

## OVERVIEW OF RHYTHM SOLMIZATION SYSTEMS

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

- syllables reflecting duration
- syllables reflecting metrical hierarchy
- syllables reflecting serial order in a subdivided beat
- speech cues associated with specific rhythmic patterns

Although there is relatively widespread agreement on the “correct” syllables for any given pitch solmization system, people who employ otherwise equivalent rhythm solmization systems frequently use completely different syllables. These differences, however, are unimportant so long as the specific syllables chosen are easy to pronounce at a brisk tempo.

The best known system emphasizing duration was developed by Zoltan Kodaly. Students using this method will perform a quarter-note as *ta* and an eighth-note as *ti*, regardless of their metrical positions. Sixteenth-notes are generally performed *ti-ri-ti-ri* for ease of pronunciation (although analogous systems may instead repeat the same syllable, such as *di-di-di-di*). Some people use an equivalent system that modifies the standard American names for note values: a half-note is *half*, a quarter-note is *quart*, and an eighth-note is *eighth* (or simply *eight*, because it is easier to pronounce).

A popular system emphasizing metrical hierarchy was developed by Edwin Gordon. Students using this method will perform any note falling on a beat as *du*, regardless of its length or how it is written. Notes that evenly subdivide the beat are pronounced *de* in simple meters and *da di* in compound meters. Notes at the next faster subdivision of the beat (e.g., the second and fourth sixteenth-notes in  $\frac{4}{4}$  or the second, fourth, and sixth sixteenth-notes in  $\frac{6}{8}$ ) are all pronounced *ta*.

Although some teachers use slightly different syllables, Gordon-inspired systems will use the same syllable to represent notes falling on equally strong (or weak) portions of the beat. Systems like this may be a little easier to learn because fewer syllables are involved. On the other hand, identical syllable combinations can represent multiple rhythmic patterns (for instance, *du-ta* could be applied either to a short note on the beat followed by a long note off the beat or to a long note on the beat followed by a short note off the beat).

Observe that, under the Gordon system, a note falling exactly halfway between two adjacent beats will be pronounced differently in compound and simple meters, as illustrated below.

$\frac{6}{8}$

du da di    du ta da ta di ta

$\frac{6}{8}$         $\frac{2}{4}$

du ta    du de

The fourth sixteenth-note in  $\frac{6}{8}$  is pronounced *ta* because it falls on a weak subdivision of the beat. The two rhythms on the right would sound indistinguishable if clapped, but their syllables are different. Of course, in context these two rhythms would sound extremely different — and this is precisely the point. The syllable *de* systematically represents a stronger part of the beat than does *ta*. (True duplets in  $\frac{6}{8}$ , however, would be pronounced *du-de*. Similarly, triplets in  $\frac{2}{4}$  would be pronounced *du-da-di*.)

There are many systems that reflect serial order in a subdivided beat. In most (but not all) cases, these systems also use numbers to represent the location of the beat within the measure. American instrumentalists (especially wind players) are often taught one such system, where an entire measure of sixteenth-notes in  $\frac{4}{4}$  would be pronounced *one-ee-and-ah, two-ee-and-ah*. A student using the Takadimi system would perform the same rhythm as *ta-ka-di-mi, ta-ka-di-mi* (notice that although the subdivisions are serialized in Takadimi, the beats themselves are not). Again, the exact syllables used may vary, but the distinguishing feature of these systems is that no syllable recurs until the onset of the next beat. Students may have a little more trouble learning a system like this and may be more prone to misspeaking because there are more syllables to keep track of. On the other hand, any given syllable pattern uniquely identifies a corresponding rhythmic pattern because every syllable represents a specific location within the beat. (For this reason, the fourth sixteenth-note in  $\frac{6}{8}$  is pronounced *di*, just like the second eighth-note in  $\frac{2}{4}$ ; six sixteenth-notes would be performed as *ta-va-ki-di-da-ma*.)

Speech cues are by their very nature idiosyncratic and tend to have some built-in amusement value, but they can also be extremely effective. The words are carefully chosen not only for their syllable count (of course) but also for their accentuation and characteristic rhythm in natural speech. For instance, *table* might suggest a sixteenth-note followed by a dotted eighth-note. Speech cues need not be maintained once a particular rhythmic pattern is mastered; students may perform the familiar parts of an exercise on a neutral syllable and strategically apply speech cues only to patterns addressed that week in class. The speech-cue method is likely to promote holistic reading of rhythmic patterns, although it does not contribute to the intellectual understanding of rhythm and meter. (Incidentally, many singers react positively to this method, perhaps because they are accustomed to performing music with text.)

Neutral syllable approaches, of course, simply perform every note as *ta* or *du* or some other syllable normally involving a strong consonant for the attack followed by an easily sustained vowel. Any spoken method is preferable to clapping because one can distinguish rests from long notes, perform dynamics easily, produce rapid notes more accurately with less effort, and conduct simultaneously. However, consistently using a single neutral syllable neither promotes an intellectual understanding of meter nor serves as a mnemonic for specific rhythmic patterns.

Beats (unlike pitches) are inherently movable; therefore, different rhythm solmization systems are not mutually exclusive in the same way that many pitch solmization systems are. For this reason, many hybrid rhythmic systems are possible. One could easily replace Gordon's *du* with beat numbers, for instance, or speech cues might be used only in association with difficult rhythmic patterns. (Even people who normally employ only a neutral syllable may prefer to perform quintuplets as *hippopotamus* or *university*.)

### A rhythmic pattern with a variety of possible performances

	$\frac{3}{4}$						
Kodaly:	ta	ta	ti ti	ti ri ti	ti ri ti ri	ta	ta
Note values:	quart	quart	eight eight	six-teen eight	six-teen six-teen	quart	quart
Gordon:	du	du	du de	du ta de	du ta de ta	du	du
Instrumental:	1	2	3 &	1 ee &	2 ee & ah	3	1
Takadimi:	ta	ta	ta di	ta ka di	ta ka di mi	ta	ta
Speech cue:	bear	bear	ti-ger	pel-i-can	al-li-ga-tor	bear	bear
Neutral:	ta	ta	ta ta	ta ta ta	ta ta ta ta	ta	ta