

# Teaching Vocal Sight Reading from Medieval Times through to the 20th Century: Crucial Points for Methodology

*Lucio Ivaldi, choir director and instructor*

Many aspects related to ancient song have yet to be studied adequately. As Bruno Baudissone argues:

The recovery of ancient music and its practices began with instruments, whereas the subject of ancient singing was approached much later. Let us not forget that, during the time in which ancient music was contemporary, instruments served the voice; today, it is just the opposite: the voice follows instrumental practices, a fact that holds true even in the performance of ancient music. Through the years, an error has led to the absence of serious research on ancient vocal music: namely, it has been believed that, to get at ancient vocal art, it is enough to distance oneself from Romantic and Realist practice (Baudissone, *La vocalità antica*, in *Orfeo, mensile di musica antica e barocca*; Florence, 1996).

The teaching of music during the medieval era was shaped by the need to form good singers for the mass and daily offices. Around the turn of the first millennium, there were several thousand complex melodic pieces at the disposal of the *cantor*, with considerable regional variation. The orderly arrangement of music on the basis of *tonaria* responded to mnemonic aims more than a desire for classification, *per se*: the thematic, indexed element was always the formula of the beginning of the melody (*tonaria* arranged by *incipit*), rather than its modal outcome (*tonaria* arranged by *finalis*). The liturgical legacy

of the early middle ages included the daily practice of song as a form of prayer and as a contribution to religious services; it was in this context that the practices of *cantillatio* and of the recitation of psalmodic tones developed. Here, too, mnemonic aspects in the arrangement of material are evident: from cantillation based upon the principal *recitation tone* sprung the *incipit*, *mediatio* and *terminatio* formulae, by free association with similar formulae, following modes typical of oral tradition.

The numerous medieval treatises on vocal technique are of interest: In the 7th century, Isidoro di Siviglia defined the necessary qualities of liturgical song as "*clara, alta et suavis*" (clear, high and sweet), but in following centuries, other writers of treatises also added "*rotunda, virili, viva et succinta voce psallatur*" (rounded, manly, lively and intoned in a succinct voice). In the late Renaissance and Baroque eras modern vocal classifications (chest voice, head voice, etc.) appear in the writings of Maffei, Vicentino, Banchieri, Zacconi, Zarlino and other authors of treatises. It is important to keep in the mind the precise distinction between those of a polyphonic disposition (*cantus, quintus, altus, tenor, bassus*) and the characterisation of vocal typologies (soprano, contralto, tenor and bass), as in Vicentino's *L'Antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* (Rome 1555).



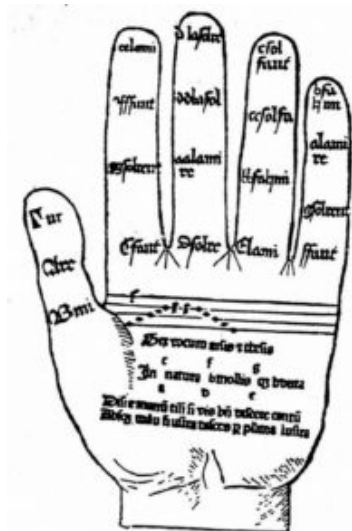
## Vocal Typologies in Vicentino

Another salient aspect of vocal teaching in the 15th through to the 18th century is the constant, wide-spread use of the didactic *bicinium*, the practice of performance in duet, on the part of the apprentice singer and his teacher, of scholastic

counterpoint, and of exercises scaled according to levels of difficulty of performance. This was a sublime means of ear-training and of training in intonation, developed over time and in the modes of a vocal practice that required daily exercise and agility equal to the practice of a musical instrument, with artistic outcomes of great efficacy and elegance. The reader is referred to the inexhaustible repertoire in collections and courses of study, including collections of didactic duos by authors such as Angelo Bertalotti, Adriano Banchieri, Orlando di Lasso, Gramatio Metallo, Eustachio Romano, but also northern European composers such as Johannes Ockeghem, Claudin de Sermisy, etc. (Bornstein, in [www.gardane.info/bicinium](http://www.gardane.info/bicinium)).

However, the practice we wish to underscore here is the teaching of vocal sight-reading, which, beginning with Guido d'Arezzo in the 11th century, goes by the name of solmisation, with the important advantage of overcoming the need to memorise thousands of melodies; one result, in fact, once problems of notation were solved, was that the singer could read and learn music *sine magistro*.

Already during preceding centuries, the mnemonic and didactic practice of computing the fixed pitches of *tabula compositoria*, that is, of a series of pitches contrasted by means of alphabetical notation, had taken hold, as was theorised by treatise writers of the early medieval era (Boethius, Cassiodorus), who associated them with the various bones and joints of the left hand, that is often erroneously called the *guidonian hand*.

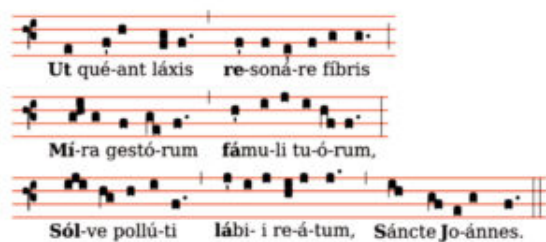


## The Guidonian Hand

To these fixed pitches, Guido thought to add a second system of pitches, this time contrasted from syllables, which allowed for the easy and univocal identification of series of intervals that constantly recurred within the *tabula*.

Precisely within the prologue to Guido d'Arezzo's *Micrologus* ... we find that young students, practiced in the reading of music according to its notes, were able within a month to sing songs they had never seen nor heard, without hesitation and at first sight; indeed, to perform a "*maximum spectaculum*" for all... In fact, Guido d'Arezzo already intuited the necessity of the ear-eye-memory-voice connection, and the usefulness of learning many songs referring back to the above-mentioned mnemonic device for grasping intervals, as well as, *mutatis mutandis*, the meaning of the tonic (Goitre, *Cantar leggendo con l'uso del do mobile*; Milan 1972).

Due to its didactic usefulness, this system enjoyed great success, not only in the medieval era, but throughout the Renaissance: thus, solmisation was based on a scale of six tones, called a *hexachord*. To facilitate the learning of this structure of scales and intervals, Guido d'Arezzo gave names corresponding to the initial syllables of the six hemistiches of the *Hymn to St. John the Baptist* to the six notes:



## Hymn to St. John the Baptist

Thus, it was merely a matter of memorising and getting the ear used to this scheme, by which one sought to gain agility and dexterity (a matter of some importance even for modern singers) in the intonation of ascending and descending intervals (i.e., unison, and the major and minor second, major and minor third, fourth, fifth, and major sixth intervals).

Do	Re	Mi	Fa	Sol	La
	T	T	St	T	T

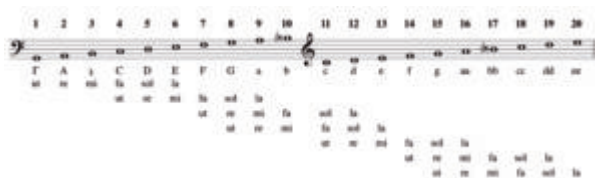
The six syllables could then be assigned to the notes of a composition with an extensive *ambitus*, by means of *mutation*, that is, a change of hexachords carried out in such a manner that the semitone was always sung with the syllables *mi-fa*. By such a procedure, the *cantores* learned, not the absolute pitches of tones (*claves*), but the relative pitches (*voces*), and fixed the intervals in their memory: a semitone was always *mi-fa*, no matter at what pitch it might be found. Thus, singers could easily intone any scale of six tones that had the semitone in the central position. This was the case, not only with the *natural hexachord* with Do corresponding to C, but also with the *flat hexachord* (with Do = F, and thus with *b* flat), and the *hard hexachord* (with Do = G).

The table is a grid with 20 columns and 20 rows. The columns are labeled with letters and numbers, and the rows are labeled with musical terms. The grid contains a complex pattern of letters and numbers, representing the successive hexachordal syllables and absolute pitches of the *tabula compositoria*.

### Zarlino's Table

In a table elaborated by Gioseffo Zarlino (*Istitutioni armoniche*; Venice 1558), we have a summary of the successive hexachordal syllables, in association with the series of absolute pitches of the *tabula compositoria*:

To this, we have appended a transcription in modern notation, as follows:



The nerve centre of this system was the difficulty of adapting it to the spread of *musica ficta*, that is, to the adapting of *tabula compositoria* to new pitches that began gradually imposing themselves on practice and taste from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century; i.e., C#, Eb, F#, and G#.

Various attempts to adapt the Guidonian syllabic system to the new needs of polyphonic and harmonic musical language were elaborated by the following scholars, who aimed to resolve the problems of intonation accompanying chromatic alterations:

**Waelrant Hubert** (1517-1595), with "Bocedisation": *bo-ce-di-ge-la-mi-ni*; **David Hitzler** (1575-1635), with "Bebisation": *la-be-*

*ce-de-me-fe-ge*; the German theorist, **Otto Gibelius** (1612-1682) amplified and altered the Guidonian syllables in a manner similar to that of **John Curwen** two hundred years later: do-di-re-ri/ma-mi-fa-fi-so-si/lo-la-na-ni-do; **Karl Heinrich Graun** (1704- 1759), with "Damenisation": *da-me-ni-po-tu-la-be*. The various proposals found scarce application in musical practice due to the meagre correspondence between, on the one hand, the syllables referred to the altered sounds and, on the other hand, those corresponding to the natural tones (Acciai, *Solmisazione e didattica musicale in Italia*, in *La Cartellina*; Milan 1996).

Another aspect of which authors of treatises in the 16th and 17th centuries took account was that of extending hexachordal solmisation to the octave.

Many theorists (Banchieri, Burmeister, Bernhard, Nives, La Maire and others) held it to be necessary henceforth to add a new syllable, *si*, to the Guido d'Arezzo's canonical six. The evermore frequent use of transposition technique (*chiavette* or *chiavi acute*) and the introduction of *mixed modes* within compositions rendered Guido d'Arezzo's system somewhat artificial and complex (Acciai, *op. cit.*).

In reality, the theoretic use of a new system of solmisation, also called *solmisation of the octave*, though widespread in many contexts, did not have time to find theoretic uniformity and universal acceptance in the didactic practice of the 17th and 18th centuries. This is a shame, because, with the addition of the seventh step and of the principal chromatic alterations, such a system could have been perfectly expressive of all the melodic and harmonic formulae present in the teaching vocabulary of the musical repertoire, at least until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Since 1600, contemporaneous with attempts to create the *solmisation of the octave*, the practice of making the syllable, Do, correspond to the fixed tone, C, became

increasingly widespread. In particular, during the period following the Napoleonic Wars, the French system succeeded in negating the difference between *claves* and *voces*, probably in order to simplify the practice of exercises aimed at instrumental agility; from this derived the notable paradox by which *do, re mi* became absolute pitches, with the total nullification of the *voces* in favour of a system based exclusively on the *claves*. Such a system of "single nomenclature" persists even today in the schools and musical conservatories of many countries, along with the questionable practice of *spoken solfeggio*.

The presence of two systems of nomenclature, with the *voces* alongside the *claves*, is a form of systemic redundancy, or arguably, of systemic abundance. The double system of nomenclature has systemic advantages, because it is intimately connected with the nature of western classical music. In fact, the system of *claves* expresses simply the absolute pitches, while the system of *voces* with *solmisation of the octave* also expresses the *scale functions* in the harmonic-tonal system. *Do* is always the tonic of whatever major tonality; *re*, the supertonic; *fa*, the subdominant, and *sol* the dominant, etc. As for the minor tonalities, the tonic is always *la*. Solmisation can even be fully applied to modal music, inasmuch as the Doric mode is always intoned as *re-mi-fa-sol*; the Phrygian, as *mi-fa-sol-la*, etc. This has great advantages for the singer in the understanding of intervals and of the system of intonation, regardless of the song's modality.

A young singer, deprived of this didactic system that has been hand-tailored for the exact representation of melodic formulae, often can calculate pitches only with the help of a musical instrument, without really having the "mental framework" of the scale and interval systems necessary for her or his art. Roberto Goitre paints a disastrous picture of the consequences in Italy of abandoning the "double nomenclature":

*Such errors and misunderstandings in the teaching of music*



*have been handed down so as to reduce our country, once the cradle of vocal polyphony, to the global rearguard of musical civility (Goitre, op. cit.).*

In reality, there was an international recovery of *claves* and *voces* in the 19th and 20th centuries, thanks to the *do mobile*, as found in the monumental works of John Curwen in England and of Zoltán Kodály in Hungary. Today, we are witnessing a gradual dispersion of other didactic practices derived from ancient music (psalmody, solmisation, *bicinia*, canons, etc.).

Let us hope, then, to see in coming years a flowering of new methodological reflection on the teaching methods of polyphonic song, hopefully not just in conservatories, but more generally in the courses of study followed by all musicians, in professional music publications, and in the daily life of the musical community in all its complexity.

***A version of this article already appeared on the website, [www.musicheria.net](http://www.musicheria.net), for which we thank its editors.***

*Translated by Marvin Vann, USA*