Walk into any primary grade music class in the U.S., and you will likely hear teacher and students singing a musical greeting, such as “Good morning boys and girls” (sol-mi-mi-sol-sol-mi) and the response “Good morning Miss Purdy” (sol-mi-mi-sol-mi-mi). Since about the 1970s, teachers have been beginning and ending music class for young children by singing the sol-mi interval and treating this interval as a foundation for further music study. So, why sol-mi?

What prompted teachers to use sol-mi as a pedagogical approach to tonal literacy? Why has it been so enthusiastically implemented? Is it a valid starting point for children’s study of music?

After thirty years of using sol-mi as a first step to teaching melody to children, dialogue about this practice seems warranted. The questions and propositions in this article invite that exchange. What do you think?

**Importation as Innovation**

The initial practice of singing two-note sol-mi and three-note sol-mi-la songs in music classes for children coincided with at least

American music education can benefit from a reexamination of the practice of centering music education programs for young children around the sol-mi interval.
two trends in American education in the 1960s and 1970s: (1) the country was clamoring for increased academic accountability and achievement in education and (2) methodologies developed in other countries (Suzuki, Dalcroze, Orff, Kodály) were being imported and adopted for teaching music to children.

As intense scrutiny was aimed at educational programs, we welcomed the new emphases on music study, sequence, and achievement that these foreign methods offered. Though some music educators worried about adoption without adaptation, those voices of caution are now mainly silent.

Philosophies and practices of the Kodály and Orff approaches, in particular, brought the sol-mi interval to the forefront of elementary music education. These methodologies undeniably have strengthened pedagogical understandings and practices in American music education. American music teachers have gained expertise from implementing international models, but what might we also have lost in doing so? Although the principles of these great educators seem sound, the practices developed in their names deserve reconsideration.

Over time, educational trends (e.g., rhythm and sol-la syllables, hand signs, simplified notation, curricular sequence) often become almost seamlessly embedded in classroom content, no longer used because of their connection to a particular author, line of thinking, or methodology. Lines that delineate the origin of an idea blur, and once-new thoughts become habits of mind. The fact that innovative thought so often evolves into acceptance as common wisdom is at the root of my questions about sol-mi songs.

Pre-1970s Song Collections

Prior to the 1970s, collections of English-language-based folk songs and music series texts for children reveal few, if any, two-note (sol-mi) and three-note (sol-mi-la) songs. Rather, song literature from the first half of the twentieth century offers children's songs with elemental variety—spirited melodies and lilting rhythms. Other than a few notable exceptions (e.g., "Rain, Rain Go Away" and the taunting chant, "I am bigger than you are"), song ranges were generally not limited to one or two repeated intervals.

What created this apparent disconnect between traditional children's folk song collections and America's current school repertoire? What caused the limitation of children's beginning music study to sol-mi and sol-mi-la, sometimes specifically on the pitches A, F#, and B? Surely in recent decades children have not lost the capability to sing varied melodies and compound rhythms. The cause for this dramatic change in approach may lie in what Elliot describes as the shift from singing for pleasure to singing for pedagogical purposes.

Importing Pedagogy

Sol-mi as a starting point for children's study of melody may have been adopted in the U.S. as a result of the logic outlined here:

- Sol-mi is the "universal interval."
- Therefore, sol-mi should be the foundational interval that generates learning about and reading tonal patterns in music.
- Mastering the interval of sol-mi in singing, reading, and writing music launches a structured sequence that adds one tone at a time, leading eventually to the chromatic scale.
- But what if this logic is faulty? Let's examine each of these notions.
- Is Sol-Mi the Universal Interval? Sometimes referred to as the ur song from the German urter,* sol-mi has been revered as a universal interval that children of any culture or language spontaneously produce without a model. The acquisition of song develops from a musical mother tongue that begins universally with sol-mi. The idea of a musical mother tongue (embraced by Suzuki, Kodály, and Orff, among others) is connected to the belief that early music education should emphasize the study of folk songs that are indigenous to the language and the people of a country. If we accept the validity of both the musical mother tongue approach and the universal interval, sol-mi would seem to be a logical starting point for beginning music education.

Three questions, however, arise from this argument:

- Why, if it is so culturally prevalent, do English-language folk songs infrequently feature sol-mi as a fundamental motive?
- If sol-mi is the universal interval that children can most easily produce, then why is this a building block that necessitates prolonged repetition and practice?
- If sol-mi is easily and commonly produced in childhood, does that mean we should build a music curriculum around it?7

W. Jay Dowling, coauthor of Music Cognition, has challenged the notion of the universal interval:

A persistent observation that I believe to be based on very weak evidence, dating perhaps from studies by Werner (Révész, 1954), is that the interval of a descending minor third is basic to children's singing. There was little evidence in the present corpus for a universal sol-mi-la-sol-mi melody.

Sol-mi-la does occur in folk songs such as "Ring around the Rosy" (S S M L S M) and "Bluebird" (S M S M S L S M). The pattern in both songs, however, is in a weaker melodic position than the stronger cadence patterns of M / S S D ("we all fall down") and M / S F M R D D ("to buy a piece of candy"). Dowling continues:

[My observations] agree with those of Moog (1976) in finding no evidence for the universality of the interval of the descending minor third. ... Moorehead et al. (1941–51) found the descending minor third common only in social chants, and not in normal spontaneous songs. The cross-cultural evidence for the universality of a descending minor third outside of Europe is also weak. Blacking (1967), for example, found a definite preponderance of other intervals in children's songs of the African Venda.

Folk songs grow from the melodic and rhythmic inflections of the lan-
language that births them. Transmitted for generations by oral tradition, these songs are the best sources for idioms that wed language and music. Although folk songs grown from another language may commonly include sol-mi and sol-mi-la, these patterns are not plentiful in English-language folk songs. Beginning American children’s study of music with musical idioms taken from English-language folk songs seems both efficient and logical.

Ironically, philosophical epistemologies of methods from across the ocean included two goals: establishing a sense of national unity and preserving a heritage of traditional folk songs. Have American music teachers accomplished these goals for our students? Or have we been so eager to embrace predesigned sequences that we have, in essence, rewritten our heritage of song?

How would elementary music education have developed in the U.S. if we had used the adopted philosophies as guideposts but drawn our methods and materials from American language, music, and educational contexts? Mary Helen Richards asked this question and designed a very different scope and sequence for elementary music education. Richards and her associates assembled a repertory of English-language folk songs, developed compatible study techniques and notation, and based pedagogical sequence on both children’s responses and linguistic sensitivity. For these music educators, the “whole [folk] song is curriculum, the child is pedagogy, and observation is methodology.”

Is Sol-Mi the Best Starting Place for Tonal Pedagogy? In the 1960s and 1970s, many American teachers searched for English-language folk songs based around sol-mi. If few such songs existed, from where has the current corpus come? Attempts to answer this question prompt four additional ones:

- Are we singing folk songs or folk sayings?
- Are we teaching intervals or teaching melodies?
- Is “school music” also “home music”?
- Are we singing folk songs or folk sayings? Pursuit of sol-mi and sol-mi-la songs in the 1970s was like a treasure hunt. Teachers needed a repertory of songs to launch the newly acquired sound-to-symbol sequence. As a result, exercises based on these intervals were created. Traditional sayings and poems were set to preferred intervals, and these short songs soon began appearing in printed sources as “American folk song” or “Traditional.” Was a new heritage of folk songs implied from this practice?

The moniker “folk song” can be misleading. Setting text, no matter how traditional or familiar, to a pattern of two- or three-note intervals does not make the resulting piece a folk song. Listen to a few of the sol-mi songs you know. Consider whether the texts more closely adhere to target intervals or to natural inflections of oral language. Many of us have used exercises and folk sayings on sol-mi so consistently that, in our minds, they became folk songs.

Is notation driving pedagogy? Commitment to presenting sound before symbol is clearly evident in nearly all current sequences for children’s study of music. The allure of study based on sol-mi is obvious:

- It’s simple: singing, sol-fa, and hand signs are limited to two pitches.
- It’s convenient: sol-mi fits onto adjacent spaces or lines on the staff.
- It’s structured: there is no ambiguity about where to begin, about how to proceed, or that music literacy is the goal.

Ironically, this simplicity, convenience, and structure may have masked some underlying concerns about the synchronicity between principles and practices. Though the principle is sturdy, the practices of many sound-before-symbol approaches may be “more rooted in teachers’ perceptions of the symbols of music than in their students’ perceptions of the sounds of music.”

Zeal for finding songs whose musical content matches the adopted tonal sequence has occasionally prompted changes in song notations. Even current series texts for children include apparent modifications that simplify tonal or rhythmic notation in order to facilitate pedagogical objectives. A slight change in melody, changing fa to mi or re to do, could transform a song considered too difficult for a certain age into a song that fits the curricular sequence.

Such minute changes in folk songs may seem justified to make the songs fit the study sequence. But when and why are manipulations of traditional folk song melodies warranted? If the complexity of conventional music notation were not an impediment in the transition from sound to symbol, would we still be tempted to simplify songs for children’s study?

Does simplification really make music learning easier? How does notational simplicity differ from aural simplicity? Musically easy (performance) and musically simple (notation) are not necessarily the same, and our attempts to simplify can actually make some musical tasks more difficult.

Our eagerness to see children demonstrate skills that appear to indicate music knowledge and literacy may have sidetracked our pedagogical goals and revised our perceptions of musical heritage.

Are we teaching intervals or teaching melodies? How should melody be taught to children? Do some of our practices sacrifice musicality in order to gain accuracy?

Musicality should be a feature of all steps toward music literacy. If we are to teach music musically, musicality should “run alongside any system or way of working.” Focusing on intervals rather than note groupings fragments musical experience, as well
Treating songs as wholes and studying them without unnecessary segmentation, as the following 1951 comment from Mursell will attest, is not a new idea, but this song-wise approach may be an idea whose time has come again:

You will always be wise to let the song itself do as much of the teaching as possible. Do not pick it to pieces beforehand. Do not stick in your thumb and pull out a couple of tonal patterns for preliminary study. Teach the whole song. Do not teach the materials little bit by little bit, or even phrase by phrase. Remember always that the song itself is the thing.20

Is "school music" also "home music"? How many songs sung in music classes today do children sing at home? Traditional folk songs and games can help bridge the gap between school music (songs that may be selected solely on pedagogical merits) and home music (songs that children and families want to sing together). Reigniting a common heritage of song depends on songs accepted in the home as "family music."21

Recent initiatives have spotlighted concerns about the state of our country's shared knowledge of songs. The Get America Singing Again campaign, launched in 1995, solicited American music teachers' opinions of what songs all Americans should sing.2 Other projects surveyed music teachers about what songs they teach, what songs their students know and can sing, and what songs should be taught to all American children.23 College methods teachers lament many future music and classroom teachers' lack of familiarity with traditional children's songs and nursery rhymes. Results of Ward's study, which specifically sought the opinions of music teachers over the age of sixty-two, "revealed that few American children's folk songs were being taught by general music teachers across the nation."24 When elementary music teachers devote themselves to revitalizing traditional folk songs for children, they are reconstituting a musical mother tongue and rekindling a common heritage of song.

as musical meaning.16 Swanwick states that "the smallest meaningful musical unit is the phrase or gesture, not an interval, beat, or measure" and warns that "if we get fixated by the interval notation we may find ourselves 'barking at print' ... [reading] in a stilted way with little idea of ... meaning."17

Fragmentation of musical material, especially when stripped of context, is not an efficient path toward musical understanding or musicality. Ignoring context, making things simple by isolating them from the backgrounds in which they are normally found, can anaesthetize musicality.

How would teaching melody differ from teaching intervals? In popular practice, there are at least four options for teaching melody. These are described in the Four Ways to Teach Melody sidebar. The melodic-figure approach contrasts with the interval (sol-mi) approach. The former teaches tonal patterns taken directly from songs, and the latter teaches intervals as songs. Pioneered in the work of Richards,18 the melodic-figure approach (not her term) arose in part from dissatisfaction with the sol-mi emphasis in music pedagogy.

Key to the melodic-figure approach is the aural, figural perception of music. Figural perception of music refers to listeners' natural abilities to organize sound into meaningful groups or figures.19 Aural patterns (what music sounds like) often differ substantially from visual patterns (what music looks like). In songs, the words cluster the sounds into figural patterns. Metric organization, in contrast, uses the frames of bar lines and beat groupings to derive patterns. Perception of and sensitivity to the figural groupings within music facilitate musicality. For teaching melody to children, the melodic-figure approach offers several advantages that are delineated in the Ten Hallmarks of a Melodic-Figure Approach sidebar.

The scale approach focuses on the structure of musical scales as they appear on the staff, provides a scaffold for understanding how individual pitches are sequenced into melody, and serves as a grid for identifying pitches and pitch relationships. The scale approach is notation based.

The interval approach repeats tonal patterns throughout a song or exercise to familiarize children with specific pitch intervals and moves through a taxonomy of easy-to-difficult patterns. Children's singing is often limited to the studied interval, at least during portions of a lesson, sometimes across lessons. The interval approach is pedagogy based.

The musical-word approach presents brief melodies of varied tonal and rhythmic content for children to echo. Melodies are selected for the facility and accuracy with which children reproduce them and are arranged into a hierarchy of difficulty. The musical-word approach is primarily facility and research based, according to Gordon.8

The melodic-figure approach recognizes melody chunks within songs. Traditional folk songs are primary repertoire, figural groupings define melody patterns, and patterns are highlighted within whole song contexts. The melodic-figure approach is primarily literature and perception based.9

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How Valid Is the Sequence That Begins with Sol-Mi? The importance of sequential music education seems inarguable. Yet identifying a best practice sequence for teaching music is surprisingly murky. Good teaching has order and sequence. But whose sequence makes the most sense to the learners?

Many of us rely on expert opinion to show us what to teach, how to teach it, and when to teach it. Are these opinions from a distance appropriate for our personal teaching contexts? To achieve "context appropriateness" in the scope and sequence we follow, we should ask ourselves a few key questions: What is the purpose of this sequence? As students progress through the sequence, are they finding joy in music? When students arrive at the end of the sequence, will the trek have been worth it?

Sequencing of concepts and skills in children's study of music is normally based on logic, but whose logic? Who determines what steps to take and when, what size the steps should be, when a step is too large or too small, or when to skip a step?

Ten Hallmarks of a Melodic-Figure Approach

1. The whole song is the context for highlighting, performing, and identifying melodic chunks.
2. Listening is treated as a fundamental activity in all music behavior; listening is a skill at the base of all music experiences.
3. Natural expressions of the English language are preserved in folk song performances and through study of structure, melody, and rhythm.
4. English-language folk songs are considered foundational to building a study-song repertory for American schoolchildren.
5. Melodic figures within non-folk-song literature extend study of melody in the music curriculum.
6. Vocal and aural variety is inherent in the study process. Figural patterns are sung within the context of whole songs, the keys in which songs are sung often vary during repetitions, and vocal exploration and confidence develop "in-tuneness."
7. Final cadences, phrase cadences, and repeated figural patterns are focal points for highlighting melody. Final cadence melodies tend to be repeated and remembered by children. (See the Sample Melodic Figures sidebar for examples.)
8. Do is part of early melody study. English-language songs are most frequently do-centered, most folk songs cadence on do, and all intervals (including sol-mi) are identified by their relationship to do.
9. Anacrusis begins many figural patterns in early music study as natural components of the English language. Preceding nouns with articles, adjectives, and prepositions creates speech patterns that move from nonstressed to stressed sounds.
10. Music notation such as maps, song dots, and ideographs facilitate melodic-figure study, moderate the transition from sound to conventional symbols, and provide opportunity for simultaneous reading, writing, and performing of music by children.

Vital, it is. It is only then when we look critically at this notion of teaching in a particular age or until all the basic facts have been mastered. ... Current evidence makes it clear that instruction emphasizing isolated facts and skills does students a major disservice ... such learning out of context makes it more difficult to organize and remember the information being presented.”

For many of us, it is only when we see the whole, when we figure out the answer, when we solve the problem, that the steps we took to get there finally make sense. Discovery learning takes many paths and many time frames; our views of sequence should embrace these variables and not rely on the false assumptions Hart cautions against:

Once we begin to look critically at this notion of teaching in logical sequence, we can see that usually a further giant—and utterly wrong—assumption has been
### Sample Melodic Figures in Folk Song Cadences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MRD</th>
<th>R/MMRMD</th>
<th>&quot;the farmer in the dell&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MRD</td>
<td>R/MMRMD</td>
<td>&quot;tideo&quot; &quot;as three blind mice&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRD</td>
<td>M/RRMRD</td>
<td>&quot;its fleece was white as snow&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRD</td>
<td>M/RRMRD</td>
<td>&quot;EIEIO&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRD</td>
<td>DR/FRMD</td>
<td>&quot;please don't take my sunshine away&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D/RS,D</th>
<th>D/RRS,$D$</th>
<th>&quot;who lives on Drury Lane&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D/RS,D</td>
<td>D/RRS,$D$</td>
<td>&quot;so early in the morning&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D/RS,D</td>
<td>$D$</td>
<td>&quot;go this way and that&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/LSFMRD</th>
<th>S/LSFMRD</th>
<th>&quot;all on a Saturday night&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S/LSFMRD</td>
<td>S/LSFMRD</td>
<td>&quot;to buy a piece of candy&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/LSFMRD</td>
<td>S/LSFMRD</td>
<td>&quot;way down yonder in the paw paw patch&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/L,T,D</th>
<th>D/T,$S$,$L$,$T$,$DD$</th>
<th>&quot;and Bingo was his name-o&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S/L,T,D</td>
<td>RMS,$L$,$DD$</td>
<td>&quot;won't you be my honey?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/L,T,D</td>
<td>$S$,$L$,$T$,$S$,$D$</td>
<td>&quot;Punchinella from the zoo&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/L,T,D</td>
<td>$S$,$L$,$DD$</td>
<td>&quot;dear Liza, a hole&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Subscripts indicate that preceding notes are lower than do.

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made: that if a subject is fragmented into little bits, and the student is then presented with the bits in some order that seems logical to somebody, the student will be quite able to assemble the parts and emerge with the whole—even though never given an inkling of the whole! ... The logic that seemed apparent to the curriculum builder, textbook writer, or teacher may be invisible and incomprehensible to the student.30

As we rethink the ways we sequence our teaching, we must watch and listen to our students' responses, letting them be the pedagogues, letting our knowledge and instincts select best practice. Through our expert opinion, based on study, analysis, and experience, we should become the authorities of method for our students31 and let observation become our methodology.32 When faced with findings from narrowly applicable research and practices developed from expert opinion, caution is a good thing. This is especially true when others' practices too easily substitute for our own judgments and supersede what we know and see in our classrooms.

**So, Why Rethink?**

Any time we rethink and revise our teaching approaches, the ideal reason is to benefit students. Accepting ideas that contradict our habits can make us feel as if we are rejecting our previous teaching, our established reputations, or our admired teachers. Yet sometimes a new look, or even the reframing of an old look, can be exhilarating and liberating.

Asking the question, "So, why sol-mi?" leads us to ponder a number of current practices. As we pursue the benefits of new ways of thinking, we want to preserve the wisdom of old ways. What do you think?

**Notes**

7. Peggy D. Bennett and Anna Langness, "It Ain't Necessarily So: When Simple Is Not Easy for Children's Study of Music" (Clinic presentation, Music Educators National Conference, Cincinnati, OH, April 1994).
8. W. Jay Dowling and Dane L.
10. Ibid.
12. Fleurette Sweeney, "From Sound to Symbol: The Whole Song as Curriculum, the Whole Child as Pedagogy, Observation as Methodology" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2002).
14. Bennett and Bartholomew, Song Works 2, 37.
17. Swanwick, Teaching Music Musically, 44, 47.
25. Bennett and Bartholomew, Song Works 1, 217.
28. Choksy et al., Teaching Music in the Twentieth Century, 79.
32. Sweeney, "From Sound to Symbol."