

SOLFÈGE

by Mr. Altman

TWO SYSTEMS

Solfège is a toolbox of words, handsigns, and note relationships that help musicians understand music. It's foundational—like so much else, you can use it even if you can't explain it or where it came from. In my elementary music classes, we refer to *solfège* as "all that *do re mi* stuff". It was there at the historical beginning of applied music theory, and it's no less useful today.

Movable-do

In the US, we use letter names to represent notes—named frequencies and all their octaves. We use *solfège* to organize other notes in a set relative to one central note. In other words, we choose a key like E Major, and call every E *do* (or *la* if we want E Minor). In fact, this extends to all *solfège* syllables—each one can be central, giving us seven distinct tonalities.

This is the movable-*do* system. It makes transposing easy because we can always assign *do* (or *la*, or any of the others) to a specific central note and the system organizes itself around it.

Fixed-do

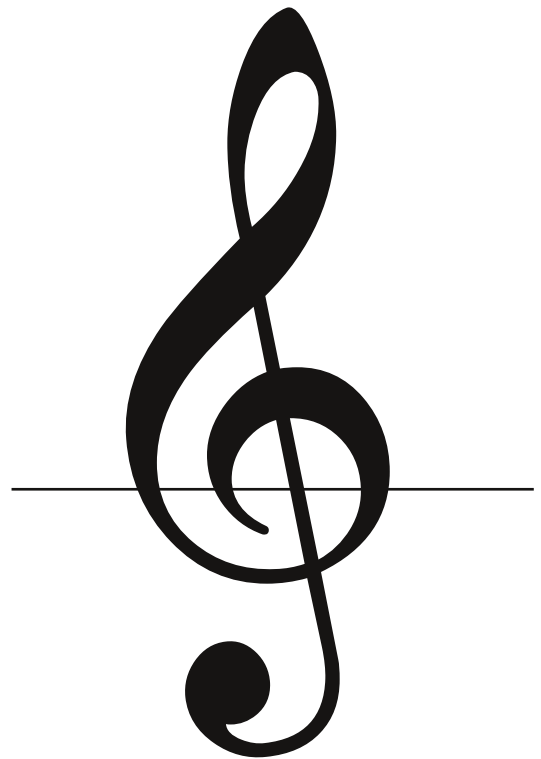
In France and elsewhere, musicians never adopted letter names for notes. They use *solfège* in the way it was first used—as the only system for labelling notes.

This isn't the sort of thing most Americans know about. In fact, I wouldn't have known this either if it were not for a young French-speaking man from western Switzerland. He was in the US for the Summer, and his grandmother signed him up for guitar lessons with me just for fun—we may have had more fun than we were entitled to in our attempts to communicate.

Here's the thing, letter names for notes is an innovation that took over the original role that *solfège* fulfilled. In a system without letter names for notes, *solfège* is limited to the key we call C Major. In French, it has a different name: *Do Majeur*.

TREBLE CLEF

The treble clef symbol is actually a clever combination of two other symbols for an important note, namely G or *so*.



It's an S and a G Overlaid

The symbol has become highly stylized from centuries of use but if you look closely you'll see it. This symbol is an elongated *s*, for *so* (more precisely, *sol*, but let's not worry about that). If you take that part out, what's left is a stylized G. Young musicians sometimes call it the "G Clef", unless of course they're French. Then it's the "*Clé de Sol*".