



In Manuel Sosa's solfège classes, students shape the syllables with their hands as they sing. PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

Why Solfège?

A demanding discipline develops the inner ear of Curtis musicians.

BY JONATHAN COOPERSMITH

“One can never train a child carefully enough. If you take general education, one learns to recognize color, to recognize words... but most people hear nothing because their ears have never been trained.”

—Nadia Boulanger

Solfège is “a system designed to help the student become more conscious of what it is he or she is hearing and to articulate that in a language that’s comprehensible to others,” says Mei-Mei Meng.

It was a beautiful fall afternoon as I sat in my living room, eyes closed, mesmerized by one of Glenn Gould’s meticulous interpretations of Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*. It was becoming harder and harder to focus, however, as I found myself increasingly distracted by someone singing along. The problem was, I was the only one home.

It turned out the person singing was Gould himself. “One does not play the piano with one’s fingers; one plays the piano with one’s mind,” he once told an interviewer. In the 1980 documentary I had been watching, Gould’s face was just inches from the keyboard as he conducted and sang perfectly in synch with his astonishingly clear articulations. Of course, Gould wasn’t simply humming along; rather, his gestures and vocalizations were inextricably linked to his flawless and expressive playing.

“The inner ear of the imagination is very much more powerful a stimulant than is any amount of outward observation,” he told the graduating class of the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto in 1964. If only there were a way for young musicians today to learn how to internalize music like this—a way to engage their minds as well as their fingers and voices to better understand music in real time.

Oh, wait, there is...it’s called *solfège*.

On the surface, solfège is the study of sight-singing and ear-training using note names like do-re-mi, but it goes much deeper than that. “It’s a system designed to help the student become more conscious of what it is he or she is hearing and to articulate that in a language that’s comprehensible to others,” says Mei-Mei Meng, who has taught the subject at Curtis since 1982. “To attain these goals, solfège breaks down the process into many parts which, in the end, work together, such as recognizing intervals—both horizontal and vertical, simple and compound—hearing two voices together at the same time, hearing counterpoint functionally, and much more.”

Bryan Dunnewald, a 2018 Curtis organ graduate who studied solfège with Ms. Meng, has benefited from the practice. “Singing is, I think, the most fundamental musical skill we can develop, allowing us to connect to our built-in instrument and internalize repertoire more musically,” he says. “Solfège has helped me become a better improviser, a more active listener, and a more confident and musical conductor and composer.”



Mei-Mei Meng has taught solfège to generations of Curtis students, having served on the faculty since 1982 PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

While some may recognize a direct connection between solfège exercises and performance, seeking an immediate benefit is a bit to the side of the main point. Its value is in its power to improve musicianship. Athletes often cross-train to increase strength, speed, agility, and stamina even though those specific exercises are not part of the actual sports in which they compete. One doesn't need to be fluent in Italian to perform a Verdi opera, but most singers would say that learning the language is invaluable. It helps with pronunciation, phrasing, and even acting, resulting in performances that are more natural and convincing. Wouldn't it follow that a deeper understanding of the notes would be of equal benefit? In that belief, Curtis requires four semesters of solfège training of all undergraduates.

"The study of solfège gives the musician the opportunity to enter the space of his or her inner ear, where their very own personal sound resides," notes Manuel Sosa, who joined the Curtis faculty in 2016 and has been teaching solfège for almost 25 years. Through a deconstructive study of pitch and duration, separately at first, the students in Dr. Sosa's classes embark on this intensely personal journey of sound. "They learn to feel and think of these as complementary entities that can actually be combined in one's inner ear before being sung or articulated on an instrument. Sound should always resonate in our inner beings first, long before it is passed through an instrument."

When learning a new language, it's often hard for a beginner to trust that studying verb conjugations will eventually lead to actual communication. While it's easier to memorize a few functional phrases, we know that true fluency is achieved only through acquiring a vocabulary and understanding grammar. When it comes to the language of music, those who simply play or sing the notes on the page lack true fluency. It takes time and effort to really learn a language, though. Nobody sees the benefits of a diet, of meditation, or of going to the gym, in the first few days or even the first few months. The key is to believe that ultimately the process will pay off. When students accept this and take the time to learn the principles of solfège, they start to see its correlation to all of their musical endeavors.

"What I learned in solfège has grown deep roots in my musical life in unexpected ways," says 2015 piano graduate Ashley Hsu, a new member of the Curtis musical studies faculty. "I have found singing the clearest, most descriptive way to communicate with my colleagues and students when discussing music." Violinist Joel Link—a 2010 graduate and member of the Dover Quartet (profiled on page 10 of this issue) agrees. "We constantly sing passages in rehearsal to help better convey our musical ideas, and we highly advocate singing in rehearsals to the groups with which we work. We interpret all musical language through our ears; having the opportunity to train your ears at a high level when you're young gives you an incredible advantage!"

"In the end, the purpose is to cultivate such unshakable security in the student in preparation for real life situations where many unanticipated things can happen," says Ms. Meng. "They will be better interpreters of music, better performers, and better teachers.

"It is a life-long process." ◇

Jonathan Coopersmith is chair of musical studies at Curtis.

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