



Solfège for the Performance-Oriented Classroom

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Opinions about how to approach singing this fall have been flying fast and furious. When I heard that my school would not be allowing any concerts for the year, I was of course disheartened. But conversations about these developments with parents and other teachers have caused me to reawaken a philosophy I've held for many years: a choir class is not about the concert. It's about the skills our students take with them to enable them to be life-long musicians. I want to play for the long win, not just the short-term pay-off. What better time to realign our priorities when our traditional rehearsal may not be an option.

When strangers find out that I am a choir teacher, I am delighted to hear them recount how much they loved their choir experience throughout high school. The delight is short-lived, however, when that exclamation is accompanied with the confession, "Don't ask me to sing, though; I still can't read music." What a shame! Indeed, Steven Demorest found that "Choral music education is often criticized for its emphasis on performance and rote teaching at the expense of developing music reading skills."¹

Because of these experiences, my end goal is that students graduate with skills that enable them to continue making and participating in music well after their school experience. I am encouraged by Moerman, who says, "[It] gives me the satisfaction that children are learning something which will benefit them for the rest of their lives: the ability to pick up any piece of music and sing it."² Music classes, even those

that are performance based, should benefit the students far longer than the time they are actually in our classes. Whatever our teaching philosophy, we might ask ourselves: "What should our students know after twelve years of music education? What skills have they developed that they will continue to use throughout their lives?" For me, solfège is one of those skills.

Solfège and Advocacy...Who Knew?

Solfège not only helps a single student become a life-long musician, but it can also contribute to an entire culture's ability to continue music making through advocacy. "Musical illiteracy implodes musical culture, and is the cause of sparse attendance at serious concerts and opera productions."³ This is a bold statement from one of the field's leading experts. It is supported by Choksy as well, who claims that genuine love of music only comes through "knowledge about and understanding of music."⁴

Choksy explains that if only one in four hundred graduating twelfth-graders became a professional musician, it would be enough. Most of us are not in the business of training professional musicians. However, we should be in the business of educating the masses. "Knowledgeable audiences and a public ready to support music financially in the schools and community are needed in far greater numbers than are professional musicians." The question is, "What are the mu-

sical skills possessed by this student that have led him or her to place such value on music?”⁵

Can it Really be Done?

The task of helping an entire culture become musically literate sounds daunting. But students are just as capable of learning to read music as they are of learning to read a language. Moerk reassures that “Developmental psychologists know that children who have richer language environments develop better language skills.”⁶ Valerio confirms that, “Likewise, children who have had an opportunity to experience a rich, diverse musical vocabulary from the beginnings of their music development will develop richer musical skills and typically will develop those skills more quickly.”⁷

Our job is to provide an environment with musically-rich vocabulary for our students. Solfège can be the primary language in this environment. In places where elementary music classes are not available or not strongly supported, it becomes our role as secondary music teachers to teach the basic concepts of music, including solfège, even if we were primarily hired to teach a performance class. We cannot assume there are no holes in a student’s previous music education.

This is best done in an authentically musical context. Theory worksheets, written exams and even sight-reading exercises strip the “music” out of music. “Older students who can tell you what the notes of a song are when seeing them, but cannot sing, read, write, and improvise using those notes, have not internalized their musical learning.”⁸

Peggy D. Bennett, who wrote chapter 13 of “Teaching General Music” outlines her quest “to teach music musically.” According to Bennett, the problem lies in the traditional way we teach solfège (through sight-reading method books), which is actually very *unmusical*. If we teach it in a musical way (e.g., through modelling, integrating with repertoire, warm-ups, and other things that are *already happening* in class and rehearsal), then it will have more meaning and be a better tool. Solfège should be presented as *sound in a context*, not a puzzle to be decoded.⁹

Making this transition requires a paradigm shift. In a world where the traditional way to teach solfège is removed from an authentic musical context:

It is difficult to make the changes to integrate sol-

fa into a performance-oriented classroom. People tend to teach as they were taught, not as they were taught to teach. It has been [Kodaly instructor Lois Choksy’s] experience that [teachers that enroll in her summer-school courses]-people with good teaching backgrounds- often write beautiful lesson plans and exhibit good intellectual understanding of the Kodaly philosophy. When these same [teachers] stay on for a full year’s program, and must assume responsibility for one class of children for the year, the initial reaction is frequently to fall back on what they knew about teaching before, on what they did before, which in itself is usually based on what their teachers did to them.”¹⁰

It is tempting to believe that in order to teach solfège, one must devote a lot of extra time at the expense of concert preparations. It does not have to be that way! Much like attempting a diet, you will be more successful, and be able to stick with it longer, if you begin incorporating solfège into the teaching style and teaching philosophy you *already* use. But consistency is the key. Whether big or small, solfège should be “in the air” every day so that it becomes part of the students’ normal vocabulary. “For the development of the musical abilities it is not just the amount of time devoted to it that counts, but regular repetition *in practice* is also indispensable.”¹¹

The idea, then, is to incorporate solfège in small, natural ways throughout rehearsal. I offer here some practical ideas to get you started. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, but rather a starting point for you to *discover more ways you can upgrade activities you already do by adding a solfège twist*.

Online/Blended Practices:

Concerts

- Invite your audiences to an “In-Concert” where family and friends are invited to see into the classroom and experience all the things the students are learning via video. In addition to recording repertoire (according to licensing agreements), the students can also demonstrate knowledge of solfège and original creative works from class.

Virtual games

- Using your video conferencing app of choice (or even pre-

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recorded videos), sign the solfège to a song the students *already know*. This can be a familiar folk tune or from the current repertoire. The students guess what the song is.

- Level two of the previous game would be sending standard notation of a melody (without words attached) of a song the student *already knows* and have the students guess the song.
- Level three would be sending a melody the student *does not know* and have them record themselves sight-singing.

Small group work

- Depending on skill level, divide students into groups with other singers in their same part, or as quartets (or octets). Assign students a few measures from the repertoire to sight read. Students work together to figure out the music.

Creating

- Assign students a pitch-set (i.e. Do, Mi, Sol, La). Students must create a melody using each of those notes at least once.
- Level two of the previous activity would be writing the melody using solfège syllables.
- Level three would be writing the melody in standard notation.

Warm-ups

Melodic

- Model the warm-up with solfège instead of playing it on the piano.
- Learn a simple song on solfège and sing it in a canon (ex: “Scotland’s Burning,” or “Row Row Row Your Boat”).
- A student leads class singing from hand signs or by pointing to pitches in a toneladder or scale on the board.
- Sing a melody or warm-up multiple times in different keys, and have them find and sing do (and sol) at the end of each repetition.

Harmonic

- Create (or have students create) simple ostinati using solfège

to accompany simple songs and canons (e.g., Do Re Mi, Do Re Mi, etc.).

- One group of students sings a single note, chord, or cluster on a drone while another sings the melody.
- Divide the class in half. Each half is assigned to follow either my right or my left hand. I show two different hand signs at once.
- Have each section drone a different pitch in a chord (e.g., Do, Sol, Mi, Do), then signal to one section at a time to sing a different solfège syllable and accompanying pitch (e.g., tenors move to La, then altos move to Fa, etc.).

Games

- Sing a scale or melody, but have one solfège syllable be “poison.” For example, audiate all the Mi’s but sing everything else.
- “Students toss the ball but are assigned, by section, which pitch to sing. (Basses on do, altos on mi, tenors on sol, sopranos on high do. Students all sing the assigned pitch when the ball is tossed to a particular section).”¹²
- “Make a ‘keyboard’ out of students (each student has a pitch to sing in a major scale) and ‘play’ a melody on them for the class to guess.”¹²
- SOLAMI poison: Sing a small series of pitches in solfège. The students echo back. If you sing the sequence “Sol-La-Mi” they must remain silent. If they echo back “Sol-La-Mi” they are either out or lose a point. This is a musical version of Simon-Says.¹³

Procedures

Auditions or Exams

- Begin by “giving the notation, without words or identification, of a song the *student knows well*. Allow him a few moments to ‘sing it softly’ to himself. Ask him to identify and sing it. This is sight-singing, but at an easier level. If he did the above well, have him sing at sight an unknown melody. If the student had difficulty with task 1, omit task 2.”¹⁴

Transition between pieces

- Sing, in solfège, the main melody of the next piece you will rehearse as a way to inform the class which music to get out.

Stopping to fix problems:

- When finishing a song or stopping to fix something, see if the choir can find and sing Do then Sol.

To give a starting pitch:

- Sing it in solfège instead of playing it on the piano or singing a neutral syllable.

Getting students' attention:

- Use a solfège jingle that you sing and they echo to regain students' attention after a group activity, or when too much talking starts to set in.

Repertoire

At the beginning of the year, have students first learn the song, then attach solfège to what they have already learned.

- Learn a simple song on words (or use a familiar folk song) and have the students figure it out in solfège. (This is by ear. Don't use notation.)
- Students "name that tune" while you sign the melody of well-known songs with Curwen hand signs.
- Audiation with notation: show notation of well-known songs (even ones learned in class) and see if students can name it.
- Have large flash cards with portions of a melody (preferably one of their concert pieces), and have students put them in the correct order.
- Sing a melody while students follow along with notation, and have the students catch your mistake.

By the end of the year, students can transition to learning their parts directly from notation.

- Choose the right repertoire. You don't necessarily need to learn an entire song with solfège. Just pick a portion of the piece that lends itself easily to that. (On that note: when selecting repertoire, ensure that you always choose at least one

piece that can be learned easily with solfège.)

Other helpful/creativity-based activities when learning repertoire:

- Make sure the students are able to sing *do* of the piece they are singing at any time. Stop and test it periodically throughout rehearsal.
- Students make up a new ending to the song in solfège.
- Change the way the song "goes" by rearranging two-pitch pattern cards.¹⁵


Our concert repertoire is the best sight-singing "method book" we can give our students but only if it is chosen the right way. If our goal is to truly teach skills for lifelong musicianship, in conjunction with "teaching music musically," then the concert and the songs we prepare for it should be viewed as a means, not simply an end. "Time spent teaching music rather than preparing pieces is time well spent. The former has implications for life-long music making. The latter is forgotten a week after the concert."¹⁶ In other words, concerts are a gateway to the repertoire, which is a medium to learn music concepts. From a curriculum-based approach, the opposite is also true. Musical concepts determine which repertoire we choose, which in turn is what we bring to the concert.

Conclusion

Using solfège will give the students something more than just happy memories of choir. It gives them tools to continue making those happy memories for the rest of their life. The list of benefits from solfège is long, including tuning, audiation, independence, satisfaction, problem solving skills, and overall ensemble engagement. Arnold Bentley claims, "Singers using solfa notation are usually far more accurate in pitch and time than the hit-or-miss staff-notation-only readers. I have yet to find a system faster, easier to write, or more reliable."¹⁷

Perhaps more importantly, however, "The child who has grown up in an environment of good music will perhaps be more likely to support and participate in musical organizations. Such has been the experience in Hungary, where the Method has produced musically literate amateurs- as is its aim- not just professionals. As an example, factory workers in Hungary form local symphony orchestras and concert choirs

rather than bowling teams for their own recreation.”¹⁸

Now, rather than pulling out method books to sing exercises for ten minutes, students are consistently thinking in solfège. They are doing it through the music they are already learning. The solfège is relevant and helpful. They have a language with which to describe the things they are learning about tonality. They walk out of your class with a tool they can use to create their own music, or to pick up any other piece of music and sing it themselves. They are lifelong musicians. 

Music Education 7, no. 52, (1959): 167.

¹⁸ Szőnyi Erzsébet, “Kodály’s Principles Method,” 23.

NOTES

- ¹ Steven M Demorest and William V May, “Sight-Singing Instruction in the Choral Ensemble: Factors Related to Individual Performance.” *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 43, no. 2 (1995): 156.
- ² Jacob Moerman, “Practicing by Syllables an Alternative for Singing by Rote.” *The A.G.O.-R.C.C.O. Magazine*, (June 1971): 38.
- ³ Szőnyi Erzsébet, *Kodály’s Principles in Practice: an Approach to Music Education through the Kodály Method*. (Editio Musica Budapest, 2013).
- ⁴ Lois Choksy and Zoltán Kodály, *The Kodály Context: Creating an Environment for Musical Learning*, (Prentice-Hall, 19):160.
- ⁵ Lois Choksy, *The Kodály Method II: Folksong to Masterwork*. Prentice Hall, 1999.
- ⁶ Peggy D. Bennett, et. at., *Teaching General Music Approaches, Issues, and Viewpoints*. (Oxford University Press, 2016):191.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.
- ⁸ Mark Derrick Sumner, *A Case for Relative Solmization within the Kodály Context and Its Application in Secondary School Music Education* (UMI Microform, 1997).
- ⁹ Peggy D. Bennett, et. at., “Teaching General Music,” 191.
- ¹⁰ Lois Choksy, “The Kodály Context,” 150-151.
- ¹¹ Lois Choksy, “The Kodály Method II,” 166, emphasis added.
- ¹² Shea Clay, “Ideas for Kodaly in the Secondary Classroom.” *Kodaly Envoy*, 45, no.1 (2018): 24–25.
- ¹³ Dave Perry and Jean Perry, *Musical Games for the Musically-Minded* (Shawnee Press, 2019).
- ¹⁴ Lois Choksy, “The Kodály Context,” 62.
- ¹⁵ Bonnie Jacobi, “Strategies for Integrating Kodály Principles into Music Literacy Instruction.” *Kodaly Envoy* (2012): 28.
- ¹⁶ Lois Choksy, “The Kodály Method II,” 4.
- ¹⁷ Arnold Bentley, “Fixed or Moveable Do.” *Journal of Research in*