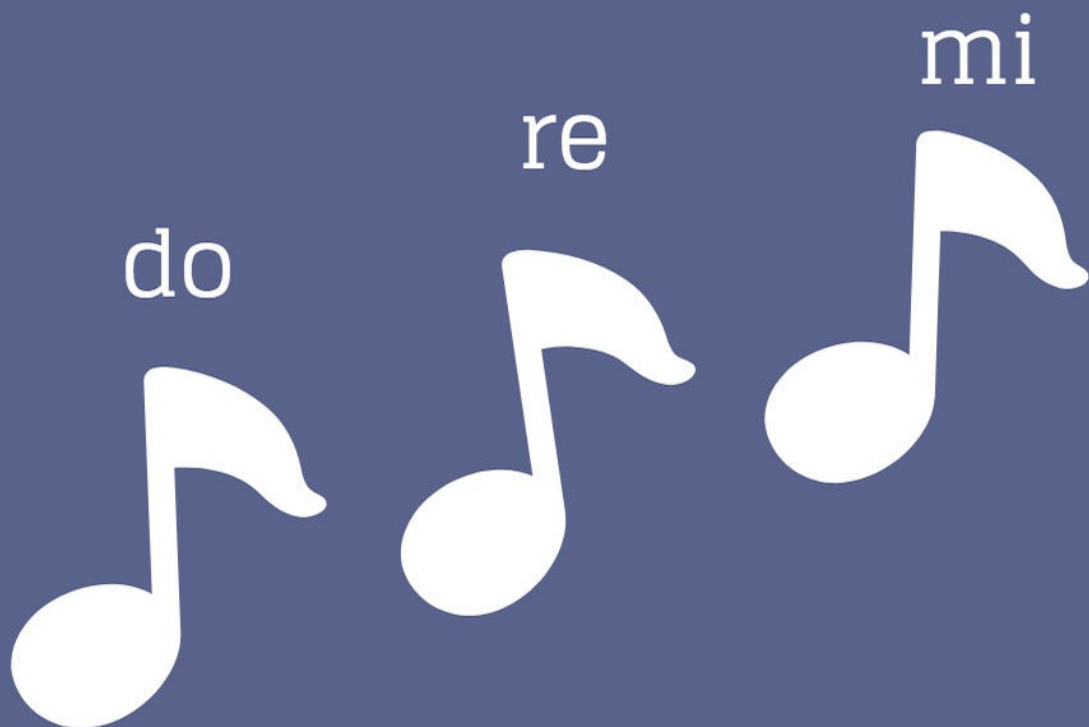


The Ultimate Guide to:

Solfège



Have you ever felt a melody go in one ear and out the other? Like there was nothing concrete to grasp to help you remember? You create a great melody in your head or while humming along to a chord progression, but within a moment it's gone.

Thankfully, not all is lost. In fact, hundreds of years ago, a system was developed to enable musicians to recognize and transcribe those sought-after melodies.

Solfege (a.k.a. *solfa*) provides a framework for melodies by establishing recognizable relationships between pitches, and training your ear to hear patterns. **It is an excellent system for learning the architecture behind music, and is a fundamental concept of [ear training](#)¹.**

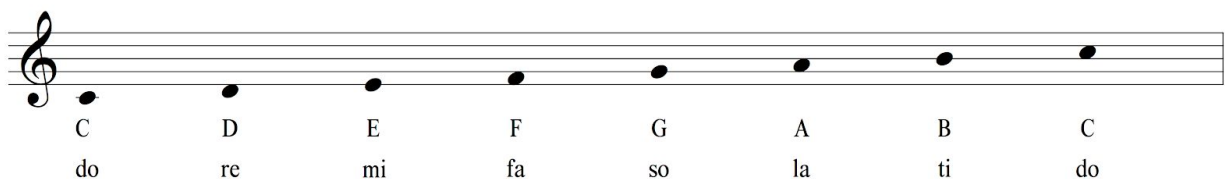
We all know the famous song from *The Sound of Music*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLm07s8fnzM>

Let's find out what those nonsense words *really* mean.

What *Is* Solfege?

Solfege is a method of naming pitches. It works by assigning a syllable to each note of the [musical scale](#)². So rather than, say, naming a C major scale as C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C, you can name it as ***do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do***. This syllabic approach carries a great advantage, since the syllables are easier to sing than the letters.



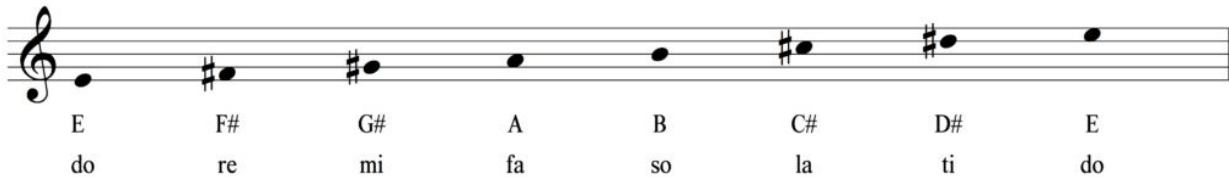
¹ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/ear-training-possible-impossible/>

² <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/what-is-a-scale/>

Best of all, solfege works for any scale and key you can think of. With some little adjustments, you can use it to recall melodies based in [minor](#)³ and non-traditional scales, too.

Two Solfege Systems: Moveable “Do” And Fixed “Do”

In the moveable *do* system, the *do* is always the [tonic](#)⁴, regardless of the scale. So in E major, for example:



In the fixed *do* system, *do* is always C, *re* always D, etc. At first, this might seem the easier way to go, but moveable *do* has many advantages.

Why Should You Learn Solfege?

From helping you better understand music theory to having applications in singing and songwriting, solfège is a valuable tool to have in your arsenal as a musician. Learning solfege will help you do the following:

Recognize recurring patterns in music

Each piece of music may be unique, but there are a finite number of [intervals](#)⁵ (or distances between notes). Solfege will help you recognize these intervals in songs, and eventually, you'll be able to recognize intervals in a series: aka *melodies*.

This sort of recognition will lead to a deeper understanding of melodies, [chord progressions](#)⁶, and song structures.

Improve your sight-singing skills

³ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/discovering-minor-chord-progressions-minor-scale-basics/>

⁴ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/how-to-find-the-tonic-of-any-song-in-a-major-key/>

⁵ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/5-minute-guide-to-interval-ear-training/>

⁶ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/what-is-a-chord-progression/>

Imagine being able to look at sheet music and sing the melody written in the staves, without having it played out loud for you first! With time and practice, the syllable-pitch associations of solfege will become second-nature, and you'll be able to hum or sing anything placed in front of you. Check out [this article](#)⁷ on the power of solfege in sight-singing!

Transcribe Music

Solfege works wonders for [transcribing music](#)⁸ (writing down what you hear) - whether it's your favorite jazz solo or the music you're hearing in your head.

Improve your Composing

Learning solfege can also work wonders for your chops as a composer, whether you're writing a vocal melody or an instrumental piece. With enough practice, you can progress from sight-singing existing songs to [making up beautiful melodies](#)⁹ on the fly, **because you'll already have a good idea of what they'll sound like**. Then, you will be able to remember them and easily write them down in order to communicate your ideas with other musicians.

Learn relative pitch

[Relative pitch](#)¹⁰ gives you the ability to identify or re-create a musical note by comparing it to a reference note, with the assumption that you can identify the distance, or the *interval*, between the two notes.

Solfege gives you a very concrete and easy-to-reference system for relative pitch.

Recall melodies at will

Being able to recall melodies is incredibly useful not only in theory, but in songwriting and [improvising](#)¹¹. No need to fumble around on your instrument to get the right order and series of notes; **solfege gives**

⁷ <https://medium.com/all-things-picardy/in-defense-of-solfege-bee7f966f1aa>

⁸ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/how-do-you-transcribe-music/>

⁹ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/songwriting-right-now-latest-tricks/>

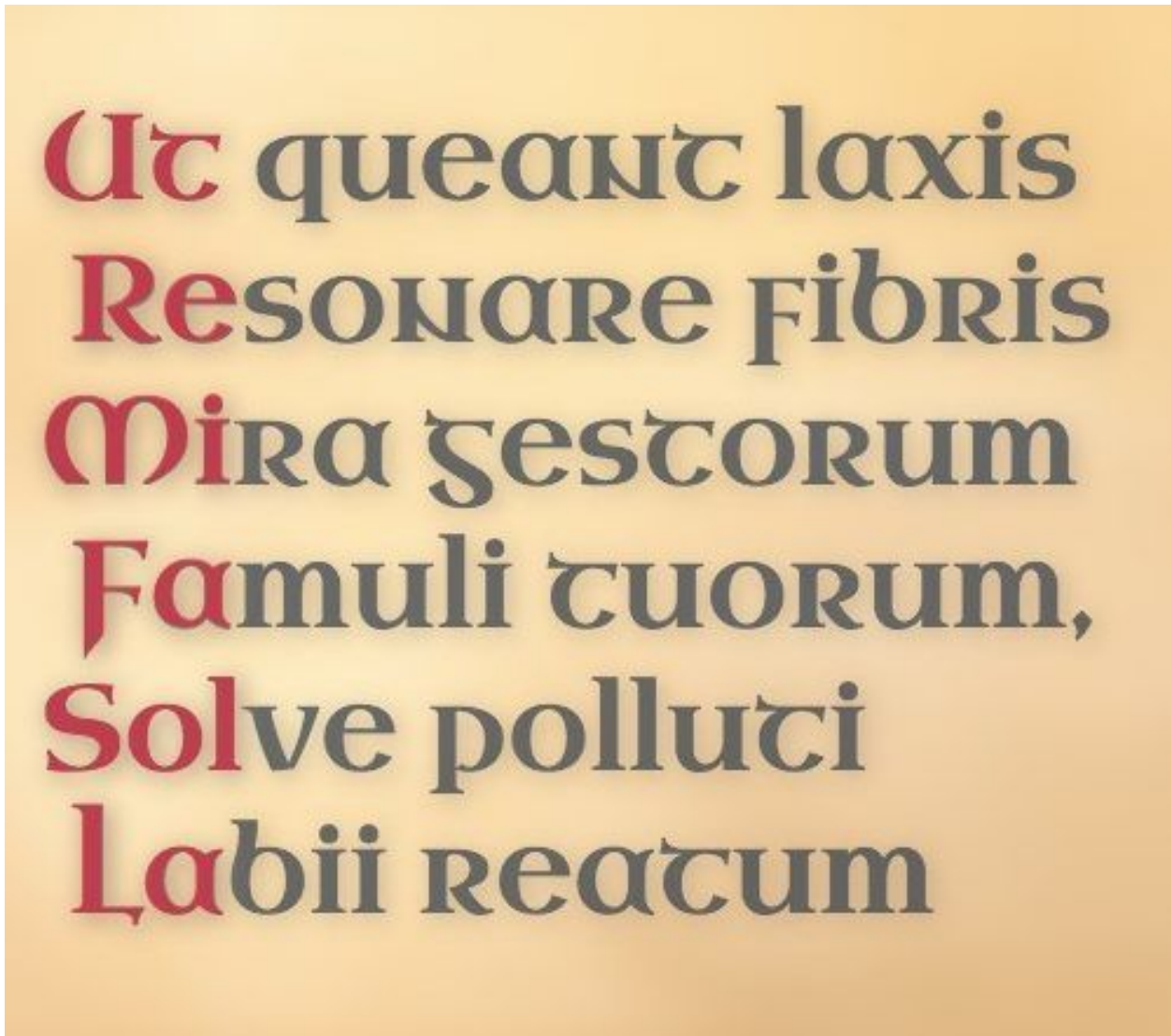
¹⁰ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/whats-the-difference-between-relative-pitch-and-perfect-pitch/>

¹¹ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/beginning-improvisation-resource-pack-preview/>

you a system to remember pitches in the order that you hear or play them.

Where Did Solfege Come From?

This naming system was invented nearly one thousand years ago, by an Italian monk named Guido d'Arezzo.. He developed a six-note ascending scale based on the first pitch of each phrase in the Latin hymn "Ut Queant Laxis", which went like this:



Ut queant laxis
Resonare fibris
Mira gestorum
Famuli tuorum,
Solve polluti
Labbii reatum

Anything look familiar?

In the hymn, the beginning of each phrase began on each successive step of the musical scale. If you sang only the first syllable of each phrase, it would correspond to an almost-complete major scale: C-D-E-F-G-A!

The syllable **"ut"** was eventually changed to **do** as we know it today, and *ti* was added to complete the scale.

With this system, one could sing the hymn using these syllables instead of the words, if they wished to.

Let's explore why this was a game-changer for learning and remembering melodies.

Who is Solfege For?

Though solfège, or solfa, is essentially the ABCs of music, it certainly isn't just for kids. **It's an aural, musical language that will help translate what you are hearing into something you can write down.**

Solfege is used in music education (most notably the Hungarian [Kodály Method](http://musiced.about.com/od/lessonplans/p/kodalymethod.htm)¹²) to teach [pitch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pitch_(music))¹³ and [sight singing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sight_singing#Sight-singing)¹⁴. So many people associate "do re mi" with its role in children's music classes.

But in reality, solfa is an empowering system of pitch recognition for musicians of all ages.

When drilling solfege, you are training your ear to recognize some of the most common patterns in music. Suddenly, you will hear a melody and be able to recognize intervals and chords by instinctively hearing the solfege syllables. It seems almost like magic - but is actually a real skill that just requires some work to acquire.

¹² <http://musiced.about.com/od/lessonplans/p/kodalymethod.htm>

¹³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pitch_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pitch_(music))

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sight_singing#Sight-singing

By illustrating key relationships between pitches, solfege breaks melodies down into smaller pieces and provides a frame of reference when learning or transcribing new music.

Solfege is for everyone. Whether you are a beginner looking to understand the inner workings of a scale, or a seasoned musician looking to hone your inner ear, learning these syllable-pitch associations will go a long way in helping you see the bigger picture: the relationships between notes in a melody.

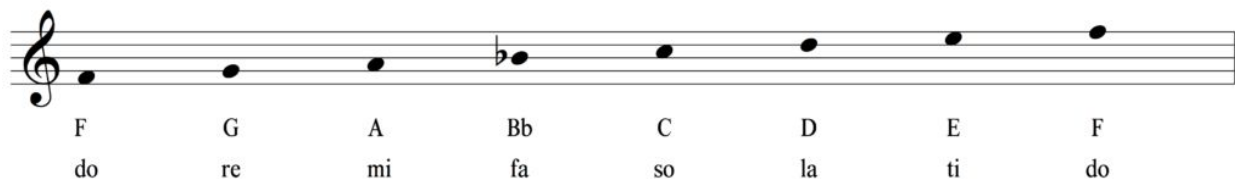
What Information Does Solfege Give You?

For example, suppose you hear two notes and can recognize them as "so" going up to "do". This immediately tells you several important things:

- The pitch movement is from scale degree 5 to 1 (dominant to tonic)
- This implies harmonic (chord) motion of V-I
- The interval is a perfect fourth

How can you know all that from two notes?

Movable "do" solfege assigns *do* to the tonic of the [key](https://www.musical-u.com/learn/identify-major-and-minor-keys-two-shortcuts/)¹⁵ of the melody. That means that if the song you are listening to is in F Major, *do* is F. Then, the rest of the syllables follow in sequential order:



So if I am hearing *so-do* and already know the song is in F Major, I know I have heard C-F!

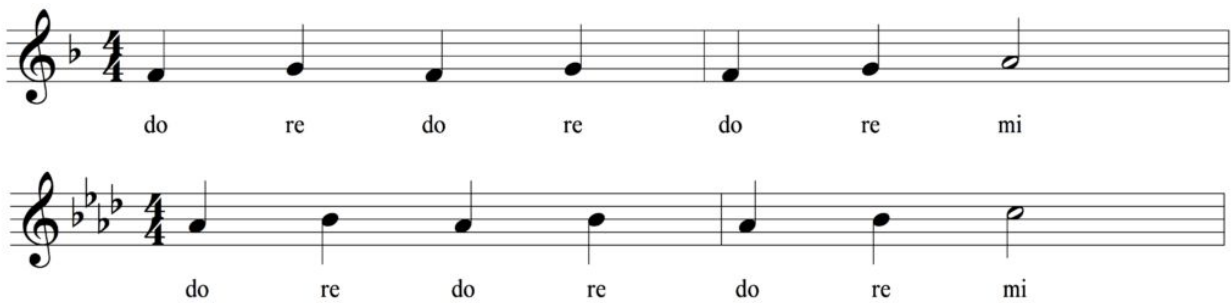
But What If I Don't Know What Key I'm In?

¹⁵ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/identify-major-and-minor-keys-two-shortcuts/>

The advantage of movable “do” solfege is that you don’t *need* to know what key you’re hearing in order to write it down accurately. Solfege is universal across all keys. If you hear a tune that goes “do re do re do re mi”, you can immediately put it in any key you want, because the solfege outlines the **relationships** between the notes, rather than the actual pitches themselves.

It’s great to know a tune by letter names in a certain key, but what if the band gets a [new singer](#)¹⁶ who wants the tune higher? It then takes time and effort to sit down and write it all out in the new key, and can be a real brain scrambler.

But if you learn solfege, you don’t have to struggle with transposing the tune from F Major to A ♭ Major:



You can easily put any melody in solfege syllables if you have spent time on ear training, and you can then translate a tune to any key you want. Magical!

Take a listen to this tune:

[LISTEN ONLINE](#)¹⁷

Can you write it down and play it in any key? Wouldn’t it be easier if you knew the system described above?

What About Solfege For Minor Keys?

¹⁶ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/how-to-pick-the-perfect-song-to-fit-your-voice-5-tips/>

¹⁷ https://www.musical-u.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Final_Tune.mp3

You may think you've hit a wall when you're trying to use solfege to write down melodies in [minor keys](#)¹⁸ - there simply don't seem to be appropriate syllables for some of the notes you're hearing!

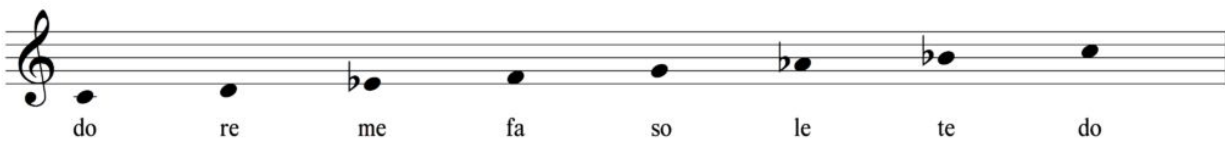
Accidentals and Chromatic Notes

In the solfege system, you can raise or lower the pitch of a note by a semi-tone (half-step) by changing the vowel in the syllable. So if you're in the key of C and you want an E $\flat$, sing "*me*" (rhymes with "*may*") instead of "*mi*" (rhymes with "*mee*").

For more detail on chromatic notes and the full list of syllables for sharps, flats, and beyond, check out [this helpful resource](#)¹⁹.

Do-Based Minor

In this method, "*do*" still represents the tonic. The lowered 3rd, 6th, and 7th degrees are represented by the syllables "*me*", "*le*", and "*te*", respectively, rather than with the usual "*mi*", "*la*", and "*ti*" found in major keys:



La-Based Minor

For those who prefer to stick with the seven original solfege syllables and don't want to add confusion through the inclusion of even more syllables, there is a way of representing minor scales without having to learn additional syllables.

La-based minor may take a little bit of getting used to for those that have become accustomed to always beginning with "*do*", but is powerful in its simplicity once you get used to it.

¹⁸ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/finding-tonic-in-minor-keys/>

¹⁹ http://legacy.earlham.edu/~tobeyfo/musictheory/Book1/FFH1_CH1/1K_Solfege.html

La-based minor is based on the idea that each major scale has a [relative minor scale](https://www.musical-u.com/learn/how-to-use-circle-fifths/)²⁰ that goes with it. **We can use the A natural minor scale to assign solfege syllables to the degrees of minor keys.** “*La*” is assigned to the first degree of the minor scale, and there is no need to change any of the syllables, as the A-minor scale has no accidentals. The solfege representation becomes *la-ti-do-re-mi-fa-so-la*:



For harmonic or melodic minor, simply alter the appropriate scale degree syllables. **This *la*-based minor solfege can be transposed to any minor key, just like moveable *do*.**

Why Movable “*Do*” Vs. Fixed “*Do*”?

The advantage of movable “*do*” is that you don’t have to worry about transposition; the tonic of whatever key you’re in automatically assumes the role of “*do*”.

In the other way of teaching solfege, known as the fixed “*do*” system, *do* **always** corresponds to the note “C”, *re* **always** corresponds to “D”, and so on, regardless of the key that you’re in.

Think of it like this: movable “*do*” is a way of recognizing *relative pitch*, or the differences in pitch. Fixed “*do*” relies more on *absolute pitch*. While learning fixed “*do*” solfege is a great step for musicians aiming to attain perfect pitch, movable “*do*” is much more versatile, allowing musicians to eventually identify intervals, regardless of the key the music is in.

In many countries, fixed *do* is basically the same as the lettering system, merely substituting the solfege syllables for “C-D-E...”.

²⁰ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/how-to-use-circle-fifths/>

In this series, we will be focusing on movable “do”, as it better illustrates the *relationships* between notes and is more conducive to learning ear training, which allows you to hum, play, or write the melody of your choice in any key.

Movable “Do” and Ear Training

At its root, ear training is all about developing a well-tuned musical ear. It involves learning to recognize intervals, chords, and chord progressions.

It is no surprise, then, that [learning movable “do” solfege](#)²¹ is highly useful for ear training for any musician. Think about the example already given above: if you hear “so” going up to “do”, regardless of key, you already know that the melody is going from scale degree 5 (the dominant) to scale degree 1 (the tonic), and that the interval is a perfect fourth. **Best of all, you can recognize the *sound* of the interval, enabling you to identify it in other music.**

Melodies are simply made up of one interval after another, or in other words, one solfege syllable after another. Learning to recognize a melody by associating syllables with pitch differences will go a long way in helping with ear training.

Learning Solfege: Where to Start?

If you Google “solfege” you’ll see there are other methods, including the aforementioned fixed “do”, but we will stick to talking about the [Kodály](#)²²/movable “do” system.

This system will train your ear to hear melodies and recognize the intervallic relationships between pitches, and be able to write them down quickly and easily. We will utilize tools found elsewhere on Musical U to supplement your training. As well as reading the tutorials

²¹ <https://www.ashleydanyew.com/posts/2016/how-to-teach-solfege-in-childrens-choir>

²² <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/what-is-kodaly-and-how-does-it-relate-to-ear-training/>

it will be vital that you spend a bit of time actually practicing the skills explained in this series!

This is a great way to begin your solfege training. Enjoy our [comprehensive guide on starting solfege](https://www.musical-u.com/learn/series/starting-solfa/)²³, in which you'll learn how to find the tonic of any key, and how to arrange the solfege syllables you learned about in this article to fit any melody you want.

Ear training is best learned by doing, rather than reading... So let's get started!

²³ <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/series/starting-solfa/>