

Sight Singing in Relation to the Total Theory Program

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The teaching of sight singing has one of the oldest pedagogical traditions in what today we recognize as a standard component of the typical theory curriculum. As an academic discipline it has a heritage that extends over a period of centuries dating back to the days of Guido d'Arezzo (c. 990-1050) whose "hand" was one of the first pedagogical techniques in theory to be developed. The medieval system of solmization changed little until the seventeenth century when French musicians began to develop what we know today as the "fixed do" system. This set the stage for a division of philosophy between the proponents of "moveable do" (whereby solfege syllables are applied to pitches according to tonality, thus the syllable "do" always represents tonic) versus "fixed do" (whereby the pitch "C" is always assigned "do," the pitch "D" becomes "re," etc.). Within each of these philosophies are proponents that sing either with or without chromatic variables. It should also be added that there are those who, from a "moveable do" orientation, prefer use of scale degree numbers over any syllable. And finally, some teachers of sight singing refuse to implement any system of solmization and prefer to use a neutral syllable such as "la."

Regardless of the means through which sight singing is taught, it is not the purpose of this article to address a preferred system of teaching the discipline. Instead, the author chooses to focus upon a concern which seems to be in-

frequently brought to the forefront but one which is of paramount importance. The point is: What are theorists attempting to achieve in offering courses in sight singing, and how does it relate to the total theory curriculum?

To address this, a clear understanding of the purpose of sight singing must be established. There are several attitudes which seem to dominate. Choral directors and voice instructors often feel that sight singing serves as an extension of their training; that is, it makes everyone a better singer. Many instrumentalists feel sight singing is simply a means of helping one's sight reading and some maintain that its relevancy might be enhanced by discontinuing the vocal orientation for instrumentalists in favor of letting the student use his or her own instrument. And there are those who feel that sight singing is an academic discipline which is an undefinable component in the building of one's musicianship.

All of these attitudes address aspects of sight singing, but the following statement seems to bring together the total dimensions of this age-old discipline: "Sight singing is a necessary tool for every musician, one which is beneficial not only as an analytical tool but also as an important and convenient means of musical communication."¹

The aforementioned statement generates the following observations. While most theorists tend to be in agreement about various virtues of sight singing, it is interesting to note that there appears to be a lack of support for it in terms of classroom instruction. Over the years there has been a trend to combine it with courses in ear training and then deflate the total package from a two- or three-credit course to a one-credit offering. In short, it has become a rather fashionable trend to reduce the emphasis on sight singing as more and more requirements are placed on music curricula in higher education.

The idea of reducing the actual instruction time devoted exclusively to sight singing is not altogether an improper one. In fact, such a structure can be successful as long as it is treated as a part of the total theory instruction. One does have to question the theory curriculum which gives one credit to sight singing in conjunction with ear training for one or two years and feels that this part of the student's training is adequate. A philosophy which feels that singing is something that is done during the freshman and sophomore years and then never again within the curriculum is a faulty one. This statement is generated by the fact that there are simply too many "musicians" who are at a loss to communicate musically without use of an instrument.

¹de Zeeuw and Foltz, Sight Singing and Related Skills (Swift Publishing Company: Manchaca, Texas), 1975.

The thought of having a piano, violin, or whatever, at one's fingertips at all times, is entertaining but highly impractical. The fact is that the human voice is the only means of musical communication that a musician carries at all times.

Without more formal study at this point, it is difficult to determine which sight singing approach is more effective. On the other hand, it is likely that for most students, four semesters, six quarters, or whatever limited time is spent on sight singing, can do little more than provide a foundation for the discipline. To a certain extent, this is how it must be, for there is simply too much to be covered in an undergraduate theory curriculum. However, it is the task of the instructor of harmony, orchestration, counterpoint, or analysis to incorporate singing into the total theory curriculum. This immediately poses the problem of how to integrate singing into these courses without interfering with the content of the class involved. The fact is that such activity can be integrated and can actually result in enhancing the course of study while developing this aspect of the student's method of communication.

The first area of consideration will be ear training, frequently taught in conjunction with sight singing but not always thoroughly integrated. One technique that can be employed is based upon the traditional format of a Bach chorale being played at the piano for purposes of dictation. How much more effective it is to divide the class into two equal SATB groups and have one group sing the chorale to the other half and vice versa. The benefits of this approach are plentiful. First of all, a Bach chorale is not a piece of music which is meant for or conducive to the piano. The individual melodic lines surface much better with the human voice than with the piano. A second important aspect is the critical interaction among students which develops when one group of students is depending upon the other for the correct pitch and rhythm in order to transcribe the sounds to paper. A healthy amount of peer pressure develops when one group sings to the other slightly sharp or flat on a particular part. Aside from the chorale texture, the human voice is an excellent vehicle through which to transmit melodic dictation as a welcome relief to the dictation exercises being played on the piano. Students who have worked exclusively with ear training at the piano can be in store for a substantial shock when initiated to the "vocal sound."

For most theorists the strong relationship between ear and voice is not an unfamiliar one, but there are less traditional kinships between sight singing and other courses within the standard theory curriculum which need to be examined. One such possibility which is frequently overlooked is the counterpoint class. A course in counterpoint (whether sixteenth- or eighteenth-century) can and should

involve extensive vocal work. One approach is based upon the traditional species counterpoint format. The object is to have the student play the cantus firmus at the keyboard while having him or her sing the counterpoint from numbers. The example below illustrates this exercise in a third species example taken from the Gradus ad Parnassum of Fux.²

Example 1. Fux: Gradus ad Parnassum.

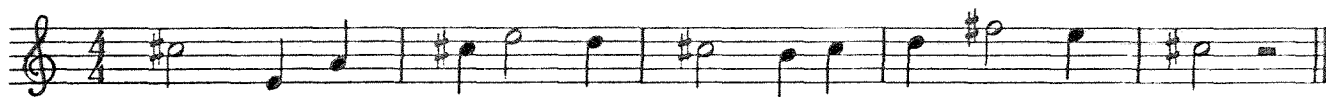
The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is the cantus firmus, written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of seven measures with notes and fingerings: 1 2 3 4, 3 4 5 6, 8 7 5 6, 8 7 6 5, 3 4 5 6, 8 1 3 4, 3 1 2 3. The bottom staff is the counterpoint, also in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of four measures with notes and fingerings: 3 2 1 3, 3, 3 4 5 6, 8. A sharp sign is placed above the 6th measure of the counterpoint staff. Below the counterpoint staff, the numbers 3 2 1 are written.

As an in-class activity the instructor can divide the students in half and assign the cantus firmus to one half with the other singing the counterpoint. Benefits from such an exercise are plentiful. The vocal/aural acquaintance with the various species is extremely valuable. At the same time this affords the student a mental exercise which can aid immensely in reinforcing the principles of counterpoint.

Orchestration would seem to be an unlikely candidate to be associated with singing and naturally it should have a primary focus towards instrumental sounds; however, singing exercises can be successfully incorporated into this course of study. Material which forces the student to develop an instantaneous facility with orchestral transpositions is especially effective. For instance, in Example 2, an orchestral excerpt in written pitch is given. The object is to have the student sing such exercises in sounding pitch from written pitch, using letter names. Thus, in the French horn example, the student would have to transpose the excerpt down a perfect fifth. Once again, singing within orchestration courses is not meant to detract from the necessary instrumental orientation; however, such a vocal technique does provide an effective means of developing a

²This exercise and concept is taken from: de Zeeuw and Foltz, Sight Singing and Related Skills (Swift Publishing Company: Manchaca, Texas), 1975.

Example 2. Mahler: Symphony no. 1 in d (horn in F).



necessary skill, facile instrumental transposition. These exercises aid the students tremendously in their ability to handle transposition and in turn their own orchestral score study.

In courses of analysis there are an abundant number of possible vocal techniques which can be employed. Within the area of twentieth-century techniques, the singing of primary melodic ideas can be helpful in the aural perception of a work. An example is the first movement of the Concerto for Harpsichord by Manuel de Falla. One method of introducing the movement to a class is to have the students sing the two primary ideas several times in order to get them clearly organized in their minds. The following set of examples illustrates this procedure:

Example 3. Manuel de Falla: Concerto for Harpsichord
(first movement).

Theme I.

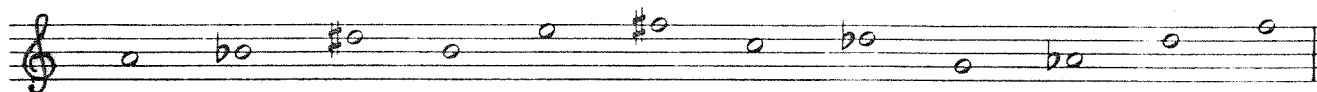


Theme II.

After singing the two themes, a recording of the movement can be played. The vocal introduction to the movement will provide an immediate accessibility to the music, which is in a modified sonata-allegro structure.

Another presentation method which can be helpful in a course of twentieth-century analysis involves study of twelve-tone technique. An example might be a piece such as Schoenberg's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 36. A statement of the twelve-tone row is given in Example 4. After singing the original row using letter names, the student should be encouraged to sing the retrograde, inversion, and various transpositions. Vocal reinforcement of the twelve-tone technique can be useful in bringing serial music into a musical light, as opposed to a more mechanical or mathematical state of mind which is frequently found with undergraduate students.

Example 4. Schoenberg: Concerto for Violin and
Orchestra, Op. 36.



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A final set of techniques makes use of reductive analysis. One activity is to have the student sing a reduction of a melodic line against the melody in its original form. A more elaborated form of this exercise can involve the division of the class into high and low voice ranges and have them sing a two-voice reduction (background or middle-ground level) against an actual performance of the piece. Such work enables the student to sing his or her analysis with the music and hear how the structural pitches identified sound when superimposed against the actual composition. While measures of sustained dissonance can occur, it is a helpful exercise which can produce interesting results, in terms of hearing how the structural pitches come "in and out of focus" against more foreground events.

Obviously, this discussion has presented just a few of the many ideas possible in moving sight singing into areas of the entire theory curriculum. There are many more which can be used, but hopefully those identified can generate additional techniques which can be applied throughout the entire theory curriculum. It is the intention of this article to encourage students (and teachers) of sight singing to think of the discipline as more than a "necessary evil" to which all students must be submitted as were their mentors before them dating back to the days of Guido.

Techniques such as those explored address an overall musical concept with which teachers of theory must keep an eternal vigil, that of insuring that students do not go about their theory studies in a mechanical way. They must always be "internalizing" their musical concepts and analysis. It must be assured that what is put on paper by the student is "heard in his head." All too often it is apparent after examining a student analysis that the work had never been musically internalized; rather, it was "perceived" as a mechanical, external study of notes on paper.

Sight singing skills are integral aspects of musicianship and companions for the theorist. It is the duty of all teachers within the college-level theory curriculum to insure that students realize through practice and application

that sight singing is ". . .a necessary tool for every musician, one which is beneficial not only as an analytical tool but also as an important and convenient means of musical communication."³

³de Zeeuw and Foltz, Sight Singing and Related Skills (Swift Publishing Company: Manchaca, Texas), 1975.