Communications

To the Editor:

Steve Larson's article, "The Value of Cognitive Models in Evaluating Solfege Systems," focuses readers' attention on some of the problems associated with the selection of a solfege system.[1] Larson has framed his mode of inquiry around a lengthy numerical analysis of several solfege systems based upon "simplified" cognitive models that attempt to represent how one uses solfege syllables for sight singing and dictation. He concludes that his "paper points up some of the striking problems created by la-based minor. There are some applications that make it the system of choice. But if our purpose is to vivify scale degree function, do-based minor appears to be a better choice."[2] These statements warrant further examination.

Larson uses rule-based models in an attempt to demonstrate the relative complexity of what it means to learn syllables.[3] Developing simplified cognitive models to "help clarify questions about the number of solfege syllables one must learn and the relevance of this number in evaluating systems of solfege,"[4] may be informative and form the basis for further research. But it may also be inconclusive to state categorically the superiority of one system over another one based upon these criteria.

In comparison with Larson's rule-based approach for teaching

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[1]Steve Larson, "The Value of Cognitive Models in Evaluating Solfege Systems," *Indiana Theory Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 73-116. For a related discussion of solfege systems, see Micheál Houlahan and Philip Tacka, "The Americanization of Solmization: A Response to Timothy A. Smith," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 6 (1992): 137-52 and "Continuing the Dialogue: The Potential of Relative Solmization at the College Level," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 8 (forthcoming).

[2]Larson, 115.

[3]Ibid., 91

[4]Ibid.

theory, Bernarr Rainbow advocates an approach that is initially dependent upon the aural perception of relative pitch.[5] He states that "Tonic sol-fa had its origins in Guidonian Solmization, depending like that system upon aural perception of relative pitch . . . . [It was a system] designed to make the pupil familiar from the outset with the aural effect of note relationships instead of introducing him first to a catalogue of musical facts and symbols."[6] Throughout this article, Rainbow reiterates the aural basis for this solfege system; a grounding in music theory is not a prerequisite for the understanding of this system. "The beginner was not first introduced to the sound and sol-fa names of the degrees of the major scale and then required to practice pitching random diatonic intervals . . . [or] to calculate the position of a note by counting through the scale."[7] This statement is the hallmark of the methodology so closely associated with tonic sol-fa and relative solmization, a later adaptation of the tonic sol-fa system. Counting solfege syllables, while in itself revealing for some music theorists, may be completely redundant for assessing the value of a particular solfege system. We need to be cognizant of the concise methodology that exists for teaching each solfege system.

As is evident from Rainbow's article, students who are taught to read and take dictation using the tonic sol-fa or relative solmization do not rely on Larson's rather complex and mechanical approach to reading and writing skills. The success of tonic sol-fa with the amateur musician attests to this fact. No attempt is made within the relative solmization system to convert note names to scale degree functions and then to solfege syllables or vice versa. Larson asserts that la-based minor "measures intervals between adjacent notes rather than locating

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[5]Bernarr Rainbow, "Tonic Sol-fa," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. 19 (London: Macmillan, 1980), 61-65.

[6]Ibid., 61. Guidonian Solmization—ut (later replaced by do), re, mi, fa, sol, la—was developed by Guido of Arezzo in the eleventh century. This system, created to facilitate the development of sight singing, was derived from a hymn text, *Ut queant laxis*, that Guido may have set to music. It is interesting to note that this hymn ends on re!

[7]Ibid., 63.

the notes with respect to the tonic."[8] But this is not how tonic sol-fa or relative solmization works. Tonic sol-fa or relative solmization:

> links the notes to *tonal images* and associations in our hearing so that they may be transferred to any tonal system be it major, minor, modal, pentatonic or prepentatonic, with the exception perhaps of the 20th-century dodecaphony. It is not associated with scales, for a so-mi minor third will sound identical in the major or Dorian scales. . . . In short, the music reading elements and the auditive elements form a unity in relative solmization.[9]

Larson has offered the reader an approach to the selection of a solfege system based on his personal interpretation of how one translates notation into solfege syllables and solfege syllables into notation in order to justify the use of the do-minor system over a la-based minor system of solfege. Unfortunately, Larson's models are only relevant for those teachers who teach solfege according to his methodology and cannot be applied to other systems of solfege. As is evident from Rainbow's article, no comparisons between solfege systems can be made without a comprehensive discussion of methodology. While some of Larson's observations may help illuminate the continuing debate on the usage and ultimate choice of a particular solfege system, many need further investigation and discussion to make his paper's inferences more explicit.

Yours sincerely,

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[8]Larson, 114-15.

[9]László Dobszay, *After Kodály, Reflections on Music Education* (Kecskemét: Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music, 1992), 54.