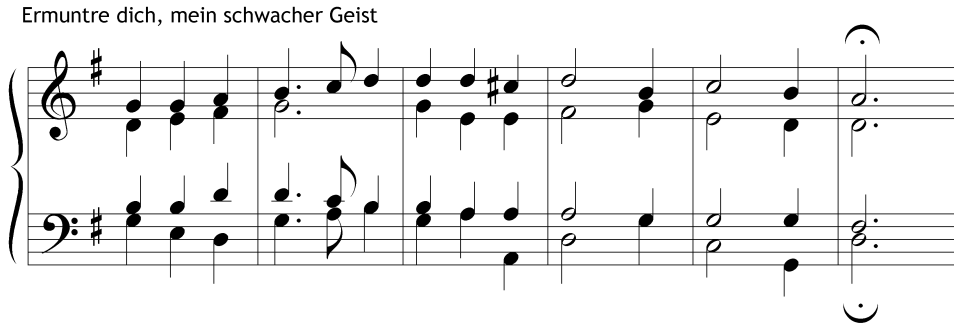
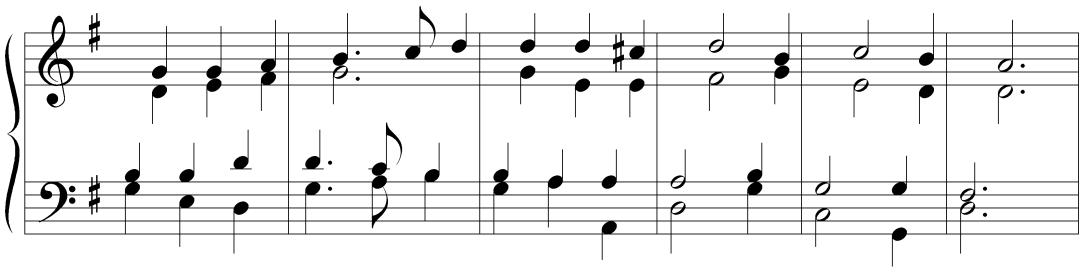
Read the Left Hand First

For most students of the piano, the left hand tends to get neglected in favor of the right hand. This happens for many reasons. First, most students are right handed and the right hand tends to be stronger and more agile than the left. Second, most students learn the treble clef first and tend to use it more often (such as in music classes and playing other instruments) than the bass clef. Third, the right hand plays the melody most of the time; as a result students have the ear to guide the right hand more so than the left. Finally, most students—as a result of how we learn to read—favor the upper part first when two lines (or, in this case, two staves) are given. For these reasons, most of the difficulties in reading and playing music tend to result from the habit of focusing on the upper staff, and taking in the lower staff incidentally.

In order to compensate for this tendency, it is favorable to focus on the lower staff and make it a *priority* when reading piano music. This can be a difficult habit to change. One way to access the skill and practice it is to actually *play* the left hand before the right. This forces you to develop the habit of reading the left hand first. For example, if you wanted to practice the technique with a Bach chorale, such as Chorale 102 (Emuntre dich, mein schwacher Geist):



you could practice the chorale by staggering each passage by playing the left hand, then the right, and so on, like this:



There is no particular way to practice reading the left before the right. It is simply a matter of practicing so that when notes are written to be played together, you play the notes in the left hand first; this will get you into the habit of reading the left hand first. I have used this technique with students and have noticed that it changes how they approach reading piano music.

Similarly, get into the habit of reading chords upward from the lowest note. This will support your intention of reading the left hand before the right. Moreover, since the lowest note is an important chord component (it is often the root), reading it first will provide information that will help you to more quickly assimilate, through expectation, the remaining notes of the chord. This is particularly helpful when you have a knowledge of chords and harmony.