

Readers' Comments

Continuing The Dialogue: The Potential of Relative Solmization for the Music Theory Curriculum at the College Level

Micheál Houlahan and Philip Tacka

Editor's note: These comments by Professors Houlahan, Tacka, and Smith are in response to two articles by the same authors, which appeared in Volume 6 (1992) of this journal ("The Americanization of Solmization: A Response to Timothy A. Smith" by Micheál Houlahan and Philip Tacka, 137-151 and "The Liberation of Solmization: Searching for Common Ground" by Timothy A. Smith, 153-168). The 1992 exchanges of ideas, in turn, were responses to articles which appeared in earlier issues of the journal (see 4/2, Fall 1990 and 5/1, Spring 1991). The editorial board decided that the exchange included here would be the last we would print from these three authors about this issue. We invite others, however, to comment about solmization, either in short responses to the editor or in submitted articles.

We wish to thank Professor Timothy Smith for his reply to "The Americanization of Solmization." However, we disagree with several of his interpretations and conclusions pertaining to our work. Smith has misinterpreted again our definition of function and tonality as outlined in our writings. We define function, as we did in our initial response to Professor Smith, as the relationship between sounds. We define tonality as a system of these interrelationships that is valid for particular musical styles and compositions. Smith has chosen to respond to our pedagogy using a much narrower definition of function and tonality, focused on the application of solmization to teaching music of the late 1600s to late 1800's. We did not limit our initial reply to this narrow definition.

In our response, we provided an abbreviated melodic sequence of our presentation of musical elements. This sequence is taught

using a variety of materials from multicultural folk music to art music. Pentatonic motives, hemitonic and anhemitonic pentatonic scales and modal scales are taught before the presentation of major and minor tonalities. Within the pentatonic system we use the notes *d-r-m s-l* to create the following scales: *do* pentatonic, *re* pentatonic, *mi* pentatonic, *so* pentatonic and *la* pentatonic. With the introduction of modal scales, students are taught to hear the tonic for each of the modes: *do* - Ionian, *re* - Dorian, *mi* - Phrygian, *fa* - Lydian, *so* - Mixolydian, *la* - Aeolian. We do not teach pentatonic, modal, or minor scales as alterations of the diatonic major scale where *do* is the tonic. Through the sequential presentation of solfège syllables, students are accustomed to the tonic note being represented by any one of the seven solfège syllables. Following this sequence, once major and minor tonalities are introduced, students logically hear centeredness in a tonic with *do* for major and *la* for minor. Once students have a firm grasp of the above concepts, they also sing major and minor scales and melodies with numbers using the number 1 for tonic major and i for tonic minor.

We do utilize the "*la* minor" system of solfège but our approach to teaching varies considerably with a traditional usage of this system. All of Smith's interpretations and conclusions relative to our work derive from the fact that he believes that the "*la* minor" and "Relative Solmization" systems for teaching musicianship skills are synonymous. They are not. Relative solmization:

links the notes to *tonal images* and associations in our hearing so that they may be transferred to any tonal system be it major, minor, modal, pentatonic or prepentatonic, with the exception perhaps of the 20th-century dodecaphony. It is not associated with scales, for a *so-mi* minor third will sound identical in the major or Dorian scales. . . .In short, the music reading elements and the auditive elements form a unity in relative solfa.¹

Undoubtedly Professor Smith will now agree that he was wrong in his assumption that we, as advocates of relative solmization, are unwilling to solmize music without knowing the mode. We train

¹László Dobszay, *After Kodály, Reflections on Music Education* (Kecskemét: Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music, 1992), 54.

our students to be able to solmize **motivic patterns** as well as **complete musical examples** using several solfège possibilities. We do not present to our students all the solfège syllables at one time but rather present them gradually. In the beginning of the first semester of sight-singing and ear-training classes, we restrict the music examples to pentatonic examples and use only the solfège syllables *d - r - m - s - l*. When students are asked to sing or aurally identify a *mi* pentatonic folk song or scale they use the following solfège syllables:

m - s - l - d - r - m - r - d - l - s - m

Smith will solfège the same passage as follows:

d - me - f - le - ta - d - ta - le - f - me - d

This solution has inherent intonation problems for the neophyte musician and would not be the most intelligent solution for our students.

As a pedagogical technique to develop students' facility with solfège syllables, pitch names and memory, we often ask students to solfège **motivic patterns related to a specific tonality**. A sample procedure follows:

1. Students sight sing a musical example with solfège syllables.
2. Students sing the musical example with note names.
3. Teacher hums selected motivic patterns from the musical example for individual students to solfège without looking at the music.
4. Teacher hums selected motivic patterns from the musical example for individual students to sing with letter names.

As a further pedagogical technique to develop students' facility with solfège syllables and keys we often ask students to solfège motivic patterns not related to a specific tonality.

1. Teacher hums a motivic pattern.
2. Students repeat the motivic pattern from memory.
3. Students are asked to indicate a centeredness in the musical example and offer possible solfège solutions and indicate key possibilities.
4. Teacher indicates the pitch name of the first note and students are then asked to sing with pitch names.

Using the above procedure, students will solfège the motivic pattern provided by Smith with the following solfège syllables: *s, -d-r-d-t,-d*.

Depending on their knowledge of solfège syllables, students will offer other solfège possibilities. They will solfège the above example using the solfège syllables: *mi-la-ti-la-si-la* towards the second half of their first-semester sight-singing and ear-training class after they have a knowledge of altered solfège syllables connected with the harmonic and melodic minor scales.

The following are the solfège solutions given by our students to the two different endings that Smith provides:

First ending: *s,-d-r-d-t,-d-l,-s,*
 or
 m-l-t-l-si-l-fi-m
 or
 *r-s-l-s-fi-s-m-r**

Second ending: *s,-d-r-d-t,-d-le,-s,*
 or
 m-l-t-l-si-l-f-m
 or
 *r-s-l-s-fi-s-me-r**

[*These solfège solutions would be offered only by second-semester theory students who have had more practice using altered solfège syllables.]

Our students are just as capable as *do* minorists of using altered notes and can aurally identify many more solfège and key possibilities. (In harmony class these skills are invaluable when students are asked to harmonize modulating material.) If Smith were to present his two musical motives in succession and ask our students to analyze aurally and solfège these examples to show similar structures, our students would use the following solfège syllables:

s,-d-r-d-t,-d-l,-s, for the first motif and
s,-d-r-d-t,-d-le,-s, for the second motif.

Students will provide the above solution in the third semester of sight singing and ear training. During this semester musical materials include works by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Frequently many of these pieces switch from major into minor tonalities or the

melody is repeated in the minor tonality. In the above case our students are able to hear this momentary modulation and sing the minor tonality sections keeping *do* as the tonic but using the altered tones of *me* and *le*.

In conclusion we would like to address again some themes that permeated our initial response to Professor Smith. As music theorists we have no disdain for music analysis. How could we? What we have is a disdain for the current tendency among some college theorists of failing to understand the problems of teaching the neophyte musician. If entering first-year students are no longer prepared to meet the demands of a standard theory curriculum, we must search for other means of teaching them rather than relying on techniques that have no proven value. Rather than investigate successful systems of teaching the neophyte, some theorists are more concerned with the propagation of theories concerned with musical analysis that have no immediate bearing on the development of the students' musicianship. We must establish a balance between musicianship and theory. We have no problem with the entering gifted students who have no need of solmization symbols and who can tackle the demands of a current curriculum. But their numbers are dwindling.

Regretfully we have come to the end of our reply but we suspect and hope that this is not the end of this discussion. In closing, we would ask for music theorists involved in teaching ear-training and sight-singing skills to begin a dialogue at a national meeting of the Society of Music Theory on the problems facing entering first-year students and to investigate comprehensively the potential of the "relative solmization" system for ear training, sight singing and analysis at the college level.