

Why is competence in braille music so crucial to blind musicians?

I'm Nina Tveter. I have a master's degree in musicology, and I'm a music teacher in upper secondary school's programme for music. That is to say that I teach music to sighted students, and since I never until now have had a blind student in my class, I teach music to sighted students only. As I'm totally blind myself, I really regret that.

I even more regret that the number of blind musicians has dropped considerably over the last 50 years. This results both from the fact that the braille music production is insufficient, and from the fact that blind music talents often don't learn braille music at all.

There's more than one reason for this. First of all their music teachers don't know that the braille music notation system exists, and therefore don't ask for braille music to their students. Second several of the advisers for visually impaired don't know that the braille music system exists either, and therefore don't tell the visually impaired children's music teachers about it. Third the advisers who know about the braille music notation system, find it too complicated to be taught to visually impaired children and therefore recommend not to use it.

This lack of respect for the braille music competence in Norway is a result of the integration of visually impaired into ordinary schools from the 1970s and onwards. Until then blind children were taught braille music from blind music teachers and musicians who had braille as their main written language and knew the braille music notation system quite well. With the integration, however, braille teaching is organized in an other way.

According to the norwegian Education act all children have a right and a duty to attend primary school for 10 years, and a right but not a duty to attend upper secondary school for 3 more years. Furthermore not only the students with special needs but in fact all students in primary- and upper secondary school have a right to adapted teaching. The education act also gives visually impaired a right to receive necessary braille teaching. But how much braille competence does necessary braille teaching mean?

The answer to this must be that the braille competence must be of a kind that matches the aims of the curriculums the teachers and students are guided by. When it comes to music it's a fact that visually impaired students in Norway today don't get the braille teaching that's required in the curriculums either for primary or upper secondary school.

Today teachers who get a visually impaired student in their class, are supposed to teach that student braille themselves. To be able to do so the teachers have to learn braille from an adviser from The National Support System for Special Needs Education, Apartment for visually impairment. This means that how much braille a blind student learns, depends strongly on what competence the adviser for visually impaired has not only in braille in general, but also in special subjects as music and mathematics.

It's crucial here to note that most of the advisers for visually impaired are sighted people who haven't got braille as their main written language. Furthermore noone in Norway learns to

read music well in ordinary school, so unless the sighted adviser as a child has gone to a music school, played in a brass band or sung in a choir, he or she will have only a limited competence in music notation in general. If that's the case, they'll find even the common music notation system complicated. No wonder then that they think that the braille music notation system is too complicated to be learned by blind children.

Unfortunately these advisers will find some support for this idea from sighted pop- and jazz musicians who argue that they do very well without competence in music notation. A classical musician, however, can't do without such competence, and you never know if a child - blind or sighted - will be a classical musician in addition to a pop musician later on. Furthermore I've heard several pop musicians say that they wish they had been able to read and write music.

Now I think it's fit to say something about why music notation is so crucial to everyone who study music - blind students included. To enter the music programme in upper secondary school in Norway no competence in music notation is required. Therefore about 50 % of all the students who start at the programme, have no such skills. These students are often pop- and jazz musicians who have a tradition for learning music either by listening to more experienced musicians or by listening to Spotify or Youtube.

In the first year of the music programme all students have an intensive course in theory and music notation because this competence is needed to acquire skills in all the other music disciplines. What we see is that the students who learn music notation for the first time in this course, is that they have great difficulties in using it as a tool in the other music disciplines. It's a challenge, because it's an aim in every curricula that the students shall be able to read and write music.

In the ear-training discipline the students have to sing rhythms and melodies by reading them directly from the sheet (*prima vista*), and they also have to write down melodies the teacher plays to them on the piano. It's not that these melodies are very complicated, but the point is that it isn't possible to do those exercises without using the music notation system.

When it comes to the main instrument discipline, the students with insufficient competence in music reading also spend much more time on learning new pieces than students who are more experienced music readers. Often they therefore give in, skip the notes and learn the music from Youtube or Spotify. But when learning it that way, they often have difficulties to enter at the right note on the right place in an accompaniment or in an ensemble context. Furthermore they often have no idea of where to start when the conductor tells the ensemble or the choir to start from a certain bar in the score.

Insufficient music notation competence is also a challenge when it comes to music-making such as composition. In Norway the students use computers and Cubase, Finale or Sibelius when they are composing, and even though these programmes allow them to either write the notes or tap them in on a music keyboard, it's harder for the students with insufficient music writing competence to develop their musical ideas than for the students with sufficient competence.

To make this clear I'll draw a comparison between music-making and text-making. To make a text by use of the listening method will be to develop it by using a voice recorder, talk it in piece by piece and develop it that way. But most of us, I guess, would find this listening method inexpedient because we have experienced that developing a text by writing is much easier. The reason for this is that developing a text by use of a voice recorder places much heavier demands on memory than writing does. You don't have to memorize a written passage. It's there when written, and you can look at it whenever you want. Listening to a word passage, however, takes just a few seconds, and then it's gone. You'll have to memorize the audio passage to continue and develop it further. It's exhausting, and you waste a lot of time. Writing is a way of memorizing without overloading the brain, so that you'll have capacity to develop your creative ideas. This applies to music as well as to text. Musical ideas must be written down to be developed effectively further. Beautiful and highly structured music such as Bach's great fugues could never have been created without the use of music notation.

Music is a language, and while spoken languages consist of words and sentences, the musical one consists of melody, rhythm, harmony, tonality and dynamics. When it comes to the spoken language, it's obvious to everyone that it's necessary to be able to read and write to master the language well. I've never heard anyone say that since the visually impaired children can understand and communicate the language, it's not necessary to teach them literary braille. Why, then, is it so often said that since visually impaired children can understand and communicate musically, it is not necessary to teach them braille music?

Even if blind children have a right to necessary braille teaching according to the Education Act, they don't learn the simple music notation as the other children do in primary school. This is, as earlier mentioned, because there's no advisers for visually impaired with competence in both music and braille. This situation is terrible, because both the common music notation system and the braille music notation system are complicated. Therefore it's important to those blind children who want to become musicians as adults, that the learning process starts early so that they may learn the braille music system little by little. To get acquainted with time signatures, pitch, note values and some chord symbols is not enough in the long run. They also have to learn to read all the different braille music layouts because all of them are in use for different purposes. When you study a piece for violin, for instance, you read the music bar by bar. When you read a score for analysis, it's most convenient to read it bar over bar without the dynamic signs.

Competence in music reading is absolutely necessary for professional musicians and singers, and blind musicians are no exception to the rule. If you want to play or sing in an ensemble, there's always an audition to pass where the skills in music reading are always one of the tests. Before entering a professional choir, for instance, both your vocal- and music reading skills are tested, and if you pass the tests, you'll really need your music reading skills because little rehearsal time will be spent on each musical number.

Here we encounter the next challenge blind musicians have to deal with. The musical notes we need in braille are not available, and if it's possible to order them somewhere, they'll not be there in time for our concerts. Therefore we must say no thanks to several jobs, because

learning the music on Spotify or Youtube takes too much time, and the result isn't accurate enough.

What can we do to solve these problems?

I think the best would be to let a blind music teacher or musician teach braille music to blind children. The second best would be to let music teachers do the work after having been taught braille music by an adviser for visually impaired. This adviser, if sighted, must have a solid competence both in the common music notation system and in the braille music notation system. As far as I know, no such sighted adviser exists in Norway today. The only sighted ones who have competence in both notation systems, are the music transcribers. Today we have only one left, but unfortunately she is almost at the end of her career, and will retire in the near future. When that happens, nobody is ready to take over, so in fact we have a deep braille music crisis in Norway today both when it comes to teaching and production.

It's a pity, because blind musicians can do very well given that they have sufficient competence in braille music notation and can get hold of the music pieces they need in braille when ever they need them. This we know from the fact that there in earlier times existed several blind organists, and from the fact that these organists were supported with a great number of organ music productions in braille. Unfortunately many of those can hardly be used today without breaking apart because most of them were made about a hundred years ago.

To be able to master a musical career as adults blind children need both teachers who are competent to teach braille music, good learning resources and braille productions of interesting music. I really hope that the Daisy Music Braille Project will come up with a solution very soon, because we need it badly!