



REVIEW: BOOK

The Solfeggio Tradition: A Forgotten Art of Melody in the Long Eighteenth Century

Nicholas Baragwanath

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Having your eyes opened to an entire world of music history, especially one that you thought you understood but clearly did not, can be an exhilarating experience. That eighteenth-century musicians could have had such different training in melody is both surprising and genuinely intriguing. Imagine, for example, posing this question to a group of talented graduate students: ‘Which tradition of melodic training was closest to what Haydn learned as a choirboy at the Stephansdom in Vienna – “fixed *do*” (à la Paris Conservatoire) or “moveable *do*” (as in many American colleges)?’ Until the appearance of Nicholas Baragwanath’s new book, the students would have had no comprehensive source to consult. They might guess one or the other answer, but it is likely that no one would give the correct answer, which is ‘None of the above’.

As the author makes clear, even though our present consumption of music from eighteenth-century Europe focuses on the marvels composed for wealthy courts and theatres, the musical centre of gravity for eighteenth-century contemporaries resided in the church. Viewed as a music-producing institution, a dukedom’s single court or theatre could perform only a small fraction of the music provided in daily services at its hundreds of churches. Much of that music was plainchant, and so training boys to serve as choristers was the central focus of music education in much of Europe. The pedagogy attributed to Guido of Arezzo was not merely a relic of late medieval times but a living presence in the lives of young choristers and seminarians during the Enlightenment. If Stefano Mengozzi’s 2010 book *The Renaissance Reform of Medieval Music Theory: Guido of Arezzo between Myth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) traces that tradition from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, Baragwanath’s book takes it from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth.

Three of the greatest nineteenth-century quests were to find the sources of the Nile, of the Mississippi and of Gregorian chant. The living tradition of chant had been, if not severed, then at least heavily damaged during the Napoleonic era. Seeking pure medieval sources to make repairs, scholars turned their backs on the practice of chant in the eighteenth century or indeed almost any chant practice of the post-Tridentine era. Fortunately for us today, a large corpus of small manuals for choristers in early modern Europe has managed to survive. Drawing on these manuals, which exhibit great uniformity from rural Poland all the way to the southern tip of Italy, Baragwanath details how chant was still taught to boys like Haydn using the old four-line staff and F or C clefs. The boys learned the hexachordal note names (*do, re, mi, fa, sol, la*) and first practised just saying (not singing) them as they read the old chant notation. The F line of the F clef was *fa*, with *mi* below it, and the same was true for the C line of the C clef (thus *fa* with *mi* below it). Rather than being conceived as a tonic, keynote or final, ‘do’ meant a note at the bottom of a hexachord, any note of which might be the local keynote or tonic. Although the situation was

complicated, it is not anachronistic to apply words like ‘tonic’ and ‘dominant’ to notes in many chants during the eighteenth century. Chants were regularly adapted to have leading notes and were often sung in a metre or at least with a regular pulse that progressed to stock cadences given a harmonically tonal interpretation when accompanied. So for choristers, chant or *canto fermo* was not a wholly different musical language from what they encountered in *canto figurato*, the more advanced material written on the five-line staff of today’s standard notation.

The book guides the reader along through a condensed version of the training received by a young chorister. Children, of course, learn quickly without overthinking the nature of the material taught. The spelling of the word ‘taught’, for instance, will appear much stranger to an adult learning English as a foreign language than to an English-speaking child. So the more a reader on this journey can let go of prior ideas about scales and keys, the easier it will be to begin thinking and hearing in the spirit of eighteenth-century solfeggio. Take, for example, the following quotation from a manuscript held in Rome, probably penned in the period 1730–1750, the *Regole della Musica Imparate à cantare, in tutte le chiavi con gli Accidenti più usati doppo i quali, s’aggiungono vari solfeggi* (Rules for Music: Learn to Sing in All Clefs with the Most Common Accidentals, after Which are Appended Various Solfeggi; Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele II, Rome (I-Rn), MSS Musicali 137): ‘The mutation begins on *fà* and finishes on *fà*. The mutation at the fourth has four notes and the mutation at the fifth has five notes. This is the most essential rule for solmizing and for singing well’ (cited on page 73).

One can see why this material has remained hidden for centuries. To an outsider it can seem unintelligible. Let us start with ‘mutation’. In an eighteenth-century context, and at the elementary level, this meant a change from the natural to the hard hexachord, or vice versa. Since that explanation may itself need explanation, the natural hexachord is C–D–E–F–G–A and the hard hexachord is G–A–B–C–D–E. If one begins an ascending scale on the G below middle C, the scale’s fourth note will be the C of a C clef, sung as *fà*. The next three notes ascending will be D (*re*), E (*mi*) and F (*fà*), so that is the meaning of ‘the mutation at the fourth has four notes’. Ascending, this mutation is always sung *fà–re–mi–fà* (C–D–E–F, the slanted line meaning ‘change to the higher hexachord’); descending it is sung *fà–la–sol–fà* (F–E–D–C, the backward slanted line meaning ‘change to the lower hexachord’). If mutation at the fourth moves from the hard hexachord (G) to the natural (C) when ascending, mutation at the fifth does the reverse. There we would begin an ascending scale on the C in the bass clef, with its fourth note being the F of an F clef, sung as *fà*. The next four notes ascending will be G (*sol*), A (*re*), B (*mi*) and C (*fà*), so that is the meaning of ‘the mutation at the fifth has five notes’. Ascending, this mutation is always sung *fà–sol–re–mi–fà* (F–G–A–B–C); descending it is sung *fà–mi–la–sol–fà* (C–B–A–G–F).

The reader may not absorb this on a first pass. Choirboys memorized such rules and practised them six days a week over months and months with a teacher, preceptor or senior boy always nearby for help. There is, however, an inner logic to the system. Diatonic semitones are always *mi–fa*. The lines marked by C and F clefs are always sung *fà* (the grave accent signalling their landmark status). Rising mutations switch hexachords on *re*, and falling mutations on *la*. The four- and five-note mutations described above are both bounded by the *fàs* of the two hexachords and clefs. These and other rules of thumb literally used a boy’s thumb and fingers to embody the patterns through the Guidonian hand. That is, the notes of the gamut were associated with positions at the joints of a boy’s left hand. To us, *fà–re–mi–fà* may seem an abstract representation, but a choirboy of that era could almost feel the pattern it had traced so many times on his hand (65–67).

One way of thinking about this eighteenth-century system of a ‘compound scale’ (71) made of the natural and hard hexachords (transposable to any pitch) is to note its clear focus on preparing a boy to be able to recognize and navigate a local melodic topography. The skills fostered can apply with equal grace to plainchant, Palestrina, Mozart, Bruckner, Fauré and Gershwin. It is not, however, a skillset directed at being able to divine a global tonic. Baragwanath provides the syllables that a choirboy (or his maestro) would likely have sung to a few famous eighteenth-century melodies.

The opening of the vocal line of Mozart's 'Là ci darem la mano', for instance, would be given the syllables *fa – fa sol | la – fa – | re – sol – | – fa* (119). This will make *do* the dominant of the key and *fa* its tonic. To readers trained in movable-*do* solfeggio this will sound like heresy, but one person's heresy could be another's reformation. While the merits of the old system may not yet, at this point, seem compelling, let us nevertheless press on to explore more of what the author has discovered and how the advanced features of the solfeggio tradition reveal a sophisticated 'forgotten art of melody'.

Traditional stage actors and musicians were trained to bring sparse documents to life, be they scripts or scores. The words and stage directions in a *commedia dell'arte* script contained only part of the 'business' that an actor would need to perform. Similarly, an eighteenth-century musician could be expected to add some business to the score of an adagio, whether subtle performance nuances, decorative ornaments or more extensive diminutions. Baragwanath has identified two rules and a type of notational cue that characterize the Italian approach to decorating and performing solfeggi.

With the Amen rule, an entire solfeggio could be sung with the vowel 'A' beginning on the first note and then continuing for all the remaining notes except for the very last one, which would receive the syllable 'men'. The author cites a number of maestros who recommended this practice or whose manuscripts were annotated to suggest it. We might call this the 'big' form of the Amen rule. The 'small' form involved holding a single solfeggio syllable for the duration of a diminution.

In his *Li primi albori musicali per il principianti della musica figurata* (The First Musical Preliminaries for Beginners in *musica figurata* (Bologna: Monti, 1679)) Lorenzo Penna wrote: 'Sometimes a composition is made up of long white notes of one or more beats, especially if it is in a *cappella* style. Breaking these up every now and then creates a beautiful effect. It is a good idea to add some movement above them, to break the long notes up and turn them into smaller ones, without losing the notated time. In other words, to sing them like an Amen' (cited on page 130). Penna's treatise provides a musical example of this suggestion. He shows two semibreves marked *re* and *fa*. Then he shows the first note, *re*, converted into four crotchets (*re, do, re, mi*), all of which are still sung *re*, followed by the semibreve *fa*. In other words, for Penna, a diminished *re* leading to a terminus on *fa* is 'like an Amen', just as a diminution on the vowel 'A' leads to a terminus on 'men'.

The Amen rule retains an initial solfeggio syllable during a subsequent diminution. The appoggiatura rule does the reverse, prepending the syllable of the main note to the one or more notes that 'lean' into it (*appoggiare*). As Johann Friedrich Agricola wrote in his *Anleitung zur Singkunst* (Introduction to the Art of Singing (Berlin: Winter, 1757)), 'When a syllable falls on a main note, which itself is notated with an appoggiatura or any other ornament, then it [the syllable] must be pronounced on the appoggiatura. . . . All appoggiaturas must be slurred to their main note' (cited on page 137). The special notation of appoggiaturas as grace notes is a graphic vestige of their lowered status in eighteenth-century solfeggio. Appoggiaturas were not given their own syllable because they were subsidiary embellishments to their main note. When notated with a smaller notehead or noteheads, it is obvious what qualifies as an appoggiatura. Less obvious are all the other embellishments that could also be interpreted as leaning into a main note. Maestros could help students identify these contexts by means of 'traits of vocalization'.

Traits of vocalization resemble slurs. In the course of editing several solfeggio manuscripts, your reviewer had noticed them and often wondered why they were there. Slurs are not common in the instructional material from Naples. In solfeggi, these slurs typically occur once or twice near the beginning of a lesson or near the beginning of a florid sequence. Baragwanath reproduces images of these traits as they appear in a number of Italian manuscripts. Based on suggestive remarks in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources, he interprets them as cues for invoking the Amen or appoggiatura rule. This is an important discovery well supported by the evidence. One might question, of course, why such helpful and instructive markings were not given a clear definition and exemplified unambiguously by the old masters. Yet many things important in conservatory

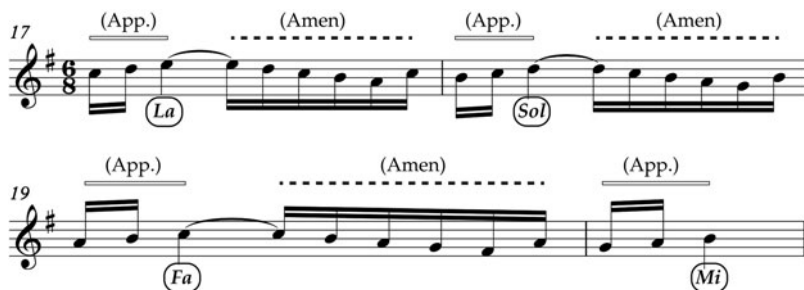


Figure 1. Episode from J. S. Bach's G major fugue from the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*

culture were not explained to outsiders. A number of partimenti, for instance, feature the letter 'X' among the figured-bass numbers. Fétis even mused about the mysterious meaning of the 'X', as did your reviewer, until one day I realized that it meant the Roman numeral '10'. In the same way, Baragwanath's extensive experience with the solfeggio repertory helped him realize the meaning of those slurs. Given that realization, it then makes perfect sense that traits of vocalization appear at the beginning of a lesson or sequence because they represent a maestro saying 'Solmize it like this, here and in what follows'.

The Amen and appoggiatura rules, whether or not marked by traits, can transform a solfeggio lesson from the rigid singing of syllables for each note to something akin to a performed melodic analysis. In this regard let us examine the melody of an episode from J. S. Bach's G major fugue from the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (see Example 1). Singing a separate syllable for each semiquaver, while certainly possible, might sound ungainly or even comic in performance. If, in each bar, we instead apply the appoggiatura rule to the two semiquavers that begin the bar and lead into a long-held note, and also apply the Amen rule to the florid extensions of those same long notes, then the entire passage would be sung to only four syllables, *la, sol, fa, mi*. Baragwanath entitles his eighth chapter 'Learning *la-sol-fa-mi*, with Some Hints on Musical Grammar', where this lovely passage by Bach would find itself very much at home amid all of the author's examples by Italian masters.

There is much more in this ground-breaking book than can be covered in a short review. For instance, the minor mode, like the medieval mode 1, took its bearings from *re* (untransposed, that could be D or A). As a result, the major-mode second theme of a sonata movement in minor would be likely to require a different set of syllables when it reappeared in the minor mode, further evidence that eighteenth-century solfeggio syllables did not primarily represent scale degrees. When a Neapolitan maestro wanted to talk about the fourth scale degree, he simply said 'The fourth note of the key' ('*la 4^a di tono*'), not *fa*.

Authentic eighteenth-century solfeggio in the Italian tradition largely died out in the later nineteenth century. Of all the systems of solfeggio still in use today, the one that best matches what young Haydn was first taught at the imposing Stephansdom in Vienna is the humble four-symbol shape-note system still used in a few conservative churches in the American South. That unexpected answer suggests that for scholars and practitioners today who desire an 'early-music' approach to melody, Baragwanath's book will open up a host of fascinating avenues that have the potential to lead us toward a fundamental re-evaluation of eighteenth-century melody.

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