

Sight-singing

“Sight-singing” simply means singing a piece of written music - at first sight - without the aid of any other instrument. It’s a special skill that both singers and instrumentalists can develop, by training with one of several sight-singing techniques. Two of the most widely used sight-singing techniques are called “Solfege” and “Tonic Solfa”. Here’s a little background on each:

Solfege

For the medieval singer, life was rough. The only musical instrument available was the “monochord” - a kind of single-string guitar which was very difficult and time-consuming. Music notation was unreliable at best, showing only whether a note was relatively high or low -- and nothing else! The poor singer would attempt to learn his/her music by struggling through it on the monochord, and then - because of the almost useless notation system - forget it by the next day or week. Then along came Guido.

Guido D’Arezzo

In the early 1000’s, a monk named Guido (who lived in the Italian town of Arezzo) invented two musical tools that made life much easier for the rest of us: the musical *staff* (which made music notation much more accurate and reliable), and a sight-singing method called *solfeggio*, or (en francais) *solfege*. Like the method behind the song “Doh, a Deer”, Guido’s solfege used a well-known tune to help singers find their notes.

Here’s how solfege worked:

Guido began his tune on the note C . . .

and then made each new phrase begin one note higher than the one before:

- C = *beginning of first phrase*
- D = *beginning of second phrase*
- E = *beginning of third phrase*
- F = *beginning of fourth phrase*
- G = *beginning of fifth phrase*
- A = *beginning of sixth phrase*

Guido then took the tune, and fit it to the words of a hymn that everyone knew. The hymn went like this:

*Ut queant laxis
Resonare fibris
Mira gestorum
Famuli tuorum
Solve polluti
Labi reatum,
Sancte Ioannes.*

Guido used the first syllable of each phrase to help the singer learn his/her notes:

“C” became *Ut*
“D” became *Re*
“E” became *Mi*
“F” became *Fa*
“G” became *Sol*
“A” became *La*

Centuries later, when a seventh note was required, the letters “S” and “T” were taken from the hymn’s last line - “*Sancte Ioannes*” - to form the syllable *Si*, which was then used as the name for the note “B”. At the same time, the syllable *Ut* was changed to *Do*.

Guido inventions were such a success, the Vatican made their use mandatory. Solfege was so universally used, for so many centuries (it’s still in use today), its syllables - *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la* and *si* - eventually replaced the note-names “C”, “D”, “E”, “F”, “G”, “A” and B”. Today, in most Latin countries - as well as in other countries which adopted the Latin system - the names of the notes in music aren’t C, D, E, F, G, A and B, but *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la* and *si*.

Besides furnishing the names of the musical notes in Latin countries, solfege is also still used as a sight-singing method, chiefly in Europe.

Fixed do

Because solfege’s *do* is *always* the note “C”, the system used in solfege is sometimes called “fixed do” - meaning that *do* is “fixed”, remaining “C” all the time.

Tonic Solfa

Meanwhile, in mid-19th-century England, an entirely different approach to sight-singing developed, called *tonic solfa* (*sometimes abbreviated to simply “solfa”*). It borrowed Guido’s syllables, but anglicized their spelling, so that *do, re, me, fa, sol, la, si* became *doh, ray, me, fah, soh, lah, te*. (Note that *si* was changed to *te*.) Apart from that similarity, the new system worked entirely differently:

In tonic solfa, the syllables do NOT signify the names of the musical notes. Instead, the syllables are the names given to the steps - or, *degrees* - of the “major scale”:

- the first note of the major scale is called *doh*,
- the second note of the major scale is called *ray*,
- the third note of the major scale is called *me*,
- the fourth note is called *fah*,
- the fifth note is called *soh*,
- the sixth is called *lah*,
- and the seventh is called *te*.

* A “scale” is a special collection of notes, most often used as the “building material” for a piece of music. There are many different kinds of scales, the “major scale” being one kind that’s very widely used. The major scale is used in the song “Doh, a deer”.

Here are the notes in the C major scale, along with the tonic solfa syllables used for each note:

C major scale:	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
<i>tonic solfa syllables:</i>	doh	ray	me	fah	soh	lah	te	doh

Now here are the notes in the E major scale, along with the tonic solfa syllables used for each note :

E major scale:	E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	E
<i>tonic solfa syllables:</i>	doh	ray	me	fah	soh	lah	te	doh

Note that the tonic solfa syllables remain constant, even though the note-names change:

C major scale:	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
<i>tonic solfa syllables:</i>	doh	ray	me	fah	soh	lah	te	doh
E major scale:	E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	E

Doh is always the first note of the major scale, regardless of which major scale is used. *Ray* is always the second note, *me* is always the third note, and so on.

Advantages of tonic solfa

Since most music is made using scales, tonic solfa has obvious advantages. The student of tonic solfa learns how to hear (and then, of course, sing) the relationships between the notes of the scale, and these are the same relationships that build our melodies, chords and counterpoint. Tonic solfa trains the ear and mind in the actual ways of music.

Relative Pitch

Tonic solfa cultivates “relative pitch”, which is the skill of being able to find any note relative to any other. Once given a starting note, students of tonic solfa can mentally find and sing (or mentally hear and identify) any other note.

Disadvantage of using tonic solfa

Tonic solfa does have one disadvantage: since the student who uses it identifies the notes of the scale as tonic solfa syllables, he or she may tend to forget the actual note-names those solfa syllables represent. The solution, of course, is to spend extra effort in learning and remembering the note-names for each scale.

Movable Doh

Because the note represented by tonic solfa's *doh* changes according to the major scale being used (*doh* is "C" in C major, but "E" in E major), the system used in tonic solfa is called "movable doh", in contrast to solfege's "fixed do".

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