

OVERVIEW OF PITCH SOLMIZATION SYSTEMS

There are two basic categories of pitch solmization systems, in addition to the use of a single neutral syllable:

- fixed systems emphasizing absolute pitch (i.e., specific notes in isolation)
- movable systems emphasizing relative pitch (i.e., relationships between notes)

As we shall see, there are also distinct subcategories of both fixed and movable systems. Some systems reflect sharps and flats while others do not; some movable systems consistently associate a single syllable with the tonic in both major and minor keys while others do not.

At their heart, fixed systems are based on note names, which vary from culture to culture and language to language. Popular systems include American-style letter names (C[#]-D-B^b), fixed-*do* solfège (*do-re-ti*, reflecting the French system of naming notes), and a German-inspired system that uses single-syllable names combining letters with sharps and flats (Cis-D-Bes). Idiosyncratic systems such as “Ceesh-D-Beef” also exist. Although fixed-*do* solfège could reflect accidentals (*di-re-te*), traditionally these syllables are sung without any chromatic inflection (i.e., G, G[#], and G^b are typically all called *sol*). Obviously American letter names could also be sung without sharps and flats (creating an exactly equivalent system), but this approach is less common.

Any fixed system will tend to privilege and promote absolute pitch (informally known as “perfect pitch”) and should generally lead to superior clef reading. These approaches can be used equally well for tonal, pre-tonal, and post-tonal music. When choosing a fixed solmization system, one should consider at least three factors: convenience of singing (both ease of pronunciation and consistent use of single syllables), the importance of explicitly addressing sharps and flats, and familiarity for your particular students. (Given that American musicians are already familiar with a system of fixed letters, for Americans the only advantages of fixed-*do* solfège is that it can be performed rapidly and sounds pleasant when sung.)

The most popular movable systems are scale-degree numbers and movable-*do* solfège. Both approaches (assuming *do*-based minor in the case of solfège) emphasize a note’s role in the tonal hierarchy. When the same melody is sung in different keys, the syllables remain the same (although the specific pitches change). Scale-degree numbers typically do not reflect chromatic inflections, although idiosyncratic systems that capture accidentals do exist. Movable-*do* solfège reflects accidentals with a change of vowel, typically shifting toward *i* (rhymes with *ti* or *glee*) for raised notes and *e* (rhymes with *re* or *day*) for lowered notes. In the keys of D major and D minor, C[#]-D-B^b would typically be performed as “sev-one-six” in numbers and “*ti-do-le*” in solfège. The same three notes in G major or G minor would be performed as “four-five-three” or “*fi-sol-me*.” As you can see, scale-degree numbers reflect interval size but not necessarily interval quality; movable-*do* solfège maintains both.

Movable-*do* solfège with *la*-based minor shares most of the features described above with regards to movable-*do* solfège with *do*-based minor — it preserves the same pattern of syllables when a melody is sung in a different key and it reflects accidentals with a vowel shift. However, this approach reinforces relative (rather than parallel) minor keys: the minor scale begins *la-ti-do* rather than *do-re-me*. This system therefore emphasizes consistent interval relationships between notes rather than consistent functions (given that *do* represents the tonic in major keys and the mediant in minor keys, for example).

Movable systems privilege and promote relative pitch, facilitating transposition skills. Scale-degree numbers and solfège with *do*-based minor also foster a general sense of tonal function. Movable systems work well for tonal music; scale-degree numbers and movable-*do* solfège with *do*-based minor are best suited to common-practice tonal music, while movable-*do* solfège with *la*-based minor is arguably more appropriate for modal music and some folk music. When choosing a movable solmization system, one should consider at least three factors: convenience of singing, the importance of explicitly addressing accidentals, and potential confusion for your particular students. Students from a culture that names notes with fixed solfège syllables will find movable-*do* solfège extremely disorienting, whereas movable numbers should pose no particular challenges. Some teachers worry needlessly that the foreign origins of solfège make this system difficult for Americans to learn. Although numbers are certainly more intuitive on the first day of class, after a week or two of conscientious practice solfège will feel quite natural. Furthermore, solfège syllables are less likely to be confused with other concepts (e.g., *ti* will not be confused with the chordal seventh or *vii*^o, whereas $\hat{7}$ may).

Neutral syllables, of course, will work with any kind of music and require no effort or class time to learn, but they do not foster any intellectual understanding, nor do they specifically promote the development of important musical skills.

Standard syllable choices



Fixed- <i>do</i> solfège:	fa	fa	sol	sol	la	ti	ti	do	do	re	re	mi	fa
Inflected letter names:	F	Fis	G	Gis	A	Bes	B	C	Cis	D	Dis	E	F
Scale-degree numbers:	one	one	two	two	three	four	four	five	five	six	six	sev	one
Movable- <i>do</i> solfège:	do	di	re	ri	mi	fa	fi	sol	si	la	li	ti	do



Fixed- <i>do</i> solfège:	fa	mi	mi	re	re	do	do	ti	la	la	sol	sol	fa
Inflected letter names:	F	E	Es	D	Des	C	Ces	Bes	A	Ice	G	Ges	F
Scale-degree numbers:	one	sev	sev	six	six	five	five	four	three	three	two	two	one
Movable- <i>do</i> solfège:	do	ti	te	la	le	sol	se	fa	mi	me	re	ra	do

A melodic fragment with a variety of possible performances



Fixed- <i>do</i> solfège:	sol	fa	mi	re	sol	fa	sol	la	ti
Inflected letters:	G	F	Es	D	G	Fis	G	A	Bes
Scale-degree numbers:	one	sev	six	five	one	sev	one	two	three
Movable- <i>do</i> , <i>do</i> -based minor:	do	te	le	sol	do	ti	do	re	me
Movable- <i>do</i> , <i>la</i> -based minor:	la	sol	fa	mi	la	si	la	ti	do