

## Readers' Comments

### Ending the Dialogue: Imaginary Solutions Are No Solution

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We may conclude from the foregoing reply that Micheál Houlahan and Philip Tacka have conceded my sixth proposition: **the *do*-tonic system is oriented more toward the ear than is *la*-minor**. While they did not in so many words *say* that they agreed, their main argument seems calculated to prove it. By deciphering a minor host of relative solutions to my example, Houlahan and Tacka confirm that their method does indeed “require comparatively more analysis when going from sound to sight,” as I lately prefaced that proposition. For my thesis, the opposition could not have submitted a better proof. Now, like the fox that lost its tail, my partners in debate desire that we should entertain the notion that a proclivity to “hear several solfège syllable possibilities” before choosing the “most intelligent solution” is a pedagogical advantage. It is not, and here is why.

First, Houlahan and Tacka’s solutions attribute to my example something that it did not contain. My melody, *sans* endings, was tonal, but without mode. To fake one, by suggesting that it might be solfèged either as (1) m-l-t-l-si-l, (2) r-s-l-s-fi-s, (3) s-d-r-d-t-d, (4) l-r-m-r-di-r, or (5) d-f-s-f-m-f, is to torture the very tonality that we wish to teach.<sup>1</sup> My colleagues’ solutions represent nothing more than their imaginations—arguments from silence.

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<sup>1</sup>The example was, the reader will recall, a melody that ascended a P4, continued in the same direction a M2, returned to the second pitch, descended a m2, and returned once more, with the second pitch perceived to be tonic. While the original example was represented as waiting for two possible endings, it could just as well have been complete, without the endings, as I represent it now. Houlahan and Tacka’s students did not solfège my example with strings four and five, but they, too, are plausible in a relative system.

Their solutions imply, moreover, that the music is incomplete. "If we had but two or three more scale degrees," their protégés might be heard to think, "*then* we could choose which one of our relative readings is, in our mentors' words, 'most intelligent'." In truth, all of the mentors' readings are *equally* intelligent because they are equally fictitious. To recommend that students should dignify one solution as more intelligent than another is to insinuate that they should hear modality where it is not. And, if there is no mode, each solution necessarily implies a relationship that is pure fantasy.

Houlahan and Tacka's use of the word "solution" betrays a misunderstanding of the purpose of solmization. Representing structure in melody ought not to be construed as a puzzle wherein students are compelled to deconstruct what *might* be inferred from that which does not exist. It ought, rather, to represent what does exist. And what *does* exist in my example is a tonal center—nothing more, nothing less. To imply that the melody has five potential solutions is little different (only to the degree that it is less farcical) from the implication that "Bruckner is potential Wagner." Both do violence to what *is* by requiring that inferences be erected upon a foundation of what *is not*.

By imposing theoretical sounds upon my example and suggesting that students should be taught to *hear* them, not only do Houlahan and Tacka give an abstruse twist to the concept of audiation, but they contradict themselves. They parade their theory before practice (a fallacy that they loudly boo in one breath but applaud in the next). When they write "We train our students to hear several solfège syllable possibilities," they confess that they train their students, like the schizophrenic, to hear things. What they hear are theoretical possibilities for which my example provides no aural basis in fact.

As predicted, Houlahan and Tacka's arguments against my third and fourth propositions could not be made without abandoning my second: **the essential function that movable systems seek to identify is the sense of centeredness in a tonic.** While they write that they accept the thesis, by providing multiple solutions to my example, Houlahan and Tacka unwittingly confess the antithesis. So, according to their own dialectic, the relative system does not do what they purport to agree that it should.

The problem becomes evident when a student sings back a “solution and Houlahan and Tacka cannot be certain to which pitch has been ascribed tonal function.<sup>2</sup> Student Schmoke, for example, solfèges the melody as *mi la ti la si la*. Unless Joe divulges that it is *la* he has heard as tonic, Houlahan and Tacka cannot know whether Joe has sensed centeredness in *fa, do, re, la, or sol*.<sup>3</sup> (They have taught Schmoke, after all, that *any* syllable could represent the center.) It is not the relative system, then, that symbolizes centeredness, but the selfsame Schmoke, in pleasant conversation, and without reference to any system whatsoever.

I am amused, therefore, by Houlahan and Tacka’s admission that, in spite of their students’ ability to fabricate an array of possible solutions to my minor mode ending, after all was said and

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<sup>2</sup>Remember the way my example was originally framed. The student perceives the second pitch to be tonic, but the instructor does not yet know what the student has perceived. The instructor awaits, then, the revelation of centricity by means of syllables.

<sup>3</sup>That the same string is comfortable with other pitches functioning as tonic is shown by the following table. The last line represents the only hearing in which the second pitch has been perceived as tonal center (bold type).

| Mode       | Relative System                 | Do-Tonic System                   |
|------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Ionian     | <i>mi la ti la si la sol do</i> | <i>mi la ti la si la sol do</i>   |
| Dorian     | <i>mi la ti la si la fa re</i>  | <i>re sol la sol fi sol me do</i> |
| Phrygian   | <i>mi la ti la si la fa mi</i>  | <i>do fa sol fa mi fa ra do</i>   |
| Lydian     | <i>mi la ti la si la sol fa</i> | <i>ti mi fi mi ri mi re do</i>    |
| Mixolydian | <i>mi la ti la si la ti sol</i> | <i>la re mi re di re mi do</i>    |
| Aeolian    | <i>mi la ti la si la do la</i>  | <i>sol do re do ti do me do</i>   |

In one interpretation the relative system consistently articulates the first six pitches of the melody as “m-l-t-l-si-l,” yet students could have sensed tonal centeredness anywhere. The instructor cannot determine where, from syllables alone. But this is just the beginning. The relative system allows that the same *incipit* could have been interpreted with the four additional strings listed in my second paragraph, each of these, too, with six possible ways to hear the tonal center, for a grand total of five ways that the relativist could string together syllables with each string admitting of six possible tonal centers. Thankfully Houlahan and Tacka didn’t suggest that their students should “solve,” or hear, the half of them.

done they chose to abandon the relative system for a *do*-tonic rendering: "s-d-r-d-t-d-le-s." By so choosing, the students reveal that they have seen the Emperor's new clothes. The followers acknowledge what the leaders do not—that a *do*-tonic system is not only better oriented toward the ear but also better suited to teach the aural particulars of major and minor. If the relative solmization system has any potential for the music theory curriculum at the college level, it is, I suspect, to help students discover for themselves that there is a tonic in which the Emperor (and his relatives) might be clothed with common sense.

