The Swinging Pendulum of Reading Music from Colonial Times to Present

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Labels and terminology

The argument is presented as the controversy between “rote” versus “note.” More aptly defined the tension lies in whether to teach singing or teach reading. Other labels given to this system include “lining out” versus “solminization” or “old way” versus “new way.” The first two are retrospective labels while the third is a contemporary view of the dichotomy.

An understanding of the growth and development of the note should be addressed prior to attempting a discussion of the shifting public, and professional, opinion of how music should be taught to the masses. The study of this conflict is evidenced in the analysis of the tune books used during the time period of 1500 to date. Most prolific of this time is the era of colonial America to the American civil war.

Tonality

Guido d’Arezzo (990-1055) codified the European hexachord system which was used for hundreds of years to follow. This six note system must be layered to find the development of our current octave (see figure 1.) From this figure we may understand the construction of a scale from c to c’ as Fa – Sol – La – Fa – Sol – La – Mi – Fa. The Mi is the only syllable not repeated and is used to designate the key. The Fa-Sol-La
system (most widely known today as Fasola) was the four note system used by many Europeans of the time when the American frontier was being colonized.

Figure 1:

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Ut  re  mi  fa  sol  la  ut  sol  re  mi  fa  Sol  la
G   A   B   C   D   E   F   G   A   B   C   D   E
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Tune Books & the Battle of Rote v. Note

Psalm tune collections printed prior to the colonization of America include the *Sternhold & Hopkins Psalter* (England, 1562.) This collection consisted of forty-six tunes using the four note system described above. The printer, John Windet, addressed the system in his preface. “I have caused a new print of note to be made with letter to be joined to every note: whereby you mayest know how to call every note by his right name, so that with a very little diligence thou mayest more easilie by the viewing of these letters, come to the knowledge of perfect solfeying…the letters be these U for Ut, R for Re, M for My, F for Fa, S for Sol, L for La. Thus where you see any letter joyed by the notes you may easilie call him by his right name,…” Prior to this edition it must have been necessary to understand the Fa-Sol-La system of solfege and impose the syllables from memory. The innovation here is the printing of the solfege directly with the music. Perhaps it is important to remind ourselves of the importance of this time as its relevance to the invention of printing press only a hundred years prior in 1455 by Johann Gutenberg. This realization helps to understand the importance of Windet’s accomplishment.
The colonists were most likely accustomed to this four note system when leaving for the new colony. The first Psalter in the American colonies was the *Bay Psalm Book* printed in 1640. The first eight editions only contained the text of the Psalms grouped by metrical divisions. The ninth edition, printed in 1698, contained what is thought to be the first music printed on the continent. The edition contained thirteen new two part psalms with Windet’s solfege abbreviations (letters) under the music (see figure 2.)

Figure 2:

The next major change in music notation for the tune books came about with John Tufts *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes in a Plain & Easy Method* (c. 1714.) His innovation included the printing of the letters instead of the diamond shaped notes which were standard musical notation at the time. It is not until 1801 when William Smith and William Little print *Easy Instructor* that we see the shaped notes which would become the standard for today’s shape note tradition. The shapes appear in figure 3 as presented by Smith & Little. From that point, it is easily understood as to today’s shape note reading societies. Such performing groups still exist and function much like they did in the 1830’s with the first printing of the *Southern Harmony* by William Walker. In the shape note tradition, the psalm is sung twice; once using the
syllables and the second time implementing the appropriate text. The importance of pitch is paramount as traditional shape note singing is a cappella. The primary reason for using shape notes is to learn a tune prior to the text. This is done in hopes of a better quality sight reading by the singers.

Figure 3:

The primary reason thought to have caused the wave reform in music is the poor quality of singing done in the early colonial American churches. The usual method of singing in church was by rote, or lining out as it is also known. This was done as the deacon read each line psalm, gave the pitch for the tune, and the congregation repeated the text using a prescribed tune they had memorized. A trend seems to have appeared with the first colonists almost as soon as arriving in the New World. Simplifying their extensive repertoire of thirty-nine challenging (mostly unison) tunes and lengthy stanzas, the Pilgrims’ original Ainsworth Psalter, was reduced to twelve easier tunes. Others, such as the Puritans of Salem, translated the psalms into English to further simplify their singing activities. Birge (1928) reports “the first tune books of which we have record began to appear about 1760. Between that date and 1780 about fourteen were published, more than sixty between 1780 and 1800 and about one hundred in the first ten years of the nineteenth century. These figures show in no uncertain terms the growing vogue of the singing school.”
Perhaps one of the most important innovations in early American music was the singing school. The singing school purpose is described by Keene (1987) as “to supply the church choirs with an ever-increasing supply of singers who were well-versed in the vagaries of voice production and in the intricacies of reading according to the four note gamut.” Thus, the school was, generally, to teach note reading. A singing school was not a school in terms we might consider today. Rather, it should be considered more along the lines of an evening course at the local community college. They often lasted a few weeks and were taught to local people in hopes of improving the sound of the church choir. Topics of the evening lectures included reading clefs, syllables, keys, note lengths, and lessons in diction. One of the rules taught at these schools, shown in figure 4, can be found in Keene (1987) and illustrates the techniques used to teach finding a key. Attendees of the singing school describe the experience as one we can only imagine today. “the interested class assembled once a week through the long winter. We not only sang every exercise, tune and anthem, to do, re, mi with a tallow candle firmly standing upon the back of the desk…We learned to read and sing from the musical notation at first sight.”

Figure 4:

Rules
Flats
The natural place for mi is in B
But if B be flat mi is in E
If B and E be flat mi is in A
If B, E, A, and D be flat mi is in G
Sharps
But if F be sharp mi is in F
If F and C be sharp mi is in C
If F, C, and G be sharp mi is in G
If F, C, G, and D be sharp mi is in D.
This process of education continued in popularity in the north and south until the early 1800’s when the northern colonies began to favor the “harmonic practice consistent with the European tradition” (Keene, 1987.) During the first few years of the nineteenth century the singing schools declined in popularity due mainly to the increased availability of transportation, traveling entertainers, and extensive publications of secular, harmonization music. Keene notes, “Singing schools were less and less required. Americans could learn their songs by ear without the trouble of a singing school and without the required diligence. No longer were fuge-tunes tolerated as creative embellishment, and in the churches ornamentation was now considered poor taste.” Another vision of the singing school is offered by Baltzell (as in Birge, 1982). It expresses what is thought to be a common reason for most to frown upon the singing school movement. “The instruction consisted of some elementary rules for singing and for the rudiments of music as relating to reading from note, according to the Sol-fa syllables. …Of the quality of their singing perhaps one should not say much. Quantity was more generally the rule than quality.”

Perhaps the most influential person on American music education was a non-musician from Switzerland, Heinrich Pestalozzi. Although he rarely addressed music education his principles still influenced Lowell Mason in the 1830’s. Horace Mann reported in an 1805 visit to Burgdorf observing Pestalozzi’s school in action, “music was everywhere in evidence. The teachers were masters of vocal music and they played upon one ore more instruments as well. One was as certain to see a violin as a blackboard in every room. Singing was taught not only as an accomplishment, but as a
means of recreation and socialization.” (as cited in Keene, 1982) This approach makes sense in the “sense-impressions” approach (anschauung) which led Pestalozzi to conclude that “a complete process of mental growth takes place when clear images are transformed into definite ideas.” He praises his musician friend, Hans Georg Nageli, for his implementations of the principles to music education. “The exertions of my excellent friend Nageli, who has with equal taste and judgment reduced the highest principles of his art to the simplest elements, have enabled us to bring our children to a proficiency which on any other plan must be the work of much time and labor.” He appears to be pleased with the elemental study and the teaching music reading.

A contemporary to Pestalozzi was Samuel Read Hall. Reed found the Pestalozzi principle of anschauung (sense-impressions) to mean teaching by rote. His argument seems plausible in this light. “Sounds, like colours, cannot be described in words. They must be taught by examples, patiently repeated and carefully attended to, until the ear is familiar with them; and gradually extended, as its powers of discrimination are increased.”

Jones (1954) surveyed tune books of nineteenth century America (1830-1900) and discusses a pendulum swing. “An examination of the percentage of the books that had sections devoted to teaching the elements of music shows a rather consistent curve from none during the first ten year period of the study to a peak during the 1860-1869 period, and then somewhat of a decline through the last ten year period.” This is, in part, attributed to the rise and decline of Lowell Mason’s popularity. In his work, The Normal Singer (1856), he proposes, “This book, The Normal Singer, if it be indeed normal, must be right, or a book in which the principles of song are treated according to
their true relation to the great work of education, or to human development, goodness and happiness. It must be right in the end at which it aims, and right in its detail or in the means which it employs.” This provides evidence of the second pendulum swing, the first being that of the singing schools.

The pendulum reverses once again before the twentieth century. This is evidenced in Luther Whiting Mason’s (1870) preface to *The Second Music Reader*. “The kind of singing (singing as it happens) is not altogether useless, as in many cases there is a freshness and energy about it that serves to awaken a love for singing, and to furnish a basis on which to build a subsequent course of musical instruction. But there is a wide distinction between this haphazard singing and genuine, ‘rote singing.’ The latter is the most important part of instruction, in vocal music. Genuine rote singing implants at the beginning true musical impressions. It leads to a discrimination between musical and unmusical style. A child will learn more easily, and enjoy better, singing in a good rather than a bad style, if he has right examples at the start.” And so the point is again made for teaching American children via rote than reading.

Jones (1954) does comment on a trend he noticed in his survey. “Indications were that as soon as possible the use of rote songs should have been abandoned. In their right place sight singing and part singing were indicated as preferable parts of a course of study.” Please note the similarities to our current practice of teaching the younger children “sound before sight” by performing simple echo patterns of sol–mi.

The issue never receives resolution even into our current music education research studies. A survey of the past thirty years in the literature of music education still finds several researchers working the case for rote singing or note reading. One of
the latest is Elliott (1982) who acknowledges “that classes will consist mainly of drills and there will be very little time for actual music making. …The person who cannot read music is deprived of active participation.” Other researchers of note in this topic are Kyme (1960), Hicks (1980), and Shehan (1987). The concept at the heart of this paper, now beginning its sixth century, is very much an issue today as much as it was in the early sixteenth century when John Windet published his radical “new way” of reading music.
References


