

Applying Conversational Solfege to Collegiate Aural Skills Instruction

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Conversational Solfege (“CS”) is a sound-before-sight elementary music methodology developed by John Feierabend in 1995 that teaches music literacy through a twelve-step program modeled largely as a hybrid between the Kodály method and Edwin Gordon’s Music Learning Theory. Despite CS’s intended audience of music educators working with children, it applies remarkably well to the typical goals of collegiate aural skills instruction, corroborating many contemporary best practices while also offering new insights. In this article, I provide a conceptual and historical overview of the Conversational Solfege methodology and discuss its modified application to collegiate aural skills instruction, situating the methodology alongside contemporary collegiate pedagogical literature and providing applications of CS to typical collegiate aural skills topics via activities appropriate for each of the twelve steps. An appendix detailing a more thorough list of compatible activities categorized by step is included for reference.¹



Introduction

In this decade alone, aural skills instruction has enjoyed a surge of pedagogical literature including two award-winning texts, a 2021 *Music Theory Online* symposium, and *The Routledge Companion to Aural Skills Pedagogy* (Cleland & Fleet 2021).² While these publications contribute invaluable insights, parallel research in music education remains an untapped resource. This is perhaps unsurprising; after all, the aims of each profession are typically distinct. Elementary music focuses on the acquisition of fundamentals and music literacy, while collegiate literature can zoom in on advanced competencies tied to professional musicianship. Still, nearly all undergraduate curricula engage directly with these same fundamentals—aural fluency, basic Western

1 My sincerest thanks go to Dr. Cara Stroud for her support when I began this project, to Dr. Sarah Marlowe for her invaluable feedback along the way, and to Dr. Kevin Clifton for his mentorship as I prepared this manuscript. I would also like to express my gratitude toward Dr. Nick Schumacher, Dr. James Sullivan, and all the aural skills students I TA’d for at Michigan State University. Their trust, support, and open-mindedness made this all possible.

2 For the award-winning texts, see Chenette & Stevens (2022), which was awarded the 2023 Society for Music Theory Music Theory Pedagogy Award and chapters in VanHandel (2020), which was awarded the 2022 SMT Outstanding Multi-Author Publication Award.

notation—and as new ways to teach the basics are proposed in elementary contexts, deeper collaborations between music theorists and music education specialists stand to benefit all involved, including the students we share. Despite each group’s divergent goals, elementary music education literature remains a useful resource to developing collegiate aural skills pedagogy.

In this article, I propose the collegiate application of a music learning methodology called Conversational Solfege (“CS”). Used in elementary music classrooms as a “sound-before-sight” process, CS centers musical literacy built on inner musical understanding. CS features a twelve-step sequence that begins with the aural introduction of musical concepts and culminates in fluent improvisation, notation, and composition—outcomes that overlap significantly with common collegiate aural skills curricula. CS’s distinct steps scaffold skill development through a framework that helps to prevent the knowledge gaps made possible with less systematic approaches. Many collegiate pedagogy resources share easily adaptable activities and assessment strategies, but their broader application into a sequence or curricula is often left implicit. This is not to suggest that out-of-order instruction is widespread, but since aural skills frequently comprise modular, flexible activities, CS elucidates a broader frame that isolated activities do not always help construct. Many classroom activities highlighted in recent literature map neatly onto CS’s twelve steps, and aligning them to this framework can help place them in their ideal context. I like to think of the twelve CS steps as “bins” that contain various, appropriate activities, and I have found placing activities shared at conferences, workshops, or publications into their appropriate bin gives me a handy menu of lesson fragments to draw from that foreground their context in the bigger picture (e.g., of a class, unit, or semester).

The first section of this article outlines the Conversational Solfege methodology as developed by John Feierabend and carried on by others within and beyond its organizational body, the Feierabend Association for Music Education (FAME).³ I briefly situate CS in relation to the educational methodologies that inspired the framework’s foundation. In the second section, I illustrate each of the twelve steps through applied activities drawn from Feierabend, recent music theory publications, and my own experience, alongside critical commentary on philosophical and functional aims of each step. Rather than follow one topic through all twelve steps, my examples will shift across several feasible skills to give an idea of how adaptable CS is in practice. While a handful of activities appear as demonstrative examples, the appendix provides a more exhaustive list, organized by step, with tips to modify each to the desired difficulty.

3 See FAME’s website: <https://www.feierabendmusic.org>.

Conversational Solfege: Past and Present Contexts

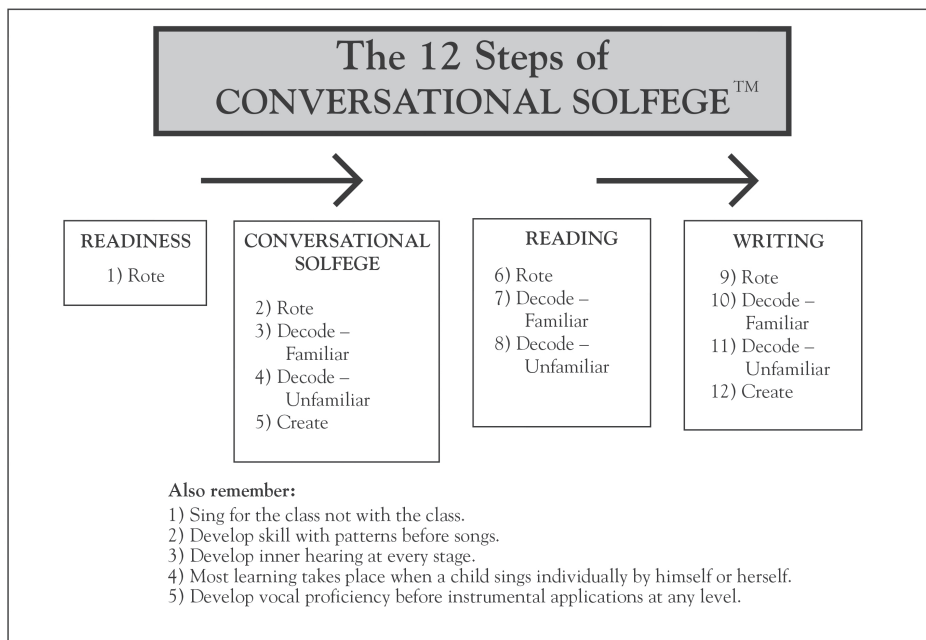
John Feierabend's Conversational Solfege first took shape in 1995, shortly following earlier works on infant music instruction.⁴ Feierabend has continued to update these texts and routinely provides supplementary materials and teaching accessories. CS's core practices are commonly shared at state and regional music education conferences, and its parent organization FAME offers multiple levels of educator certification. Outside the teaching manuals, the most comprehensive scholarship on the method appears in *Feierabend Fundamentals* (2018), coedited by Feierabend and former teacher trainer Missy Strong. The book's chapters are primarily authored by current or former FAME "Endorsed Teacher Trainers" and can lean more promotional than critical in nature, e.g., chapters like "Getting Started with a *First Steps in Music Business*." CS draws on the robust empirical data that inform Edwin Gordon's Music Learning Theory (MLT), but the *Fundamentals* text primarily validates CS through a narrative of Feierabend's experienced frustrations and breakthroughs in his early professional career. I share this to highlight that CS remains critically underexamined, likely due to its relatively small practitioner base compared with more popular methods like MLT and Kodály. Although CS has garnered infrequent critical scholarship, I believe its foundations are still exceptionally robust. In the subsequent section, I draw several parallels between CS and current best practices in collegiate aural skills to highlight how, on top of a strong philosophical foundation, CS continues to resonate with the latest ideas in collegiate aural skills pedagogy.

Example 1 reproduces the traditional outline of the twelve CS steps from Feierabend's publications. The steps are categorized into four stages beginning with exposure ("Readiness") and sound-based instruction ("Conversational Solfege") that build up to the "Reading" and "Writing" stages. In all "rote" steps, instructors model some skill or concept for the students to imitate. In "decode" steps, students translate the modeled skill or concept into the desired format—like adding solmization to neutral syllables in steps 3–4 or notating them in 10–11. And the "create" steps ask students to improvise or compose their own musical ideas.

CS's foundational roots borrow from the Kodály and MLT methodologies.⁵ A full treatment of either lies beyond the current scope of this article, but a brief overview

4 See Feierabend's *Music for Very Little People* (1986) and *Music for Little People* (1989).

5 Gordon served as Feierabend's supervisor while completing his 1983 dissertation, "The Effects of Specific Tonal Pattern Training on Singing and Aural Discrimination Abilities of First Grade Children" at Temple University.

**Example 1.**

The 12 steps of Conversational Solfege reproduced from Feierabend (2018) with permission.

will help contextualize CS and underscore its efficacy. In MLT, audiation is centered to foster and assess students' ability to demonstrate accurate inner hearing through the discrimination of similar musical patterns.⁶ MLT introduces isolated patterns first by performing them and having students echo them, both on neutral syllables. Then, the process is repeated with the appropriate solmization to connect the syllables with their musical function—a stage Gordon termed “verbal association” (Walters & Taggart 1989, 17). Like CS, these patterns are later paired with notation to foster “symbolic association” (19). But unlike CS, MLT assesses students' ability to decode only unfamiliar patterns, what Gordon labeled “generalization” (20), whereas CS begins with identifying familiar patterns. These distinctions, though, are less deliberate divergences than they are natural points where Gordon's influence gives

⁶ Throughout this article, I distinguish between “audiate” and “auralize” per Karpinski (2000, 49n56), where “auralize” means to mentally hear music in the absence of present sound, and “audiate” means to “hear and comprehend,” suggesting that successful audiation means one could decode the solfege of a melody or construct a major triad given a starting pitch, for example.

way to Kodály's.⁷

It is trickier to pin down Kodály's method to a single set of practices for comparison.⁸ Even so, many foundations are resonant with CS: both are repertoire-driven and deliberately incorporate folk music and nationally celebrated composers into their curricula. In comparing Kodály's method to CS, Feierabend identifies the following shared priorities: "teaching the music of a country to its people, developing understanding from folk song to masterworks, using effective solfege pedagogies, using singing as the primary means of introducing music literacy, and teaching with the goal of providing music for everyone" (Feierabend 2018, 192).⁹ In my experience, using singing as the primary means of introducing music literacy succinctly highlights a guiding principle for CS and my own inspiration to use it and speaks to a philosophy I am sure many aural skills instructors resonate with.

CS is also modeled largely after the three stages of Kodály's learning sequence: preparation, presentation, and practice. In the preparation stage, students encounter repertoire featuring the musical element they will gain fluency in without that element being explicitly addressed. During the presentation stage, the element is recognized and connected to appropriate terminology and symbols. In the practice stage, students integrate the new element through performance, reading from notation and writing musical ideas. The twelve steps of CS can be generally mapped onto these three stages. Example 2 illustrates this by superimposing CS's steps with dot-dash, dotted, and dashed lines corresponding to Kodály's preparation, presentation, and practice steps, respectively. This overlay highlights that CS deliberately separates listening, reading, and writing skills whereas Kodály introduces them simultaneously in its presentation and practice stages. That is, CS prioritizes aural mastery before progressing to reading, whereas Kodály introduces listening, reading, and writing all at once.¹⁰ In this respect, Conversational Solfege mirrors Kodály's structure while incorporating the philosophical emphasis on audiation characteristic of MLT.

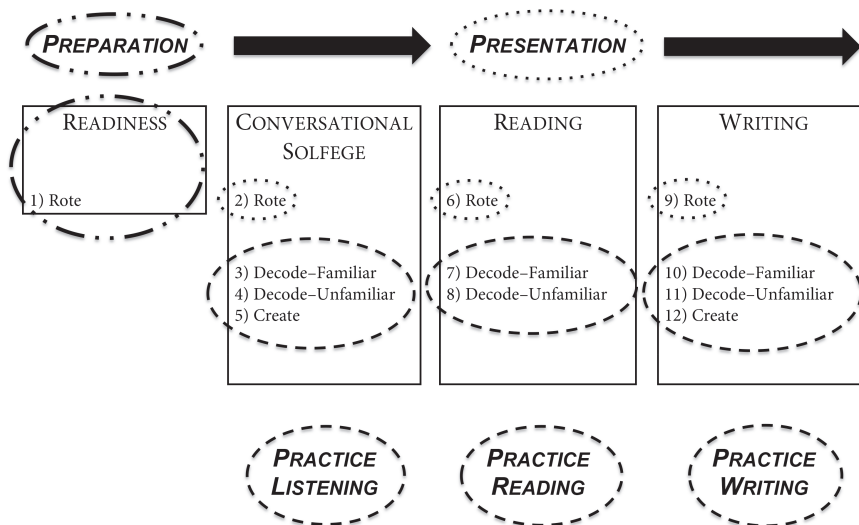
7 Marvin (2007), Walters & Taggart (1989), and Gordon (2012) offer further exploration of MLT.

8 Different pioneering collaborators, namely Jenő Ádám, Helga Szabó, and László Dobszay, have presented Kodály's general pedagogical philosophies in various ways, and the community today is still sufficiently robust to undergo continuous revision.

9 The first two items in Feierabend's list bear more than close resemblance to current meta-theoretical issues in music pedagogy. I discuss thus further in this section's closing paragraph.

10 Feierabend typically discourages progressing to the next step until most students have satisfactorily mastered the previous one, though I have seen some dedicated instructors keep records on which step each student is at for any given skill and give each instruction catered to their progress.

The 12 Steps of CONVERSATIONAL SOLFEGE™

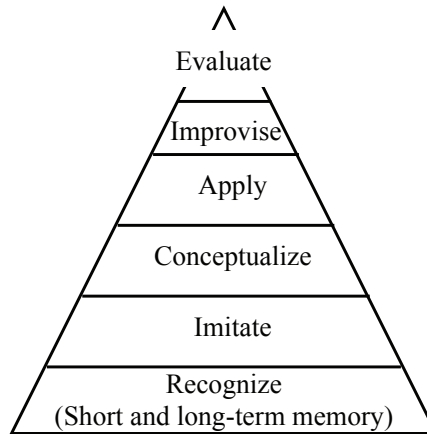


Example 2

The twelve steps of Conversational Solfege and its relation to the Kodály method, reproduced from Feierabend (2018) with permission.

The robust sequential structure CS offers is not without precedent. Deborah Rifkin and Philip Stoecker's (2011) revised taxonomy for music learning (Example 3) arranges educational objectives based on Bloom's (1956) celebrated model but adjusts some language to "better represent our understanding of how information is processed when it is presented aurally" (2011, 160). Their taxonomy guides students first through aural recognition of a phenomenon, then through recalling and imitating it, and then through conceptualizing the material analytically. The subsequent stages have students apply the concept in a musical setting, improvise within temporal constraints, and ultimately evaluate the result by some criteria. As with Bloom's original taxonomy, a sequence emerges by way of asking students to engage in progressively higher-order tasks nearer the top of the pyramid. Many parallels with CS may already be self-evident, but I will discuss some salient intersections in the following section.

Finally, I would like to address some recent controversy surrounding the FAME



Example 3

A revised taxonomy for music learning, reproduced from Rifkin & Stoecker (2011).

organization, particularly a 2019 (rev. 2021) report from its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee.¹¹ The report outlined grounds for removing songs from repertoire lists—e.g., racist history, derogatory terms, or links to minstrelsy—that many former teacher trainers I spoke with felt were inadequately addressed. Despite this, many expressed continued support for CS and a desire to separate the method from its parent organization, supplementing it with resources outlining anti-racist pedagogy and expansive repertoire initiatives. Because collegiate instructors are unlikely to use any of CS's repertoire lists, I feel this controversy is mostly irrelevant to the present discussion. That said, several teacher trainers, citing Brandi Waller-Pace, argued that problematic repertoire lists “are the fruit, not the root.”¹² Simply put, CS is designed to teach a certain body of music through a certain lens. Furthermore, CS is a method, not a curriculum.¹³ By recognizing those parts of aural skills courses CS is not meant to teach, instructors can ensure it contributes to—rather than hinders—the broadest range of possibilities for aural skills instruction.¹⁴

¹¹ Available at <https://www.feierabendmusic.org/wp-content/uploads/Diversity-Equity-and-Inclusion-Statement-Revised-2021.pdf>.

¹² <https://www.diversifythestand.org/transcripts/brandi-waller-pace>.

¹³ For collegiate-level design specifically, see Houlihan & Tacka (1990) for a suggested sequence of rhythmic and melodic topics grounded in folk music.

¹⁴ See for instance the discussion in “What Are the Truly Aural Skills?” Chenette (2021, [3.5]) for

The Twelve Steps of Conversational Solfege

Conversational Solfege teaches musical literacy through an established vocabulary of aurally introduced skills and concepts. While *concepts* refer to abstract content or desired outcomes—and *skills* their execution in practice—I reserve the term *vocabulary* to describe a selected group of example passages that illustrate a concept. My discussion will use common targeted concepts as examples without suggesting any in particular. While the elementary-gear *Teacher's Manuals* include a proposed instructional sequence, the method does not inherently require that any specific concepts are taught. Instead, it is a template onto which instructors can overlay any concept they like. CS's content-agnostic framework allows for a great deal of freedom in deciding how to use it. That said, while the “bins” of activities are handy to freely draw from, I find CS's primary contribution to be the logical sequence that emerges when the steps are done in order. The following discussion offers instructors easily applicable activities to complement what they are already doing and advocates for some CS steps that receive less attention, especially as a diagnostic tool for common student struggles.

In Example 4, I have categorized the twelve CS steps along with brief descriptions into the four general categories outlined by Feierabend. The accompanying parenthetical terms provide handy nomenclature sometimes used by CS practitioners. The “ears” step focuses exclusively on introducing authentic musical repertoire that features a targeted concept. The “mouth” steps omit notation and comprise solely aural interactions with the targeted concept. The “eyes” steps introduce reading notation—in any desired format—and establish connections to the aural sensations, while the “hands” steps shift the focus to writing notation. In addition to the overlaps with Kodály, I have mapped Rifkin and Stoecker's corresponding taxonomy stages onto the framework in brackets. This helps illustrate CS's spiraled approach: after an initial preparatory step, students progress through the taxonomy's stages three consecutive times, first by building vocal fluency, then through general literacy, and lastly by accurately notating their utterances. Rifkin and Stoecker's highest stage, *evaluation*, is not explicitly tied to any particular stage, though I will return to it when discussing step twelve. For each step, I begin with a description of its role in the original elementary context, followed by a discussion of its application to collegiate settings, paired with relevant scholarly literature that exemplifies or complements its use.

many skills poorly realized by the CS twelve-step model, such as teaching timbre, audio engineering, stylistic fluency, and large-scale forms, among others.

The Twelve Steps of Conversational Solfege			
c.f. Kodály's Preparation [Presentation] and Practice; as well as Rifkin & Stoecker's 2011 [revised music learning taxonomy]			
READINESS: ("ears")	CONVERSATIONAL SOLFEGE: ("mouth")	READING: ("eyes")	WRITING: ("hands")
1) Rote Students are aurally exposed to repertoire that features the targeted musical concept or skill.	2) Rote Students are aurally exposed to musical patterns featuring the targeted concept or skill (the targeted vocabulary) using the appropriate solmization system.	6) Rote Students are visually exposed to repertoire that features the targeted musical concept or skill.	9) Rote Students copy music notation comprising the targeted vocabulary from a model.
[Recognize]	3) Decode–Familiar Students hear musical patterns from the targeted vocabulary and echo them back using the appropriate solmization system.	7) Decode–Familiar Students read musical patterns from the targeted vocabulary and perform them using the appropriate solmization system.	10) Decode–Familiar Students are aurally exposed to musical patterns from the targeted vocabulary and notate them in the appropriate format.
	4) Decode–Unfamiliar Students hear unfamiliar musical patterns and echo them back using the appropriate solmization system.	8) Decode–Unfamiliar Students read musical patterns comparable to the targeted vocabulary and perform them using the appropriate solmization system. This is sight-reading .	11) Decode–Unfamiliar Students are aurally exposed to musical patterns comparable to the targeted vocabulary and notate them in the appropriate format. This is dictation .
	5) Create Students improvise using the targeted concept while incorporating the appropriate solmization system.		12) Create Students improvise using the targeted concept or skill and take dictation on their inner hearing. This is composition .
	[Improvise] [Apply] [Conceptualize]	[Improvise] [Apply] [Conceptualize]	[Improvise] [Apply] [Conceptualize]

Example 4
The twelve CS steps with annotated connections to Kodály and to Rifkin & Stoecker (2011).

READINESS (“Ears”): Step 1—Aurally introduce an exemplary repertoire.

Step one, *rote*, belongs to its own category, “Readiness.” In elementary settings, step one serves to introduce students to a small collection of songs through instructor modeling, often via games that link an activity to some lyrical content for memorability (and fun). Students typically engage first through passive listening and eventually begin singing along. The songs feature the targeted concept (e.g., eighth notes in simple meter), though the concept is not explicitly identified, nor is any notation provided.

The central aim is to expose students to the targeted concept through authentic musical experiences, whether through performance or listening to recordings. For young students, this step reflects the reality that instructors cannot assume prior familiarity with any given concept; with sufficiently young students, no prior knowledge can be assumed. But I also think step one heeds all instructors to remain mindful of the value of intentional exposure. Beyond challenging the assumption that mere enrollment in a collegiate music program guarantees familiarity with a predetermined canon, frontloading exemplary music before teaching abstracted concepts offers several additional benefits. For one, it combats perceptions of theory and aural skills classrooms as “sterile” and focused on abstractions at the cost of authentic musical engagement. It also centers an otherwise tacit curricular goal: that students should engage with as much music as possible, from time-tested standards to new and unfamiliar works. Priming students with authentic repertoire additionally lays the groundwork for Problem-Based Learning (PBL), or discovery learning, where students confront problems before acquiring the knowledge or skills needed to solve them.¹⁵ Done correctly, instruction emerges as a self-evident solution, rather than relying on exercises designed to justify the skill’s relevance. For instance, in a lesson on inflected scale degrees, students would first listen to music with a raised fourth before being taught the syllable *fi*. This reframes the syllable as the solution to a tonal function lacking a phoneme, rather than an arbitrary label tasked with justifying the tonal function itself.

If we expect our students to genuinely engage with—not merely identify—numerous and varied musical phenomena, then it is also our duty to showcase exemplary music whose value and relevance are self-evident. While any desired outcome depends on context—such as university demographics, department aims, or course objectives—

¹⁵ See <http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/dukerShafferStevens.html> for a three-part account of the rationale, application, and assessment strategies associated with PBL in music classrooms (Stevens, Duker, & Shaffer 2014).

it should never fall to students to determine why a topic merits instruction. If, for example, an aural skills instructor is going to teach modally mixed chords, CS requires them to begin with experiences that exemplify the topic's broadest musical potential.

Yet another benefit to incorporating this first step into one's pedagogy is that it fosters student agency in the classroom.¹⁶ Though elementary students are not typically privy to the targeted concept during step one, collegiate students could benefit from being handed some of the reins so early on. I have had success asking students to construct playlists featuring the targeted concept, typically alongside examples I provide.¹⁷ The difficulty of curating a playlist depends on the concept, but giving students agency in this step will spark a chain reaction of benefits. Students will naturally feel more connected to a topic when they can recall passages that reaffirm the musical function or enjoyment tied to the concept. In some cases, this practice can provide a handy performance aid, as when students can call to mind their own example while navigating unfamiliar passages. For example, students could supplement a list of common melodic phrases (e.g., $\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{1}$, $\hat{1}-\flat\hat{7}-\hat{1}$, $\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$, $\hat{1}-\flat\hat{7}-\flat\hat{6}-\hat{5}$) with their own chosen examples to think of when sight-reading later on. Or, students could work gradually toward a compendium of intervals tethered to function (e.g., an ascent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$) and mark each with an example they know from recordings of their choosing. This exercise can also give instructors insight into students' musical tastes, fostering stronger connections, informing future assignments, and building a growing library of examples to draw on year after year.¹⁸ What better way to make students in our classrooms feel seen than to ensure that their music is heard?

CONVERSATIONAL SOLFEGE (“Mouth”): Steps 2–5—Associate musical patterns with meaningful syllables.

Steps two through five comprise a category named, “Conversational Solfege,” often dubbed the “mouth” steps for their emphasis on vocalization. As will be made clear, these steps form a microcosm of the method in full and represent Feierabend's unique intervention compared to other methodologies. The “conversational” label specifically points to CS's resonance with “conversational language-learning model[s] wherein one first hears and works on speaking a new language before moving on to

¹⁶ Step one is resonant with the type of student agency discussed by Folse (2004), Jimenez (2016), Chenette (2018), Peebles (2020), and Burt & Duker (2022), among many others.

¹⁷ Constructing playlists have been suggested in a few different contexts within music theory / aural skills classrooms. See, for example, Burke (2013) and Alcalde (2018).

¹⁸ More anecdotally, this practice has also helped me stay present with unfamiliar and exciting artists, styles, and genres recommended by my students.

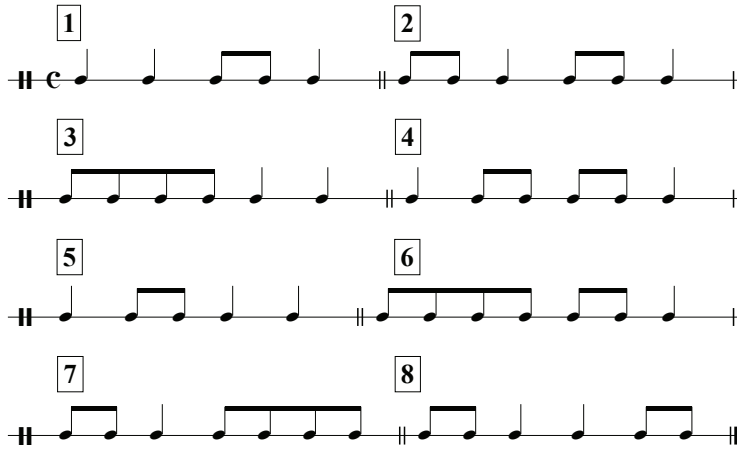
reading and writing it” (Feierabend 2018, 147).¹⁹ As such, these steps are limited to aural/oral communication and deliberately delay any kind of visual reinforcement until the desired level of fluency is reached.

In step two, *rote*, the instructor demonstrates the targeted vocabulary taken out of its broader musical context, as in Example 5, which students echo verbatim to associate syllable with function. These targeted vocabularies should be small, manageable sets of musical patterns—typically eight to sixteen total—introduced using functional syllables. CS does not prescribe any specific syllabic system, but it does require a way for students to vocalize their understanding, whether through solfege or scale degree numbers, and Takadimi or Gordon/Froseth syllables.²⁰ Elizabeth West Marvin has similarly suggested this in connection with Gordon’s conception of verbal association, stating, “[when] instructors sing on scale degree numbers and ask students to echo back on numbers ... [it] gives students the immediate verbal association of scale degree numbers with the functional role of pitches within a key” (2007, 18–19). Though redundant at first glance, the association built through repetitive echoing is critical for achieving the kind of conversational mastery CS works toward. Furthermore, building fluency in a solmization system by beginning with familiar patterns equips students to engage more confidently with unfamiliar ones later and, over time, this fluency enables students to use solmization to help navigate increasingly complex examples. By grounding aural sensations to their corresponding solmization before asking students to apply it in unfamiliar contexts, instructors reduce the extraneous cognitive load of adapting to an unfamiliar system during more advanced tasks.

For step two, I have had success with Feierabend’s “silent bouncing ball” activity. I begin by teaching my students some musical melody with lyrics by ear. If we are focusing on large diatonic leaps, I might use Caroline Shaw’s recording of “The Parting Glass,” or if the topic is chromatic neighbor tones, I really like using an inner voice from Gabriel Fauré’s “Cantique de Jean Racine.” After they feel comfortable with the melody, I write the text (but no other notation) on the board and point to the words as they sing it in time. On my signal—like flipping my marker upside-down—the students switch to silent audiation and keep track of the pitches internally so that they reenter

19 This connection to language acquisition is also the subject of Mariner & Schubert’s (2019) “Speaking Music.”

20 CS does not require any specific pitch solmization systems but, like MLT, focuses on tonal function, and so requires at least one moveable or functional system to work. See Karpinski (2000, 44–61) for an excellent overview of the cognitive support and pedagogical implementation strategies of functional solmization systems. For a thorough account of Takadimi, see Hoffman, Peltó, & White (1996) and the psychological addendum outlying its cognitive grounding in London (1996).



Example 5

A hypothetical targeted vocabulary for introducing eighth notes in simple meter.

on the accurate pitch when I flip the marker back right-side-up. In my experience, this activity is best done around half the normal tempo to encourage deliberate and thorough internalization of each pitch along the way, in addition to mitigating the clumsiness that would come from rapid switching back and forth. It is also an effective time to work on the role of inner hearing while singing with good intonation. When time is tight, I use a song all of my students know, like “Happy Birthday,” to save the time it would take to teach them something by rote, though I try to avoid this because, for many of them, learning a song purely by ear is something they rarely practice otherwise.

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In step three, *decode familiar*, the instructor presents the targeted vocabulary (as in Example 5) without functional solmization by using a neutral syllable, clapping, or playing an instrument. Students “decode” the patterns by repeating them with the appropriate functional syllables. Step four, *decode unfamiliar*, repeats this process, but with novel patterns that are similar enough for students to deduce the correct syllables. As a reminder, these steps all occur without visual aids of any kind.

Returning to Rifkin and Stoecker’s (2011) taxonomy, step three aligns with the *conceptualize* stage while step four aligns with the *apply* stage. Step three marks the first time students must match musical patterns with solmization, requiring a schematic

understanding of the music. I like that steps 3 and 4 isolate the task of linking patterns to syllables without any pressure to perform beyond imitation. And, by channeling student understanding through the instructor's chosen solmization, keeping pace with the syllables becomes a desirable difficulty rather than an additional burden. That is, when asked to sing an excerpt on specific syllables, students may wonder whether it would be easier to just use neutral syllables and may attribute the difficulty they experience to an instructor's "unreasonable" demands. But when students are asked only to convert provided patterns into a system that reveals comprehension, and neither their general musicianship nor reading skills are called into question, the correct syllables are presented as the solution, rather than a cumbersome cognitive load to bear on the way to one.

I have enjoyed trying this with my students by playing a variant of the common game "two truths and a lie" I call "two lies and a truth." First, I vocally model a brief passage on neutral syllables with three different solfege options written on the board. For example, I will sing an ascending major triad with Do-Re-Mi, Do-Mi-Sol, and Mi-Fa-Sol in view.²¹ My students indicate which iteration of the passage "told the truth" by singing it back. Once they get it, I often invite students to invent two lies and a truth on their own. This game lets me anticipate commonly conflated patterns and draw focus to their distinctions, as well as introduce a metaphor connecting solfege and truth. Later, when navigating functional solfege in modulating passages, I tell my students to modulate their solfege once it feels like their syllables are beginning to "lie."

Feierabend additionally suggests an activity called "mixed signals" where students perform a rehearsed passage on a neutral syllable but switch to functional syllables upon the instructor's signal, perhaps through a clap (2018, 26).²² With collegiate students, I have substituted neutral syllables with student-invented song lyrics to make it more engaging, while also making the switching task slightly more difficult. Though challenging, having students simultaneously juggle lyrics and functional syllables closely resembles the task choristers face when sight-singing texted vocal melodies.

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21 The syllables are written, and not vocalized, out of an abundance of caution to avoid reinforcing incorrect verbal associations during deliberate mismatches.

22 Note: this is the same as the earlier step two "silent bouncing ball" activity, except it alternates between neutral and functional syllables, instead of neutral syllables and silent audiation.

Step five, *create*, introduces improvisation based on the targeted concept or skill and may be implemented in various ways depending on the nature of the skill being taught. When I taught elementary students, I often had students take turns improvising one or two measures that incorporated a mix of familiar and unfamiliar realizations of the targeted concept, typically over an ostinato or other stable musical framework.²³ Because student improvisation ideally leans toward the exploration of unfamiliar patterns, it is not always necessary that students improvise using solmization systems. Letting them decode after the improvisation reduces the main task's cognitive load density and allows students to focus on musicality in real-time, unburdened by the need to think in syllables.²⁴ When my students improvise live with syllables, I find they often improvise overly simple patterns because more complex ones exceed their syllabic fluency, and not necessarily their musicianship. I remind my students that these are two different skills, aware that they safeguard their musicality more personally, even emotionally, than their syllabic fluency. Post-improvisation decoding often elevates the musicality in classroom activities, creating a positive feedback loop that enriches nearly every element of instruction. Even so, I use improvisation without syllables to scaffold toward improvisation with them, working toward the conversational fluency central to CS.²⁵

When teaching elementary music, I used an activity Feierabend suggests called, “the straw that broke the camel’s back” where I arranged my students in a circle with one, the “camel,” placed in the middle (2018, 34). The students around the circle took turns contributing brief (two-measure) improvised patterns while the “camel”

23 With collegiate students, I can gladly report success incorporating minimalist, drone, ambient, and EDM tracks to provide metrically and/or rhythmically stable accompaniments to student improvisation. Student favorites have included recordings by Brian McBride, Nala Sinephro, Laurie Spiegel, Max Richter, and Philip Glass.

24 On music theory pedagogy and cognitive load theory, see VanHandel (2012, 2020).

25 Of course, this desired conversational fluency comes at the expense of how much content can be realistically covered. The time required for students to be improvisationally fluent in skills to a point where they can improvise equally well with or without syllables drastically limits the total number of skills they can feasibly acquire. On this issue, CS leans toward limiting content to achieve true mastery of fundamentals. On this point, Karpinski writes: “By developing strong basic skills and by correcting the basic causes of aural difficulties (not merely by addressing the symptoms), we establish a solid foundation on which to build further skills with ease and fluency” (2000, 7). Furthermore, Brian Alegant’s (2014) “scuba diving” essay provides a useful metaphor and thoughtful account of a “less-is-more” approach in music theory instruction, and Garrett Michaelsen’s (2019) “Teaching with Radical Optimism: Mastery Learning in Music Theory,” offers further thoughts on the benefits of a pedagogical approach that values mastery sometimes at the expense of content covered.

repeated the entire pattern sequence, combining each new pattern into a longer and longer stream. When the camel could no longer successfully recall the full sequence, the last student who contributed a pattern replaced them in the middle and the game reset.

When Jan Miyake visited our music theory pedagogy course at Michigan State University in January 2023, she introduced a similar game my own students subsequently named “too many composers.” Students stand in a circle, and the instructor assigns one to improvise a brief pattern that is subsequently echoed around the circle, in time, one by one. As the pattern makes its way around, the instructor selects a second student to improvise a different pattern that simultaneously makes its way around. Based on the number of students in the circle, several unique patterns can continue at once, and the instructor can devise situations where students must perform one passage while simultaneously listening to the student beside them for what they must immediately perform next. I have found the kind of difficulty this game introduces typically brings more grins than frowns, and so I often continue ramping up the difficulty until things inevitably collapse. If an instructor is covering both pitch- and rhythm-based units in class, it can be especially fun (and challenging) to incorporate patterns of both types at once within the circle.²⁶

Step five is also compatible with Timothy Chenette’s suggested melody updating tasks devised to target students’ working memories (2018, 12). Chenette writes, “[W]e might imagine giving students a melody, either in notation (for students who are fairly fluent at auralizing from a score) or aurally. Then we might ask them to silently replace specific tones in that melody with other tones. After a (probably small) number of such swaps, students could be asked to compare their results with their neighbor or sing them for the teacher.” For example, after priming students with “Yankee Doodle,” an instructor could ask them to swap all $\hat{3}$ s with $\hat{5}$, or to swap the opening $\hat{1}-\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}$ ascent with $\hat{1}-\hat{1}-\hat{3}-\hat{5}$. To align with CS’s step five, the melody would need to be presented aurally, though a notated version would work at step twelve. I have also experimented with having students improvise brief, original patterns, and then I silently introduce visual instructions listing rules their passage needed to follow. For example, students silently imagine a two- or four-measure rhythmic pattern, and I introduce written rules such as: measure two must have exactly five notes; or that no two measures can be identical; or that measure four must be the retrograde of measure two. Students can then share their solution aloud using functional solmization. Given

26 In any pitch-based version of this game, there will need to be some further structure—like a I-V-I harmonic pattern—to avoid excessive dissonance once enough different patterns are going at once.

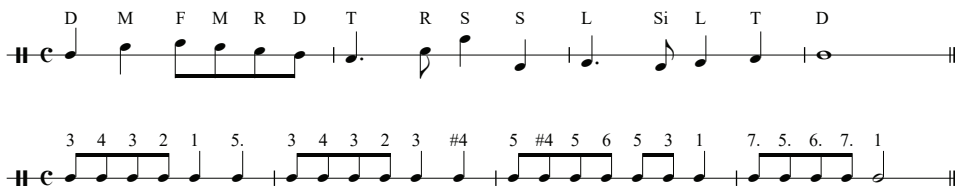
that each student’s response will be unique, you can keep students engaged by asking those not sharing their response to pay attention to a specific rule and make sure others’ responses adhere to it. Either way, activities that require students to hold and manipulate a musical idea in their working memories directly scaffold the skills needed later for successful dictation.

READING (“Eyes”): Steps 6–8—Associate sound with sight.

In the next category—reading, or the “eyes” steps—students encounter the targeted concept in standard notation or some alternative visualization. Even visual-kinesthetic formats, like Curwen hand signs which use different hand shapes for each scale degree, would not be introduced until these steps. In step six, *rote*, students hear and see familiar patterns from the targeted vocabulary and engage with them using functional syllables to reinforce the link between the syllables and notation. The instructor performs targeted vocabulary patterns aloud with appropriate solmization, and students echo them on those same syllables.

The shift to notation after prolonged aural-only instruction introduces a thorny problem: students need to understand how abstract functions map onto precise pitches when notated in a given key. In other words, even if a student could perfectly comprehend a heard passage’s rhythm and pitch content using functional syllables, they cannot convert that understanding into standard notation without some idea of key signatures and proper spelling because standard notation does not typically support abstracted information. The CS manuals offer little guidance on this leap, likely because it rarely arises in elementary classrooms. Presumably, however, collegiate instructors will want students to understand *how*—not merely *that*—the same melody is represented in different ways depending on the key. Instructors will address this hurdle differently depending on the needs of their students and their course objectives, but for those sticking closely to the CS method, using protonotation helps bridge this gap between the “mouth” and “eyes” steps.

Example 6 shows a protonotation system that preserves metric and rhythmic information, with each letter or number representing a unique solfege syllable or scale degree; full spelling or accidentals are provided for chromatically altered pitches. Rather than reflecting pitch contour like in the top system, the bottom system places all pitches on one staff line, reducing the guidance from visual cues alone. This approach requires additional markers to resolve ambiguities, such as which octave a pitch occurs in, which I show with a period. This additional step to hold off on absolute pitch information brings some pedagogical benefits, especially for older



Example 6

Two approaches to performance-based protonotation.

students. Elizabeth West Marvin argues that delaying absolute pitch information prevents students with absolute pitch (AP) from eschewing the relative/functional pitch skills cultivated by this kind of methodology (2007). When students with AP use moveable solfege or scale degree numbers, they must think functionally instead of merely reproducing isolated pitches. Even so, functional singing alone does not prepare students to convert functional syllables into absolute pitch information given a tonic or key signature. Students singing in unfamiliar clefs, for example, may use several tricks to “pretend” they are in another key and mask their ignorance of the absolute pitches they are singing through their functional solmization. For some instructors, this is amended by introducing non-functional systems, such as fixed-do. In fact, a fixed system is another means of addressing the gap between “mouth” and “eyes” steps separately from function-based protonotation by ensuring that students also work on mapping their functional awareness onto specific keys.²⁷

*

In step seven, *decode familiar*, we find a CS step rarely practiced in conventional collegiate aural skills. Here, the instructor silently displays familiar notated patterns from the targeted vocabulary that students match to the correct functional solmization, typically by singing the patterns on the appropriate syllables. Essentially, step seven is sight-reading where the students are intimately familiar with the patterns despite having never seen them notated. Although it may appear redundant, this step is crucial for scaffolding standard sight-reading in step eight, which can be one of the most stressful aspects of aural skills for students. But a generous interpretation of step seven also makes room for creative alternatives that demonstrate understanding

27 However, using both fixed and moveable do risks confusing the same set of syllables between two separate phenomena, hence the need for non-overlapping systems, like functional solfege syllables with fixed letter names, or functional scale degree numbers with fixed-do solfege.

and notational literacy without necessarily having to perform.²⁸

For example, I have addressed step seven by performing familiar patterns and briefly flashing four possible notated answers on a board to foster rapid identification skills—essentially “multiple choice” dictation. Having to hold the heard passage in mind while reviewing four options is a nice way to work on the working memory skills students will rely on in later, trickier dictation assignments. I have also given students short, notated passages and then performed parts incorrectly, having them detect errors that deliberately feature common mistakes. Students marked areas that I performed incorrectly and then performed the notation back as it should sound. Limiting the class to familiar patterns also makes other, normally challenging activities—like clapping and chanting two-part rhythms—more approachable when the musical material is restricted to patterns the students have seen in the previous six steps.

*

Step eight, *decode unfamiliar*, repeats step seven with novel, but comparably similar, examples. Since this step involves performing unfamiliar notated patterns using functional solmization, Feierabend aptly notes that “this step is frequently called *sight-reading*” (2001, 12). Like step seven, a key benefit of CS is its broad approach to decoding unfamiliar notation, of which traditional sight-singing is one option of many. Step eight assesses students’ ability to connect unfamiliar written patterns with their auditory realizations, and instructors have several assessment options beyond standard sight-reading, including the rapid identification activity described earlier. (Perform an unfamiliar passage and then quickly show four possibilities for students to choose from on the board.) This flexibility is useful when instructors wish to avoid students performing solo in front of peers, to accommodate students with vocal difficulties (e.g., illness to post-transition challenges), or to gradually scaffold toward more performance-heavy sight-reading later on. Additional strategies appear in the appendix.

WRITING (“Hands”): Steps 9–12—Transfer reading skills to writing skills.

In the final stages—writing, or the “hands” steps—students begin to notate patterns. In step nine, *rote*, students view familiar notated patterns and practice copying them, performing them aloud before and/or after copying them down to once

²⁸ To be clear, step seven accommodates many types of activities, of which standard read-and-sing is only one. I still find this type of activity highly valuable but prefer to focus on how step seven also allows for other activities that target the same skill in a lower-stakes environment.

again reinforce the connection between sound and notation. While traditionally this involves standard Western notation, I have used this step with lead sheets, Nashville numbers, and other formats with positive results. In fact, it was precisely when students were diligently copying a Nashville Number sheet once in class that they thought to ask curious questions about its design I suspect they might otherwise have been reluctant to share.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the collegiate pedagogical literature I surveyed adequately addresses step nine. With such little time with our students, dedicating even a handful of minutes to have students simply copy notation as it already appears may seem wasteful. At first glance, this step appears to be a relic of its elementary design—I can confirm my own elementary music teaching included ample instruction on how to draw quarter and eighth notes—but step nine holds considerable value for collegiate students, too. Even older students with exemplary reading abilities frequently struggle to notate musical passages. In many textbooks, fundamental engraving concepts, such as standard stem lengths and the ordered placement of key and time signatures, receive little or no dedicated mention and are expected to be learned primarily in passing. Step nine offers the opportunity for brief “crash courses” on music notation fundamentals. Depending on students’ prior knowledge, I have used step nine to attend to more nuanced elements of engraving such as duration-based horizontal spacing or how to avoid ambiguities when the first iteration of a pitch receives an accidental but the same pitch class in a different octave is unmarked. When I have brought in real passages featuring such ambiguities, it often led to lively debates which proved to me that time on step nine is well spent.

*

In step ten, *decode familiar*, the instructor models familiar patterns from the targeted vocabulary for students to notate. Step ten is tantamount to dictation restricted to patterns intimately familiar to the student. In step eleven, *decode unfamiliar*, students progress to unfamiliar patterns, and Feierabend notes that “this step is frequently called *dictation*” (2001, 12). Take note: in both steps, students demonstrate that they can notate their inner hearing, and not necessarily that their inner hearing is correct. This subtle distinction highlights an important element of the carefully ordered twelve-step procedure. When viewing a submitted dictation assignment with errors, the instructor must first identify which of the previous steps has caused the struggle. A correctly heard passage with notational errors indicates the need to revisit steps nine or ten, but inaccurate inner hearing suggests the student

should return to step three or four.²⁹ While idealistic, CS posits that students should struggle only with the new challenge introduced on the current step, which in step nine is not accurate audiation, but merely the accurate notation of one's audiation. It is rare that students have correctly heard a passage but make some mistake notating it, but it is possible (e.g., clef-related errors, spelling errors, scale degree errors, etc.) and instructors could generally classify such as step nine to eleven errors.

The appendix includes one game I frequently used as an elementary educator, which I find scales smoothly to collegiate instruction called "poison pattern." In standard "poison pattern" (sometimes called forbidden pattern), the instructor presents students with a prompt they must remember and subsequently avoid. With young students, I led a rapid call-and-response echo task where I sang on neutral syllables and students echoed on decoded syllables. If a student echoed the "poison pattern" by mistake, they were "out." With collegiate students, I write a short, forbidden pattern on the board and let them silently determine how it should sound. I increase the difficulty by embedding the poison pattern within a longer sequence, requiring students to extract and omit only the forbidden section. I have also experimented with an abstracted poison concept rather than just a single pattern. For example, I could sing an antecedent phrase and students would need to notate it while simultaneously omitting the forbidden pattern, e.g., any minor triad arpeggiations. If the forbidden pattern exemplifies the targeted concept, which it typically should, dictating a passage becomes simpler since the students do not need to notate the pattern but merely identify and omit it. Thus, it is probably best to start with "poison pattern" dictations and then follow up with more standard ones.

*

Like step five, the twelfth and final step, *create*, provides students musical contexts where they may improvise using the targeted concept. The difference from step five is that students now notate their musical ideas after performing them. As Feierabend suggests, notating one's inner hearing "is frequently called *composition*" (2001, 12). I find that viewing this step as taking dictation of one's inner hearing distinguishes it from the view of composition, heavily mediated by theoretical knowledge, that some of my students think "real" composition comprises. I strive to prove to them that their ears and musicality alone, when properly channeled, already qualify them to be

29 Gary Karpinski dedicates substantial time to outlining what instructors may make of various kinds of errors in melodic dictation that, without using a comparable "step" process, nevertheless clearly identify where a student's misunderstanding lies (2000, 63-64), what kind of feedback instructors can offer, and how to evaluate the submission as a gradable assignment (103-110).

real composers! At its simplest, step twelve in elementary classrooms typically has students improvise a short pattern and then notate it. In collegiate classrooms, step twelve could privilege audiation over “written theory” knowledge via a hypothetical end-of-semester project where students set a brief text, like a poem, to music.

For this project, instructors could ask students to procure a melody with accompaniment for a given text, which can be easily scaffolded through multiple smaller stages. Students might first record themselves reading the poem aloud several times and dictate the rhythm of their favorite take. This increases the likelihood of finding a naturally flowing rhythmic setting, although some time would need to be spent on prosody beforehand. Next, students could improvise melodies for that rhythm in small chunks, one or two measures at a time, and again notate their favorite take. Additionally, students could analyze the harmonies suggested by their melody and add accompaniment. The crucial part of the process is that students learn to harvest music from a text they have analyzed themselves, rather than merely justify a composer’s choices in an already-completed passage. For example, perhaps instructors would like students to attempt an ironic setting of a poem by deliberately misconstruing the traditional way to interpret it. If instructors give them a text that has already been set to music, it could be enriching to withhold showing students that setting until they have devised their own, so that they can better speculate why the composer made the choices they did. Either way, setting a text through a series of improvised segments helps demystify the compositional process and disabuses notions that successful composition arises only from complex theoretical deliberation.

Feierabend also suggests an activity titled “answer the question” that is especially well-fit to teach small phrase forms like periods and sentences. In its simplest form, students receive a worksheet with the first halves of musical phrases (the “question”) that the student must notate an “answer” for. In my own teaching, I have provided students with notated antecedent phrases that they read, and then internally composed and notated consequent phrases for. The full class performed the incipit while selected students volunteered to sing their conclusion, which the rest of the students attempted to notate. After looking to mitigate the pressure of performing alone in front of the class, I devised a spin on this game I call “Did you get that?” In this iteration, students partner up and take turns improvising smaller sections of a larger form that the other student must notate for them. This has worked best with repetitive forms like rounded binary, where student 1 improvises an antecedent which student 2 notates and then improvises a consequent, which student 1 notates, and so on. Then, when they arrive at the return to A’, I encourage them to reimagine their

earlier phrases with an eye toward variation and surprise, impressing on them the interest composers can sustain when balancing familiarity with novelty.

Example 4, the earlier outline of all twelve steps alongside their matching stages in Rifkin and Stoecker's (2011) revised taxonomy, did not explicitly pair any of the twelve steps with their highest-order stage, *evaluation*, where students assess their own utterances. In fact, both of CS's "create" steps, five and twelve, may address the evaluation taxonomy stage. For instance, the earlier text-setting project asks students to improvise multiple interpretations for each line *and* to choose their preferred attempt. CS steps could separate these objectives, but improvisation and evaluation are difficult to tease apart in practice. Step twelve essentially merges them; students improvise, then notate their improvisation, which helps check for errors and invites a broader self-evaluation when deciding whether to keep or revise a pattern. Sometimes rapid evaluation occurs even before improvisations manifest aloud when students decide which of multiple ideas they decide to perform. In short, Rifkin and Stoecker's revised taxonomy is useful, but does not map perfectly onto the CS steps, and labeling step twelve simply as "improvisation/evaluation" would miss this nuance. Instructors should foster moments of metacognitive evaluation—and indeed all the taxonomy's stages—throughout their curricula, not just at particular CS steps. Even so, step twelve remains a natural point for both improvisation and meaningful evaluation.

One final point about the twelve-step process: while the text setting example positioned the twelfth step as a final project, this is incidental. In practice, instructors move students through the twelve steps for many concepts and skills, often at different stages simultaneously, sometimes progressing through multiple steps in a matter of minutes, and sometimes across a full multi-week unit of course meetings. At its simplest, step twelve could entail a brief improvisation activity where students notate their idea after performing it out loud. Again, Conversational Solfege is not a curriculum but an especially handy chisel to keep in the aural skills toolbox. Like a chisel, it cannot build the whole house—it is not meant to—but when it comes to teaching music literacy, CS guarantees a solid foundation of inner hearing that sets every student up for success.

Conclusion

My goal in this article has been to demonstrate the broad applicability of the Conversational Solfege framework to collegiate-level aural skills instruction. While CS shares significant methodological overlap with contemporary best practices—evident

in the alignment of their respective literatures—it additionally offers scaffolding for some of aural skills’ central pillars. For example, CS ensures ample time dedicated to building fluency with small sets of exemplary patterns and allowing students to rehearse difficult tasks, like sight-singing, by first previewing them through familiar patterns. It additionally isolates tasks, like notating music, as standalone steps before adding the challenge of dictating unfamiliar passages.

I hope framing already-established aural skills activities within CS’s twelve steps offers a practical outline for course sequence design in collegiate aural skills courses. Contemporary pedagogy—across books, journals, conferences, and workshops—abounds with thoughtful activities, assessment strategies, and assignments, though sometimes without clear guidance on the context in which they are most effective. While that context may seem sufficiently intuitive as to remain implicit, I believe that situating such activities within a well-formed framework can optimize their use and that CS provides exactly that framework.

I further hope that readers who see the value of applying CS to their instruction are encouraged to engage regularly with music education journals, texts, and conferences across all age levels. Excellent pedagogy tends to remain excellent pedagogy regardless of its target age demographic, as I hope this overview of CS makes clear. And as the pedagogical practices within the field of music theory become continuously refined, the need to adopt wider-lensed scholarship on teaching and learning will follow. Much of this is already underway. Although music education and music theory pedagogy often pursue disparate aims, their shared concerns—such as aural skills acquisition—make it worthwhile to minimize redundancy and avoid digging two tunnels to the same place, so to speak.

Lastly, I direct interested readers to the appendix which lists aural skills activities and assessment strategies categorized by CS step. The list represents my effort to situate activities from various pedagogical sources within the CS framework, alongside modifications for activities drawn from Feierabend, other music theorists, or those I have found handy in my own teaching. The list is a static and incomplete snapshot, but I hope it serves as a useful starting point for instructors exploring ways to integrate CS into their practice.

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Appendix

This appendix lists appropriate collegiate aural skills activities organized by step according to the framework laid out by Conversational Solfege. The activities—sourced from John Feierabend, music theory pedagogy scholarship, and me—are cited where possible, though the list is far from comprehensive and many of the more generic activities are harder to cite. In two cases (Steps 3–4 and Steps 7–8), the only difference is the use of either familiar (3 & 7) or unfamiliar (4 & 8) musical patterns, and so the activities for these steps are combined with underlines to distinguish one from the other.

Step 1 (rote): Introduce students to authentic musical experiences that involve the targeted vocabulary.

Playlists: Task students with discovering musical works on their own that feature the targeted concept. Additionally, you may task them with brief writing assignments to describe the affect of the concept in that particular context. (See Burke 2013 & Alcalde 2018 for more).

Timestamps: Provide students with recordings of passages that feature the targeted concept and have them mark the timestamp(s) where it occurs.

Guided listening: While listening to a piece of music, ask students to react in real time (raise hand / clap) when the targeted concept occurs.

Step 2 (rote): Model for students a selected group of musical phrases that demonstrate the targeted concept on an appropriate solmization system.

Echo me: Perform a musical pattern from the targeted vocabulary on functional syllables and have students echo it back verbatim (Feierabend 2001).

“Swiss cheese” patterns: After performing a complete pattern from the targeted vocabulary on functional syllables, perform it again with some parts left out, and have students audiate or sing the missing parts. Feierabend (2001) calls this “the missing link.”

Sound per syllable: Perform a passage from the targeted vocabulary on functional syllables and have students map different syllables to kinesthetic responses, e.g., claps, snaps, and taps (Feierabend 2001).

Silent bouncing ball: Illustrate a musical pattern from the targeted vocabulary in text (not notation) and have students sing it in real time as the text is pointed to. Upon some signal from the instructor, students substitute vocalization for audiation. The instructor may swap back and forth multiple times to encourage continuous audiation.

Steps 3/4 (decode familiar/unfamiliar): Perform familiar/novel patterns from/similar to the targeted vocabulary for students without functional solmization and have them echo back using the correct solmization.

Decode: Perform patterns on a neutral syllable and have students echo the pattern back with the appropriate solmization.

Two lies and a truth: Perform three distinct patterns on neutral syllables while pointing to one solmization pattern written (as text) that matches one of the three patterns, and then have students sing back the pattern that matches the written syllables. Or, perform one pattern while pointing to three possible written patterns.

Mixed signals: After modeling a passage for students on neutral syllables, have them echo it back, alternating between functional and neutral syllables based on an instructor cue, like a clap or wave (Feierabend 2001).

Rapid fire: Over a tonic drone, play individual pitches on an instrument that students must echo back as quickly as possible using the appropriate syllables (Feierabend 2001). Increase the difficulty with faster tempo or brief patterns of multiple notes. Increase the difficulty further by instead giving the students a static interval away from the prompt they must respond on (e.g., students must respond a diatonic third below the given note).

“Not quite” echoes: After modeling a passage for students on neutral syllables, have them echo it back with some fixed set of changes they must implement. For example, swap all scale degrees 1 and 5, or omit all scale degree 7s (Feierabend 2001).

Chunking: Perform a few different patterns on neutral syllables that students echo on functional syllables until they are all committed to memory. For each pattern, provide a label (A, B, C...). Then, write a string of letters on the board (A, C, C, D, B) and have students perform the full “phrase.” This scaffolds teaching phrase structures and other larger formal designs (see Chenette 2018).

“Sequencify”: Provide a basic tonal pattern on a neutral syllable that students echo on functional syllables, repeating it by some sequential pattern, e.g., shifting it a diatonic step, or a perfect fourth, each time. (Feierabend 2001 calls this “sequence this.”)

Crazy canons: Perform a simple melody on neutral syllables broken into equally sized units (e.g., two or four beats) and instruct students to echo one unit later using functional syllables. Students thus create a canon, but must continue to listen and decode the instructor’s melody as they echo.

Poison pattern: Deem some specific pattern or musical element “poisoned” (e.g., lowered scale degree six, or the + of beat 3). Then, improvise various patterns on

neutral syllables that students echo with functional solmization, but must omit the poisoned pattern or element. Feierabend (2001) calls this the “forbidden pattern.”

Step 5 (create): Have students improvise aloud original musical phrases incorporating the targeted concept.

Slowly changing patterns: Elect one student to begin by improvising a brief pattern using functional solmization. In a pre-determined order, each following student improvises a new pattern, changing only one element from the previous student’s utterance.

Too many rules: Have students begin by silently audiating an original pattern under some guidelines (i.e., meter/modality/length). Then, provide new rules one by one that the pattern must follow (e.g., no two measures may have the same number of notes, every tonic pitch must be preceded by a dominant pitch). Students internally adjust their pattern to meet each rule as it appears and are invited to perform their final pattern after all the rules are established.

Buzzer beater: With a metronome at a slow tempo, students improvise a brief pattern on functional syllables with the beat, followed by the next student, and so on. If a student errs, they leave the circle, until one winner remains. (Feierabend 2001 calls this “beat the clock.”)

Melody updating task: Beginning with an established pattern (familiar or improvised), provide written/verbal instructions for the students to gradually update the model. Chenette (2018) presents this using familiar melodies and thus specific correct modifications, like changing a specific fixed pattern to something new.

Modular loops: Arrange students in multiple circles and have the members of each circle improvise a brief pattern using functional solmization, one after another (a loud metronome is best to keep each circle together). Students repeat their original utterance when the circle returns to them, creating loops. Then, elect students from different circles to swap places at random so the loops change.

Don’t echo me: Students toss around a beanbag and improvise patterns on functional syllables, prohibited from echoing the pattern given by the student who threw the beanbag to them. (Feierabend 2001 calls this “don’t repeat me.”)

The straw that broke the camel’s back: Arrange students in a circle with one (the camel) in the center. One student in the circle improvises a short pattern on neutral syllables that the camel repeats on functional syllables. Then the next student in the circle improvises their own short pattern, and the camel must perform the first pattern again and then decode the new pattern in one continuous stream. When the camel can no longer remember the full pattern and errs, the student in the circle

who improvised the most recent pattern becomes the new camel and the game resets (Feierabend 2001).

Too many composers: Arrange students in a circle and have one improvise a pattern that is then passed around the circle in time, student by student. As the original pattern goes around, select another student to improvise a new pattern that also is sent around the circle. Continue selecting more students to improvise additional patterns with the ultimate goal that each student has contributed one—meaning each student is passing a pattern to one side while simultaneously receiving the next pattern from the other side. Increase the difficulty (and fun!) by incorporating both rhythmic and melodic patterns together (Jan Miyake 2024, live demonstration).

Retrograde patterns: Perform tonal patterns on an isochronous rhythm that students echo back in reverse order. Increase the difficulty by modifying the rhythm which the students keep invariant while still performing the pitches in reverse order (Feierabend 2001).

Step 6 (rote): Introduce students to notation that illustrates the targeted concept in visual form

Read patterns: Perform familiar patterns from the targeted vocabulary aloud using functional solmization from notation and have students echo them (Feierabend 2001).

Steps 7/8 (decode familiar/unfamiliar): Have students perform familiar/novel musical patterns from/similar to the targeted vocabulary aloud from notation using functional solmization.

Error detection: Perform a pattern aloud on neutral syllables from notation with mistakes (treat the written notation version as correct). Students identify the error and perform the notated passage on functional syllables as written.

Rapid ID: Show multiple brief notated passages at once and perform only one aloud on neutral syllables. Students identify which was performed and echo it back using functional solmization. To increase the difficulty, do not make any of the notated passages visible until you have already finished performing one aloud (Feierabend 2001).

Telephone: Students receive a small card with two notated passages (A & B) on one side. For each card, one “A” pattern is another student’s “B” pattern. One student performs their “B” pattern on neutral syllables, and the student with the matching “A” pattern repeats it using functional solmization and then performs their own “B” pattern on neutral syllables (Feierabend 2001).

Omit by type: Students perform a longer passage written in notation but silently audiate some property of the passage (e.g., different students may not sing various scale degrees).

Canon clapping: Students vocalize a rhythmic passage on functional syllables but must also clap the same pattern some number of beats after their voice. Decrease difficulty by delegating each task to different students. Increase difficulty by increasing the duration separating vocalization and clapping.

Two-part rhythms: Students vocalize on functional syllables and clap two distinct notated rhythms concurrently.

Read ahead: Students perform from a notated passage using functional solmization, but the instructor blocks out the notation some amount of time beforehand, forcing students to read ahead. Increase the difficulty by blocking out notation further in advance.

Guess the tune: Students are divided into groups, and the instructor notates two notes of a familiar melody. Each group may guess the title the melody is from and, if none guess correctly, the instructor adds another note, and each group may guess again. Students should not vocalize the melody aloud until the game is up, relying instead on silent audiation. In classrooms using Curwen hand signs, the game may be modified to use those instead. Students may, of course, also offer their own melodies to demonstrate (Feierabend 2001).

Rising tide: Students read a notated melodic passage aloud using functional solmization. Then, on each subsequent performance, the instructor “raises the water” and students must leave out notes below a certain threshold and audiate them instead. Inversely, the instructor can “lower the curtain” to omit higher notes instead (Feierabend 2001).

Step 9 (rote): *Have students copy by hand notation featuring the targeted concept and then perform what they have notated.*

Copy notation: The instructor displays notation that students copy by hand and perform afterward. Time may be spent highlighting subtler elements of the notation (e.g., how beaming works in different meters, where cautionary accidentals are necessary, etc.).

Steps 10/11 (decode familiar/unfamiliar): *Perform a familiar/novel musical phrase from/similar to the targeted vocabulary without functional solmization and have students notate what they heard.*

Standard dictation: Perform a musical passage that students subsequently notate.

Reinforce understanding by having students perform the passage using functional solmization afterward.

Error detection: Perform patterns incorrectly from notation (but now treat the performance as correct and the notation as incorrect). Students notate a revised version and then perform from it using functional solmization.

Written poison pattern: Perform a musical passage that students subsequently notate, but mark some pattern or element as “poisonous” that students must omit and leave blank. The poisonous element may be a specific pattern, or a general concept like dominant harmony arpeggiation or intervals of a major sixth (Feierabend 2001).

Step 12 (Create): Have students improvise original musical phrases aloud that incorporate the targeted concept and then notate their utterance.

Answer the question: Provide students with a sheet that notates multiple incomplete phrases and have them devise a suitable conclusion (like an antecedent and consequent phrase). Then, have the entire class perform the given incipit aloud and elect students to take turns performing their responses, all using functional solmization (Feierabend 2001). If students are providing confident and accurate answers, you can task others with dictating what they heard.

Exquisite corpses: In small groups, have students compose some small unit of a passage in notation, and then pass it along to the next student to continue or complete. (This is most effective under parameters like phrase form, or where each student is responsible for outlining some specific harmony in advance).

Did you get that?: In pairs, have students notate musical passages by improvising a short pattern on neutral syllables that their partner must notate. The partner then improvises the next part of the phrase, which the other student must now notate for them. (This works best with some parameter, like building toward some small-scale form or with a predetermined harmonic “roadmap” by the instructor.)

Set text: Assign students a brief passage of text for which they must improvise/compose a rhythmic or melody. This activity can be used to focus on prosody, text painting, or even deeper compositional tools like irony or changing the meaning of the text through a careful setting.