

Response to Roger's Review of: "To Doh or Not to Doh"

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In his review of our article "To Doh or Not to Doh" Michael Rogers raises a very important pedagogical philosophy that is absent in the context of our paper. He states that there is 'nearly universal agreement about the superiority of scale-degree function,' in the teaching of sightsinging. We wholeheartedly agree that students should be able to distinguish functionality of the pitches within the tonal system, in order to be successful at inner hearing, tested as sightsinging. Instructors who participated in the various studies were also convinced of the importance of this pedagogical cornerstone. However, teachers who were teaching a non-movable syllable system conveyed this information without using solfege syllables or numbers, instead using terminology such as the '*seventh scale degree*' or the '*leading tone*.'

There is obviously *not* universal agreement about the superiority of a particular syllable system to accomplish this end. Rogers suggests, and one would expect, that using a movable system such as *movable doh* or *numbers* would encourage students toward functional 'thinking' more than systems such as *fixed doh* or *inflected letter names*. We have found through experience that movable syllables actually hinder some students, who might already possess a thorough knowledge of all keys, and thought processes for successful pitch orientation. Teaching a particular system does not necessarily aid a student toward functional thinking.

If a teacher can impress students with the idea of how tonality works and how they can hear what they see (C-D-E-F as either a beginning or an ending) then it does not matter what they 'say.' Whether to use movable, fixed, or a neutral syllable has already been much debated (see Bentley, Multer, Smith, Houlahan and Tacka,

Larson). The advantages of each system may be different, but the purpose is the same, namely, to facilitate sightsinging. Even within movable systems, *movable doh* and *numbers* are not the same thing. For the inexperienced freshman sightsinger *movable doh* requires an extra step cognitively. After identifying the fifth scale degree in a particular key, the student must convert the number information to the syllable *sol*. The same extra step would be involved in learning *fixed doh* as opposed to *inflected letter names*..

The reviewer insists on musical responses, downplaying the importance of 'correct' notes. It is widely recognized that the skill we are trying to teach and assess is inner hearing using the only physical test available – singing. For some people this manner of testing is less than ideal. (One of us once had an excellent sight-whistler.) In fact, we *are* interested in the correct notes as an indication of an inner understanding of the sound of the written music. Since we cannot electronically probe their brains, we must rely on their voices. Sightsinging class is a perfect avenue for conveying the inner workings of tonality, but the goal is an accurate performance. Of course, we would want our students to exhibit accuracy *and* musical nuance, but nuance depends upon accuracy. Our experiments were designed to test the end result, namely, accuracy of a sightsinging performance.

This paper details numbers and accuracies, by which we deduce that in a group, syllables do *not* necessarily help, in fact may hinder, a successful rendering of what may be 'heard' in the brain. The study is all about syllables, and indicates that perhaps we should not put so much weight on them. Some students really succeed with movable doh. Others never catch on to syllable names yet seem to understand sightsinging just fine. Students could be given a palette of systems from which to choose, in the style of discovery learning, assimilating whatever 'words' suit their experience, understanding, and ability.

Rogers's call for interviewing subjects is a valid and much needed research tool. We have conducted qualitative studies also¹ and found the information to be most helpful in influencing our

¹"A View of Ear Training Pedagogy from the Students' Perspective," presented at Music Theory Midwest, May, 1997, in Northfield, MN.

pedagogy. However, the results of qualitative research often do not represent the whole population. Rogers obviously values qualitative research over quantitative. We value both. Empirical research provides answers which are most applicable to a random group, those we might see each fall. While we all desire to teach the brightest and most musical students, we are employed to impart our knowledge to all. If many of our entering freshmen did not struggle so with *movable doh*, we would never have initiated these experiments. And, while *movable doh* may be easier for the instructor to convey the concept of functionality, because of its foreign-ness to the 18-year-old, it may not be the easiest method for that student to grasp.

Michael Rogers rightly asserts that sightsinging is certainly not about fussing over what to call each note. In fact, our study says just that. In light of the fact that syllable systems did not significantly improve any group over another, why insist that students all use the same system, functional or not?