

# **But I Don't Have Time!**

## A case for teaching music literacy

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**(Part I)**

“My rehearsal time is so limited.”

“I have a concert coming up and I have no time to teach literacy.”

“How can I teach them to read independently when they know nothing and we have concerts to present?”

“Teaching music literacy is tedious and time consuming and will turn off my students.”

These are common concerns of music educators and are concerns that I have struggled with myself. We all want students to appreciate and love music just as much as we do. I believe that teaching students to become musically literate, independent musicians is vital part of helping students gain a deeper love and appreciation for music. Fortunately, teaching literacy does not have to consume vast amounts of class time. Furthermore, in the long run, teaching literacy saves time because students are able to learn music much, much faster AND they can do so without the aid of a piano or teacher singing it for them. In this installment I will present some of the basic principles of how I teach music literacy. In a future installment, I will present some techniques for how I teach and assess students quickly and efficiently, how I choose repertoire, and how I approach teaching an excerpt from the choral literature. I will also provide a list of repertoire that has worked well for me. Finally, I will discuss challenges and successes I have experienced with my students at Brookline High School provide written feedback from both current and former students.

At Brookline High School, I teach two un auditioned and one auditioned choirs. All three learn almost all music entirely by sight-singing. Students come to my program with a wide variety of backgrounds and skills. Some cannot identify any music notation, some can identify basic music notation, and some have been taking private vocal or instrumental lessons for years and can read music notation very well. However, very, very few of them can sight-sing even a simple melody accurately. Therefore, at the beginning of each year I make the assumption that all students know nothing. My choirs include students taking chorus with me for the first time through experienced students who are taking the class for the fourth time. I need a method that is going to get the whole class reading quickly so that the experienced students don't become bored and the new students don't fall behind.

The process I use for teaching literacy is based largely on the work of Dr. Carol Krueger (Florida Southern College) and Edwin Gordon. The basic idea of this approach is that music is a language and should be learned like a language.

Music can be broken into two major elements: frequency/pitch (tonal) patterns and time (rhythm) patterns. These two elements need to be taught independently at first and then integrated as the students' skill increases. The system I use for teaching rhythm patterns is the “Takadimi” syllables system developed by Richard Hoffman, William Peltó, and John W. White (<http://www.takadimi.net>).

For teaching tonal patterns, I use moveable-*do* solfège syllables with *la*-based minor. I also use the Curwen hand signs in conjunction with the solfège syllables. While there is debate about the

effectiveness of the Curwen hand signs, I have found that some students really benefit from the kinesthetic connection. In addition, as I will describe later, I find the Curwen hand signs invaluable in quickly assessing a large number of students.

I use three main phases in teaching students music literacy:

- 1) Prepare the ear (both tonal and rhythmic patterns)
- 2) Prepare the eye (both tonal and rhythmic patterns)
- 3) Integrate both tonal and rhythm patterns

I will describe in greater detail below the preparation of tonal patterns. The approach to preparing rhythm patterns is essentially the same.

### **PHASE 1: Prepare the Ear**

Successful sight-singing requires the ability to audiate a given rhythm and/or tonal pattern. Audiation is a word coined by music education researcher Edwin Gordon: hearing and comprehending of sound that is not physically present. In other words, in order to successfully sight-sing, one needs to be able to “hear” a given rhythm and/or tonal pattern in an “inner ear,” the mind’s ear, without any sound actually being present. Without this ability, sight-singing is little more than guesswork.

#### **Step One**

The goal of this step is to introduce the solfège syllables and aurally familiarize the students with the sound of these pitches so that they can begin to identify the relationship between the pitches. I sing many 3 to 5-note solfège patterns with the accompanying Curwen hand signs to students. The students immediately sing the patterns back. Initially, the patterns I use are limited to just three tonal syllables: *do*, *re* and *mi*. There are only twelve possible three-note patterns using *do*, *re* and *mi*: *drd*, *rdr*, *drm*, *mrd*, *dmd*, *mdm*, *mdr*, *rdm*, *mrn*, *rmr*, *rmd*, *dmr*. The whole process of singing these patterns takes less than one minute. Eventually I expand these patterns to include all pitches in the major scale, but the patterns remain limited to 3 to 5 notes in length. Additionally, because I use moveable-*do* solfège, I change the tonic pitch daily so that students ears don’t become locked into a single tonic pitch. These patterns must be practiced regularly until students have thoroughly mastered them.

#### **Step Two**

The goal of step two is to determine if students are able to decode tonal patterns they’ve performed in step one. Step two usually takes place one to two days after we have practiced step one for a few days. I sing (or play) the same patterns as in step one, but now I sing the patterns on a *neutral syllable* and I do not use the Curwen hand signs. The students are instructed to sing the patterns back using the correct solfège syllables and Curwen hand signs. This is one instance where I find the Curwen hand signs invaluable. In a large class of students, I cannot always hear whether each student is singing the correct syllables. However, if the students are using the Curwen hand signs, I can quickly visually assess whether individual students can correctly identify the solfège syllables in the tonal pattern I have performed for them. If students are unable to do this step successfully, then I know I need to return to step one. As with step one, this process need not take more than one to two minutes per class.

In my early attempts at teaching music literacy I did not spend nearly enough time teaching Phase 1, which led to many unsuccessful - and ultimately frustrating - experiences for me and my students.

### **PHASE 2: Preparing the Eye**

The goal of Phase 2 is to associate patterns learned in Phase 1 with musical symbol(s) for those patterns. Once the students’ ears have the ability to correctly decode a set of tonal patterns, then the next step is to

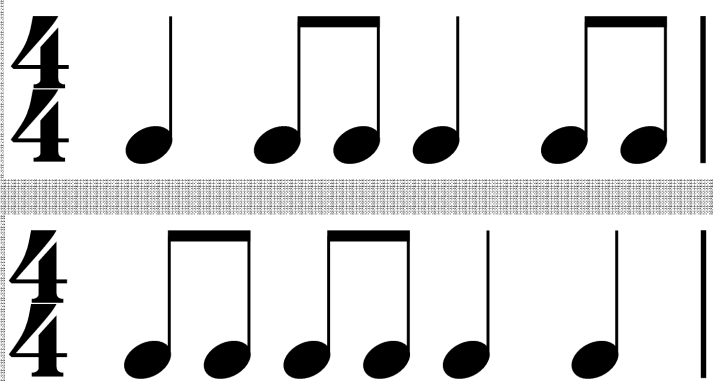
show them the musical symbol that represents that tonal pattern. For this phase flashcards are an invaluable teaching tool.

Keep in mind that my high school students come to me with a wide variety of skills and backgrounds, which requires that I assume they know nothing about standard music notation. My goal is for every student to be able to read some simple musical patterns in the first couple of days. On the other hand I don't want to spend weeks teaching them note letter names, intervals, key signatures, etc. before we start reading. This is chorus class after all – they want to sing! Fortunately, there is a way to do this!

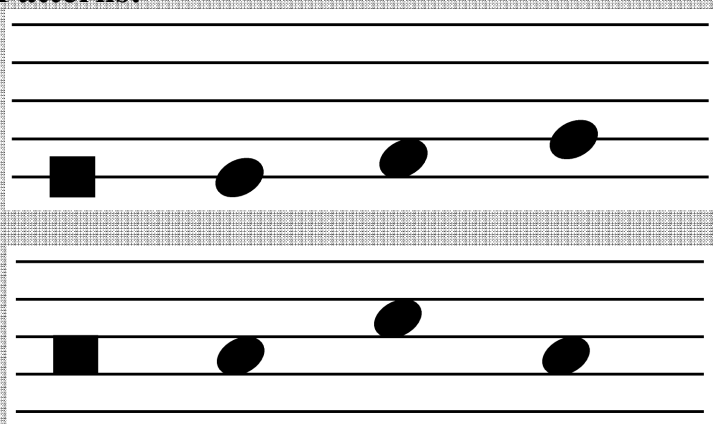
Each of the short tonal patterns introduced in Phase I can be made into flashcards. The tonal reading flashcards I use include a 5-line staff without clef, meter signature or key signature (see inset). A square is used to indicate where the tonic is located. This square can (and should) be placed anywhere on the staff, since in moveable-*do* solfège the tonic note can be located anywhere on the staff. These simplified flashcards allow the new reader to focus on the solfège syllables/notes and their relationship on the staff without the need to know or be confused by rhythm, meter, pitch letter names, key signatures or interval qualities. In addition, these same flashcards can later be used to teach patterns in the minor mode by making the square become *la* (assuming one uses *la*-based minor). It only takes a couple of minutes to run through a series of these flashcards.

## Resources for Teaching Music Literacy in Chorus

**Rhythm Patterns:**



**Tonal Patterns:**



### **PHASE 3: Integrating Tonal and Rhythm Patterns**

Integrating both tonal and rhythm patterns is the final phase in learning to sight-sing. Initially, the sight-singing exercises must be kept simple and should only incorporate tonal and rhythm patterns that have been learned in Phases 1 and 2. If a given exercise incorporates a newly learned tonal pattern, then the difficulty of the rhythmic pattern must be reduced. If a given musical exercise incorporates a newly learned rhythmic pattern, then the difficulty of the tonal patterns must be reduced. Be sure to introduce only one new concept at a time. Also, it's better to teach literacy skills for short periods of time consistently than to have occasional marathon sessions.

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Students welcome the opportunity to learn to read music and receive a great deal of satisfaction from being able to learn a piece of music on their own without assistance. Teaching this material benefits me, the teacher, as well. I can introduce more repertoire now because my students learn music much more quickly. I don't have to drill parts! My own musicianship has improved tremendously as a result of doing this work daily. Finally, I feel a great deal of satisfaction knowing that I have helped my students learn a skillset that enables them to become independent musicians and gives them lifelong access to vocal music.

A musically literate choir should not be limited to students who are "naturally talented" or whose parents can afford private lessons. With training, ALL students can acquire these skills. It's up to us help them achieve that potential. Music literacy skills can be taught fairly quickly without requiring vast amounts of class time. In the long run teaching these skills will *save* class time, although the teacher's effort and planning may increase. I didn't figure out how immediately to get my choirs to sight-sing all of the music. Over time, with patience and a lot of trial and error, I was able to make it work. Even if you are only able to incorporate some of this work into your classes initially, something is better than nothing. In my own teaching I've found that the benefits reaped are well worth the effort.

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