

About the Guidonian Hand and Its Notes on the Tonal Scale



▲ One example of the Guidonian hand, from a sixteenth-century Italian vocal manuscript

In Medieval music, the Guidonian hand was a mnemonic device used to assist singers in learning to sight-sing. Some form of the device may have been used by Guido of Arezzo, an 11th-century medieval music theorist who wrote a number of treatises, including one instructing singers in sightreading.... The idea of the Guidonian hand is that each portion of the hand represents a specific note within the hexachord system. (See more information on back of this sheet.)

(wikipedia.org/wiki/Guidonian_hand)

Why are Notes of the Tonal Scale Called "Do, Re, Mi" etc.??

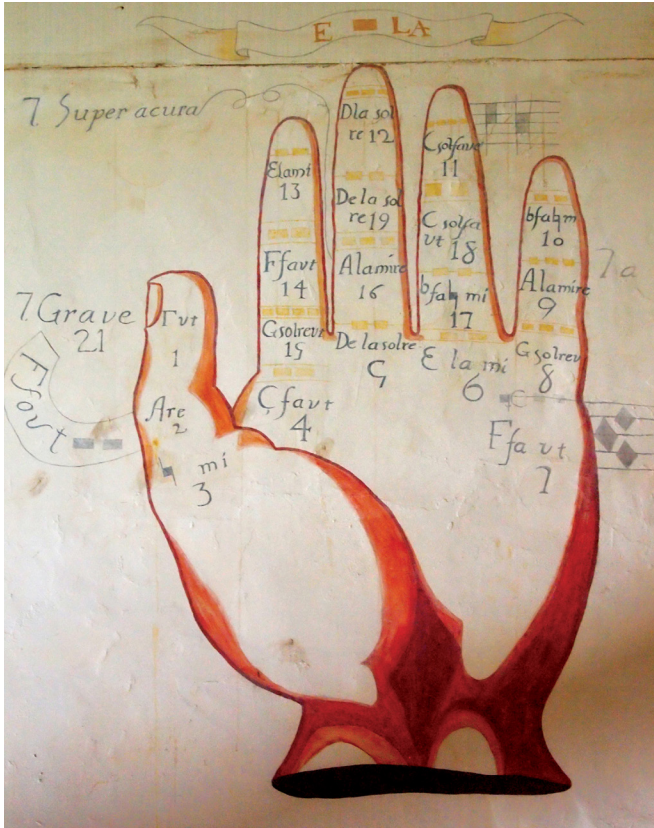
Solmization, or the practice of assigning syllables to the different "steps" of the scale, originated in ancient India. Fast forward a few thousand years, when Isidore, the Archbishop of Seville during the sixth century, lamented that "Unless sounds are remembered, they perish, for they cannot be written down." The Benedictine monk who was also a master of music, Guido d'Arezzo, set to work to prevent so many sacred tunes from being lost.

Brother Guido was familiar with solmization, and noted that most of the Gregorian chants popular at that time could easily be learned by singers if they could see the tone

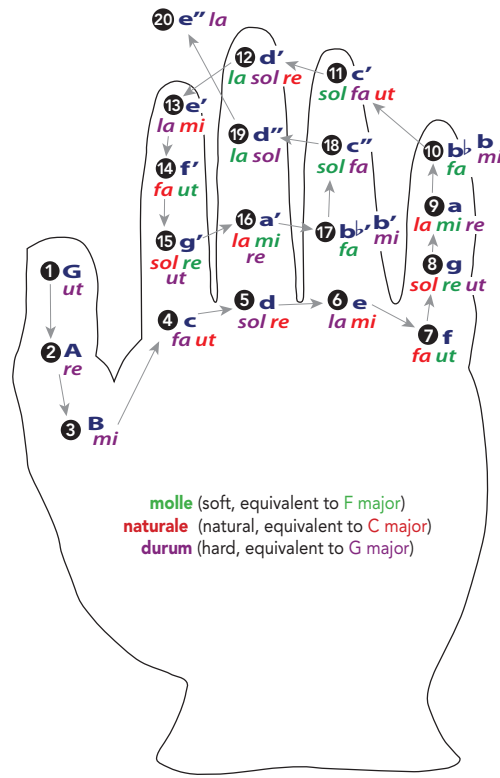
progression up and down the scale, and associate it with the sound. He assigned six notes of the scale—**C, D E, F, G, A**—a syllable: **Ut, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La**, (Later, "Ut" was changed to "Do" and "Si" was added. "Si" was eventually changed to "Ti." And yes, it actually is "Sol"—but the final "l" is hard to hear thanks to the "La" that follows.) Since there originally were six notes, they were referred to as a "hexachord." In each hexachord, all adjacent pitches are a whole tone apart, except for the middle two, which are separated by a semitone.

Those weren't just random sounds; they came from **Ut Queant Laxis** (Hymn to St. John the Baptist), a well-known hymn of the Middle Ages that was chanted for vespers. Each succeeding line of the song started one note higher than the previous one, so the first letters of each word of each line were used: **Ut** queant laxis, **R**esonare fibris: **M**ira gestorum, **F**amuli tuorum: **S**olve polluti, **L**abiir eatum, **S**ancte **I**ohannes. (The translation is "So that your servants may, with loosened voices, Resound the wonders of your deeds, Clean the guilt from our stained lips, O St. John." See the back of this page for a copy of the hymn.)

Did the Guido method work? Well, as Rodgers and Hammerstein later put it, "When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything!" (*From mentalfloss.com/article/53280/why-are-notes-tonal-scale-called-do-re-mi by Kara Kovalchik, with additions from blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/03/04/sound-of-music-history-do-re-mi/ and wikipedia.org/wiki/Hexachord)



▲ **Guidonian hand at Mission San Luis**



▲ **Numbers indicate the spiral order of the notes on the hand. Colors indicate the three modes of the hexachord (the first instance of a color is the starting note). Note that the Hymn to St. John the Baptist is written in C major (naturale mode).**

#	Modern note name	Medieval note name*	Mutation (switching between hexachords)							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Solmization										
1	G	Γ (gamma)	ut							
2	A	A	re							
3	B	B	mi							
4	c	C	fa	ut						
5	d	D	sol	re						
6	e	E	la	mi						
7	f	F		fa	ut					
8	g	G		sol	re	ut				
9	a	a		la	mi	re				
10	b ^b b	b ^b b			fa					
11	c'	c				mi				
12	d'	d			sol	fa	ut			
13	e'	e			la	sol	re			
14	f'	f				la	mi			
15	g'	g					fa	ut		
16	a'	aa						re	ut	
17	b ^{b'} b'	b ^b b								mi
18	c''	cc							sol	fa
19	d''	dd							la	sol
20	e''	ee								la

*Full note names actually consisted of the letter(s) in this column plus the solmization syllables. For example: a = a la mi re
Diagrams based on those at wikipedia.org/wiki/Guidonian_hand.
Note that the chart above has been put in numerical order top to bottom. Other solmization charts are laid out like the notes on the staff with G placed at the bottom and the notes going up.

Ut Queant Laxis (Hymn to St. John the Baptist)

Ut que-ant la-xis, Re-so-na-re fi-bris, Mi-ra
ges-to-rum, Fa-mu-li tu-o-rum, Sol-ve pol-
lu-ti, La-bi-i re-a-tum, Sanc-te Jo-han-nes.
(I)



Hear and see a demonstration of the Guidonian Hand!
Visit <https://bit.ly/2P61YOC> to watch a video of a music professor singing a chant and pointing to his hand to indicate the notes.



Other references:



'DO-RE-MI': How we got the 'Do' in Do-Re-Mi
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5ybV034wkY>



Guidonian Hand - Music History Crash Course
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBq-S_Qdu2U

Solmization and the Guidonian hand in the 16th century
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRDDT1uSrd0>

Other Examples of the Guidonian Hand

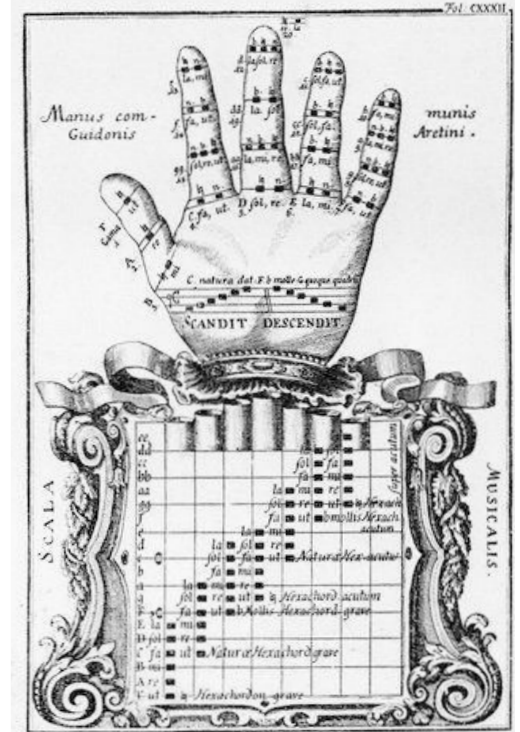


◀ **Guidonian hand, music treatise by Elias Salomon, 1274**
Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan MS D.75 Fol. 6r

▶ **Guidonian hand Mission San Luis painting is based on**

Found in a Franciscan Guide for Novices, the Regola de n.s.p.s. Francisco y breve declaracion de su preceptos, 1725. From the Mathes Collection.

▶▶ Source unknown



◀ **From a liturgical miscellany, Italian, late 15th century**
(UPenn Ms. Codex 1248, fol. 122r)

▶ **From Musurgia Universalis by Jesuit polymath Father Athanasius Kircher**

Published in Rome in 1650

▶▶ Source unknown

