

Theosophy of the musical scale

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The traditional “solfa” names of the notes of the musical scale were first canonized around 1000 AD by Guido d'Arezzo, who invented a staff notation that was a precursor to our Western musical notation. He was charged by the Pope to standardize the chant used in Catholic liturgy, which had diverged into many different practices in different locales. His scale was: Ut Re Mi Fa Sol La. He gave a mnemonic for this scale based on the first stanza of a hymn sung in the Divine Office on June 24, the feast of John the Baptist. It goes:

Ut queant laxis
 Resonare fibris,
Mira gestorum
 Famuli tuorum,
Solve polluti
 Labii reatum,
Sancte Iohannes.

which translates as:

So that these your servants can, with all their voice, sing your wonderful feats, clean the blemish of our spotted lips, O Saint John!

In this hymn, which is believed to have been written by d'Arezzo himself, each musical line except the last starts on the scale note whose name is its first two letters. You can hear the hymn sung in Gregorian chant, along with traditional d'Arezzian style notation, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fMppPLocmo> . Note that d'Arezzo's scale starts with Ut (our Do, see below) on G below middle C, which was known as Gamma in an old Greek system of tone notation; hence his sequence of notes was called *gam-ut*, which entered English as the word “gamut” meaning “everything.” The scale itself is called in Latin “*gam*,” in French “*la gamme*.”

Later, around 1600, the theorist Giovanni Doni changed the name of the root tone from "Ut" to "Do," and added Si, which d'Arezzo did not recognize as a scale tone. Doni named this tone SI from the initials of the last line of d'Arezzo's hymn. SI is called the “leading tone” because it strains toward Do of the higher octave. Symbolically *Sancte Iohannes*, John the Baptist, was the one who leads to Christ. But Doni understood the scale musically to be in descending order of tones, starting on higher Do. In other scale systems of world music it is common for the scale to be thought of as descending.

The most common motion of melody is descending. Melodic descent creates a melancholy emotional atmosphere, the essence of musical communication¹. A very fine recent example is Eleanor Rigby, by the Beatles <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57020697> .

Doni mnemonicized the note names as abbreviations of the following Latin words (mnemonicization was a favorite trope since ancient times of the "method of symbols", in which one series of things is theosophically associated with another, thereby enriching both for the mind's contemplation):

Do - *Dominus*, Lord, i.e. God
Si - *Sider*, star, the siderial world. all galaxies
La - *Lactae*, milk, our Milky Way galaxy
So - *Sol*, Sun
Fa - *Fata*, fate. Fate is ruled by the planets, hence Fa is the planets.
Mi - *Microcosmos*, the small universe, the Earth.
Re - *Regina Coeli*, Queen of the Heavens, the Moon.
Do - *Dominus*

Occultists and alchemists of the 17th century used this series of names of scale notes as a cosmic symbol. This is the form that was adopted by Gurdjieff and transmitted to us by Ouspensky. It represents the Ray of Creation.

Microcosmos is also Man, who is made in the image of God, "as above, so below". This is the meaning of Mi in the lateral octave. We have this diagram in *In Search of the Miraculous*:

Do	
Si	
La	
So	Do
Fa	Si
	Fa So La
Mi	Mi
Re	Re
Do	Do
Cosmic octave	Lateral octave

In the cosmic octave, **Mi** is the Earth. In the lateral octave, **Mi** is Man. **Mi** can be read as "me," in a play on words. **Fa So La** is "organic life", which fills the gap between "earth" and "the planets", allowing the planets to act on human "fate," **Fa**, through **La** and **So** in the lateral octave. What do these notes **Fa**, **So** and **La** "mean"? **Fa** is bloody life, involved in its universal fate of living and dying, eating and being

¹ Compare *Beelzebub's Tales* p. 92 where it is said that the speech of Raven beings of the Planet Saturn "can be compared to the singing of our best singers when with all their Being they sing in a minor key"

eaten, reproducing and spreading, changing and developing new forms through the Darwinian battle for survival; **So** is the heart of life, its innocence; **La** is the "song" of life, its beauty, its incipient transcendence of mere organic nature.

Si (lateral octave) is especially interesting—its place parallel with **Fa** (cosmic octave) in the diagram, the relationship between the two would musically speaking be the *diabolus in musica*, the tritone (i.e. the three whole tone steps between the four notes **Fa-So-La-Si**). Somehow the harmonious interval that exists between the Sun, **So** (cosmic octave) and **Do** (lateral octave), the Absolute for Man, becomes diminished and dis-harmonized as it descends through the **Do-Si** interval. It changes from God to The Devil, the fallen god, who then inherits the responsibility of transmitting higher influences to organic life and eventually to man. He (the Devil) does this by tempting man through the Dominant Seventh chord (**So Si Re Fa**), which contains the *Diabolus*, the tritone between **Si** and **Fa**, and which it is man's task to resist by resolving to the Tonic chord (**Do Mi So**). In this resolution, **Si** (the Devil) ascends back to **Do** (God) and becomes the root upon which the chord of man is built; **Re** (the moon in man—see *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*) quickens and ascends to become **Mi** (man himself), while **Fa** (Fate) descends upon **Mi**, man, who, as the mediant, the middle term, must simply accept it; **So** (life's innocence, whose purity was obscured by the dissonance with **Fa**, fate) simply remains in place and becomes the crown of the triad.