All-State: Music Theory: Chevé or Counting? Solfège or Numbers?

presented by Dr. Brenda Brenner — reported by Douglas A. Neill

The music theory presentation by Dr. Brenda Brenner at the 2013 MNSOTA All-State Teacher's Workshop was very engaging and thought-provoking for me. I agree with her use of Solfège and Chevé Rhythm syllables for young elementary aged students, as the Chevé are easier to understand and repeat than counting, and the Solfège syllables are more easily sung. She also firmly believes that rhythms and pitches need to be actively sung by the students in order to take advantage of children's highly developed language skills. I agree totally; the more you can run through the language centers in students' brains, the more they will understand and retain the musical concepts and reading skills.

There is an issue that grows out of the use of these approaches. When do we switch students to more "mature" counting and sight-singing systems? When (if ever) do we switch to counting systems using 1+2+3-e-+-a 4, or do we stay with syllables? When (if ever) do we switch to numbers in sight-singing as opposed to Solfège?

Before giving my answers to these questions, I should reveal my background and biases. As a student, I never learned Solfège in a functional way. Sight singing at North Dakota State University was done in the early '80s using numbers. I did later on learn to use basic Solfège during the nine years I taught elementary classroom music in Lake Park/Audubon Minnesota. My students there could sight sing reasonably well through the pentatonic scale using Solfège.

I also have a strong background in instrumental music performance in many different genres. I play in the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony, jazz groups, rock bands, country bands, Irish bands, polka bands, Dixieland bands, and any other group that needs a tuba or bass.

I have also taught at all different levels including the classroom music mentioned above, band grades 5–12, choir grades 7–12, orchestra grades 5–8 and college lessons as an adjunct professor teaching tuba and (mainly electric) bass.

The reason I mention my background is that my experiences in these various learning and performing environments have led me to my current opinions on the above-mentioned music education issues. As all of us who perform music know, competent sight-singing skills are vital, and how we get our students to make and grow the connection between the written musical notation and the represented musical sound is at the core of what we do. We are trying to teach our students to be musically literate.

Dr. Brenner stated in her clinic that

Brenda Brenner

she didn't think students would ever need to switch from Chevé rhythm syllables to traditional counting. To an extent, I agree. There are many advantages to staying with the Chevé syllables, mainly stemming from student habit and familiarity. Using numbers is cumbersome; the spoken numbers don't lend themselves to being said quickly and clearly. The advantage of numbers is in the additional information concerning position in the measure—is this rhythm happening on beat 1, 2, 3 or 4? But students may find that information to be self-evident, and the numbers may confuse the issue as much as they help.

For me, it doesn't matter too much. I believe if a student can successfully handle the rests and other issues with rhythmic position in a measure while using Chevé syllables, great! I would feel no urgent need to switch them. But beginning at the college level, I think counting has to be taught from the standpoint of musical literacy. You have to be able to know as an adult performer what your fellow musicians mean when they say, "That entrance should be on the +(and) of four!"

I take almost the opposite view when it comes to Solfège, as heretical as that might be. I think we do our students a small disservice at the elementary level and a great disservice at the secondary level by using Solfège instead of numbers. I understand from my days as a singer and as a choral director that the Solfège syllables lend themselves to good vocal technique much more so than numbers (who wants to sing se-ven?), but that's the only advantage I see arrayed against many disadvantages.

Dr. Brenner spent a good bit of her theory presentation on the Solfège sunflower activity. This is a wonderful activity that physically represents the steps of the major scale (plus accidentals) as students sing. Do has the students' hand on their toes, Mi on their knees, So on their hips etc. This wonderfully accesses students' spatial sense to aid in their understanding of the pitch levels and intervals between those pitches in the major scale.

So why not use numbers as well? Why invent a third language in the study of what for most students is their second—music? Students understand counting very well, and the older students have a very good intuitive sense of the "distance" between the numbers, much like the "distance" in musical intervals. To me, on the level of student understanding, it makes no sense to exclude numbers for the sake of Solfège.

Further, my experience playing professionally in multiple genres convinces me that while Solfège can be used and can be used well, it is not at all in serious competition with numbers. It's a little bit like the United States' flirtation with the metric system. It's there; you can see it in various situations, but it has not displaced the old English form of measurement. To function in our country (for better or worse) you need to be able to understand Fahrenheit temperature, gallons, miles, feet and inches. For the measurements that matter most, the English system is what is used.

Among instrumental musicians, the numbering system is far more common in my experience than Solfège. Just last week, our church band was thinking quickly to respond to the minister's children's message involving *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* (in August!?), and one musician said quickly to the other, "In C; the melody starts on 5!" He did not say, "It starts on So."

We teach our students when working

on theory that all music springs from the major scale. Almost every form of music based in the Western tradition has as its main organizational principal the major scale. The chords built off the major scale are not named using Solfège symbols—it is not the Do–Fa–So chord progression; it is I–IV–V. The use of numbers throughout music education when it comes to melody and later chords would be self-evidently advantageous; immediately there is an understanding that the IV chord is built on the 4th step of the scale. It is not immediately obvious that it is built on Fa.

The Nashville numbering system is the currency among the many proficient musicians in that town. It was explained to me by Nashville guitarist Tim Thompson that through most of the 20th century the majority of the musicians in Nashville could not read traditional notation. They needed to communicate the music in some written form to shorten the learning curve when new songs were introduced to bands, so they started using numbers—Roman numeral I for the I chord, ii for the ii chord and so on. It is the same notation for chord analysis taught in college theory. (One significant difference—they do not change the numbers for minor keys. In other words, vi is actually what schooled musicians would call i in minor. So a I–IV–V progression transposed into minor using the Nashville numbering system would be vi–ii–III. Try reading that as a musician and see if it doesn't melt your brain!)

Jazz musicians and folk musicians similarly use numbering to identify chords and chord progressions for each other, as well as numbers to identify melody notes when needed.

I have used the numbering system to teach theory to my orchestra students. It is the best way I've thought of to explain changing key. I start with a common tune—*Jingle Bells*—and explain that while it can start on any pitch, that pitch *has* to be the 3rd step of the major scale. We then play several major scales and perform *Jingle Bells* using each of those scales while I call out the number of each note of the melody. I then ask the students to identify a familiar song while I show the rhythm and numbers of the melody with my fingers—not unlike signing in Solfège. The students love the challenge, and I've never had a class that couldn't identify the songs I signed for them. Will it help their understanding of music theory? I believe so… and I believe that not using Solfège will not hinder their growing knowledge of music theory. Using Solfège instead of the more intuitive numbers will.

Doug Neill teaches at Horizon Middle School in Moorhead.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Fall 2013 (Vol. 16, No. 1)