. See "Early Learner Sophiyka" example 5.

As a piano teacher, you may want to re-think your teaching approach to beginners – the *Soft Mozart™* way. If so, go to www.softmozart.com and check out the program. You will get plenty of help to guide you in this exciting adventure. Vertical reading can be another tool in the piano teacher's toolbox or music reading experiences.

Interactive examples:

1. An example of a beginner adult's reading and playing success may be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49sYegG4j9s>, "Soft Mozart™ Before and After – from 0 to the Nutcracker Waltz".
2. First Fingering Example, Video 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJil7y_Srqc.
3. Second Fingering Example, Video 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55bUbHY9sdY>.
4. Materials examples: <https://globalmusiceducation.com/collections/english-collection>.
5. "Early Learner Sophika": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCHb5rjUcI8>

Hellene Hiner's music training was initiated and completed in the Soviet Union. After time spent in Houston, Texas, she now resides in Turkey. A note of appreciation goes to Hellene Hiner for her kind cooperation and photos in this article.



Nancy Lee Harper, pianist-pedagogue and founder of EPTA Portugal, has performed and given Masterclasses in 29 countries on 4 continents. With hundreds of publications to her credit, she continues to research, write, and record

little known repertoire, such as the works of British composer Malcolm Dedman (Tocatta Classics, July 2022) and American composer Beryl Rubinstein (in progress), even while retired from the Universidade de Aveiro (Portugal).



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