Solfege Town is a remarkable new way to teach the familiar Solfege music syllables, do re mi fa so la ti, in the course of seven easy lessons.

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A New Approach to Solfege

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Nuncici Press
2010

ISBN 978-1-60145-978-7

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Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2010

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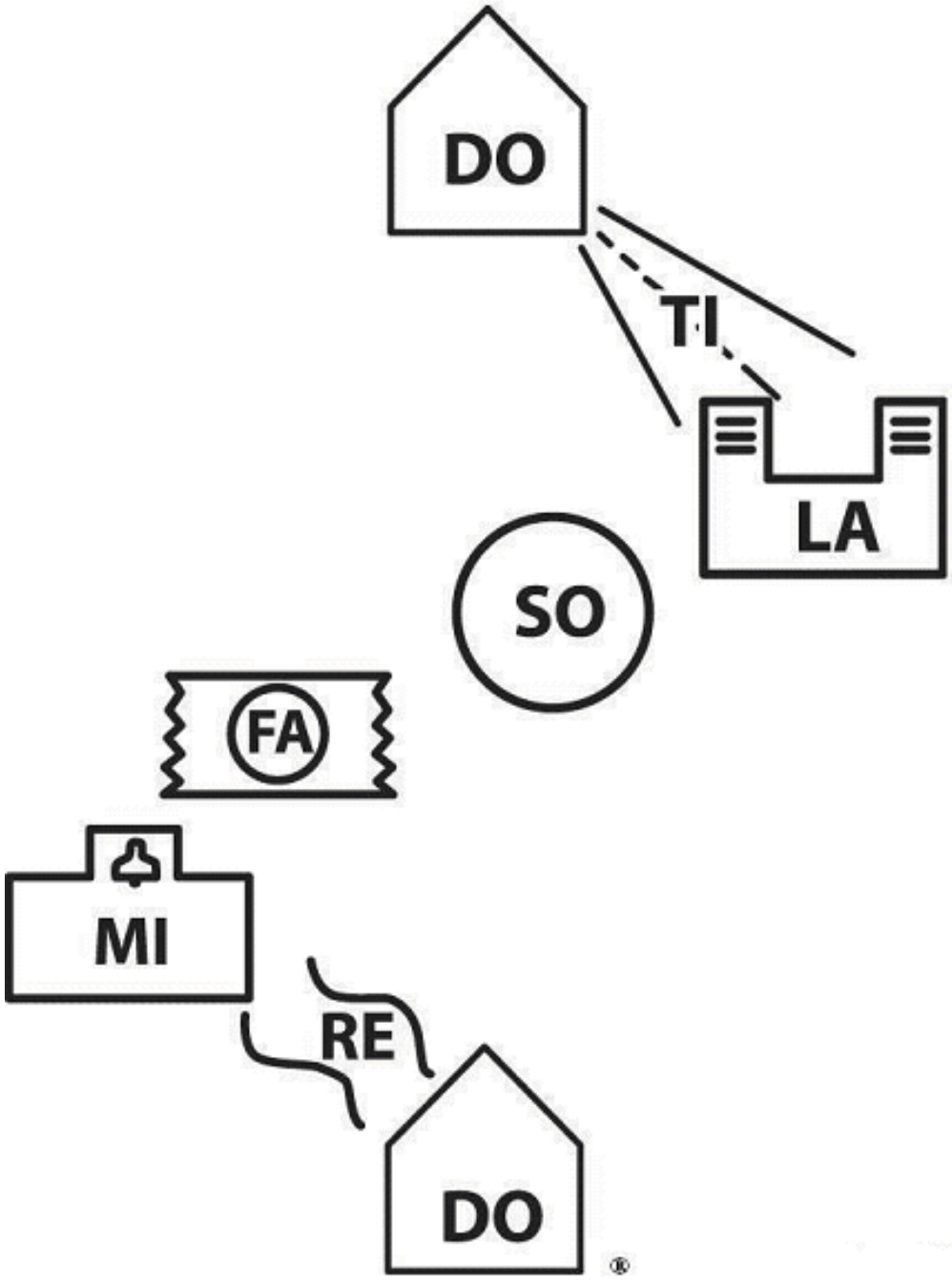
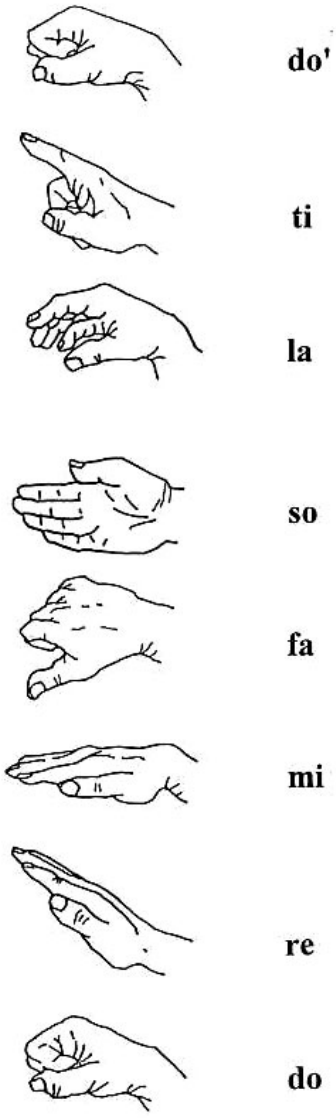


Introduction

There are many ways to teach music, but the best way is to engage the imagination. For more than 100 years, the Solfege syllables and accompanying Curwen hand-signs have been used to represent the notes in the scale so that they can be seen and felt as well as heard. *Solfege Town* is a sequence of music activities that go beyond this goal, actually moving the student into a meaningful understanding of how the notes relate to one another.

Solfege is a system of symbols which represent tones in the seven note scale. The origins of the syllables came from an 11th century Italian monk named Guido d'Arezzo. Upon finding a Latin hymn which got progressively higher line by line, he took the first couple of letters of the text of each line to create six musical syllables. Over time, these syllables were transformed into the seven familiar names *do, re, mi, fa, so, la* and *ti.*

Sarah Ann Glover (1785-1867) was one of the pioneers of this new system. Using the syllables, she refined them into a method known as Norwich Sol-fa by which she could aid in the instruction of sight-reading. Around 1850, an English Nonconformist minister named John Curwen borrowed from Glover and others to create a system he called Tonic Sol-fa. One of Curwen's innovations was to create a series of hand-signs to accompany each syllable. These hand-signs are still used today, most notably in music education programs such as the Kodaly Method.



Solfege has been shown in a controlled study to provide significantly more improvement in the ability of students to sight-sing than they might get through staff letter-names and neutral syllables. The Solfege syllables have an advantage over the note-letters in that they suggest a *function* for each note, rather than a simple identity. *Ti* is not simply the note under *do,* but a note which tends to *resolve* to *do*.

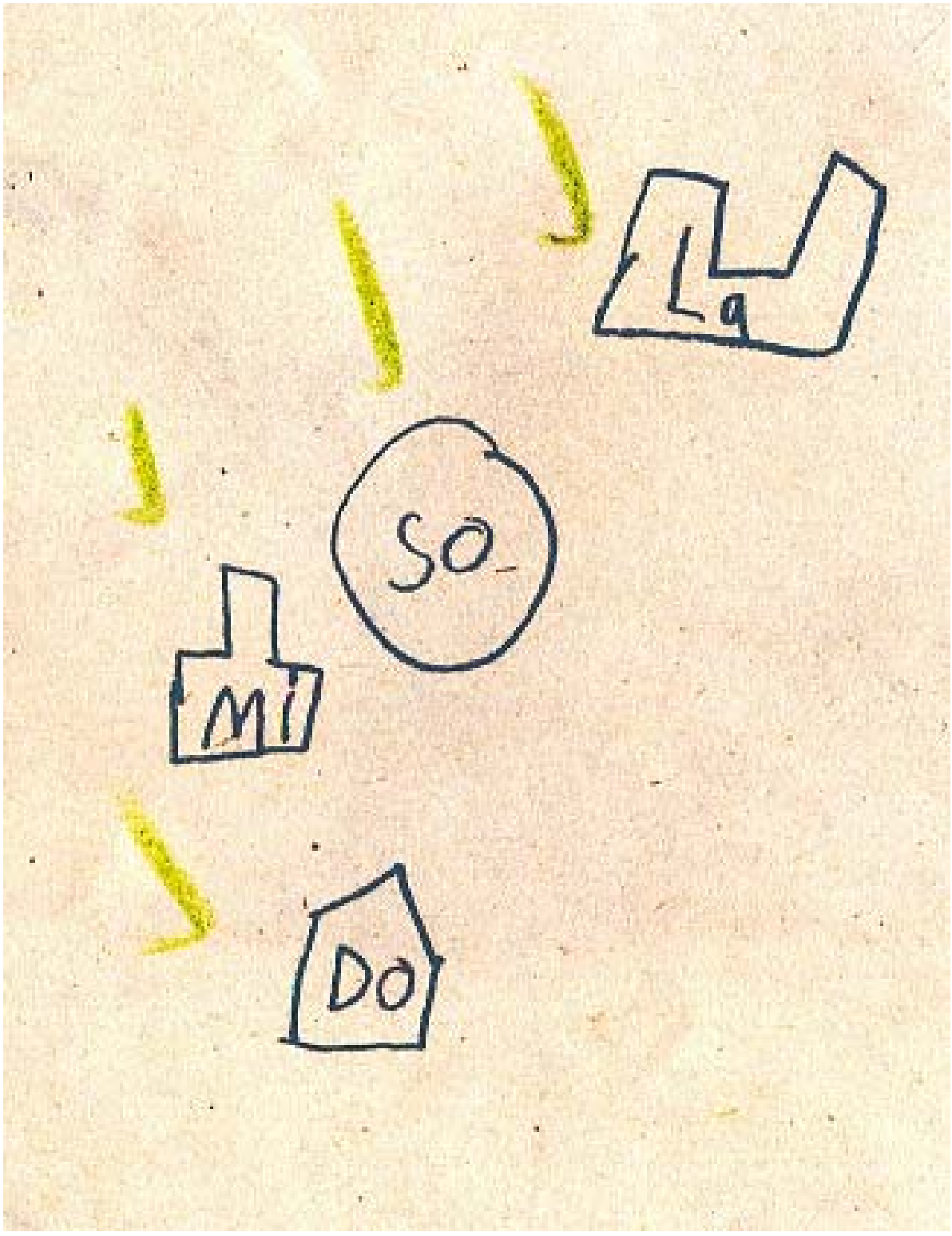
Solfege Town is designed visually to represent the complexity of sounds the students are hearing, as well as engage their imaginations with a better story-base. The layout of *Solfege Town* is a flattened spiral. High and low *do* are lined up vertically with *so* to show their close relationship. Passing tones are grouped in several smaller diagonals.

Furthermore, each icon of *Solfege Town* visually represents the function of the note. *So* as the universal leading tone is a bus-station. *Do* as the universal resting tone is a home. As students memorize the location of each note in *Solfege Town*, they are also memorizing its characteristics.

Solfege Town is a terrific aid to comprehension as well as memorization of the Solfege syllables. Even more importantly, it will attract students who are visually based and those who prefer stories to abstract concepts. In many cases, we as music educators may have lost these students in the early stages to the art and language teachers. *Solfege Town* will give these harder-to-reach students a fighting chance.

This book contains a complete tour of *Solfege Town*, which can be taught in seven consecutive lessons, over the course of a year, or over several years. In the back are a number of songs written by the author to illustrate the functions of the notes, as well as a further appendix of folk-songs that use progressive combinations of the notes as they are introduced.

I hope you enjoy making *Solfege Town* your town!



Chloe, first grade

Chapter One

In order for Solfege to mean something to your students, it must be a tool they can use. For this reason, we start with the note they will be able to use most easily: *so*.

While *do* may seem like the obvious choice, being the tonic of the scale, *so* is more useful because it is dynamic. When you sing *so*, it creates an expectation: something must be done. The energy inherent in that first note engages students excitement and curiosity as they learn where to go from *so*.

But first things first:

What to tell the kids:

This is *so*.

So is the "bus station." You don't want to stay at the bus station. Nobody *lives* at the bus station. But you go to the bus station because you want to get somewhere. You can get *anywhere easily* from the bus station.

Next time we'll learn some places that the bus can take you. For today, I just want you to remember that *so* is what? The **bus station!**

For the teacher:

We begin with *so* because it's the most useful of all the signs. It represents the dominant getting ready to move to the tonic, and because it suggests *possibilities* it has an edge over *do*. A song made up of only the tonic would be very flat and lifeless. On the other hand, a song composed with just the dominant suggests more to come.

We begin right off with the idea that music is dynamic. It wants to move. By suggesting that the first of our notes is a bus station, we introduce the idea that music involves going from one note to another. Furthermore, by making *so* a bus, we prepare students for the idea that *so* is a note that can take you to *any other note easily*. The dominant is special in that, like a queen in chess, it can resolve its movement in any direction with equal effectiveness.

Finally, by starting with a bus-station in a town, we plant the idea that the notes are different kinds of places to go. They are not simply houses on a street. Each note has a function, like people in a family or a business.

Songs to reinforce *so*

You will be hard pressed to find a song that just uses "*so,"* but included in this text is a song-game that uses it instructively. It's a poor relative of the Hokey Pokey called "Sokey Pokey." The real point of the song and game is to get students to make the sign for "*so"* while they are singing it.

Games to reinforce *so*

At the very beginning, we can reinforce *so* with a game that we'll be able to use all year: **The So-circle.** The game is named after *so* because it involves movement and relationships. In the So-circle, the members of a class perform one-at-a-time around a standing circle, with each performance taking a set amount of time. The So-circle teaches listening skills, improvisation, and ensemble etiquette.

Students will stand in a circle facing the center. The teacher tells them that they are "in a So-circle," and the most important rule in the So-circle is "Don't laugh." The reason for this rule is that, in the So-circle game, each person will have a chance to do something by themselves. When people perform alone, one of two things can happen. First, they may get embarrassed and may lose their focus, causing them to make mistakes. Second, they may want to relieve the tension by making a joke. The problem is that, at any given time, we can't tell for sure which of these someone is doing.

One good way to explain this to the students is to say: "If we were walking down the street and we met someone who talked funny, maybe turning their r's into w's, we might think they're talking silly on purpose and we might want to laugh. But what if they can't help it? They might have no idea they talk this way at all. Then if we laugh, we'll embarrass them. That's why we don't laugh in the So-circle: because we never know for sure."

After instilling this cardinal rule, the teacher says, "Repeat after me." The teacher claps four times, saying "ta" on each clap. "Ta ta ta ta!" The students will echo in tempo: "*Ta ta ta ta!"* Teacher repeats the ta's, and students repeat the echo.

Now the teacher tells the students, “In between your ta’s, I’m going to do something different.” Here the teacher models the thing that each student will be doing by themselves. For example, the teacher might hold up a hand and sing “So” four times. “So so so so!”

Students: “*Ta ta ta ta!”*

Teacher “So so so so!”

The teacher tells the students that, in between everyone’s ta’s, each of them is going to take a turn singing “So so so so”. The game goes sequentially around the circle, with everyone doing the “Ta ta ta ta” together, followed by one person at a time doing the other pattern.

There are several important things for the students to remember:

1) To reiterate the cardinal rule: Because each person is going to be singing and hand-signing alone, no one is allowed to laugh at anyone else. If someone decides to laugh at themselves, that’s okay, but we’re not going to laugh with them. If necessary, the teacher can stop the game to remind people of this most important rule.
2) No one has to perform perfectly. Each student does their best to approximate the teacher’s note and hand sign in the time they have. If they mess up, or take too long, everyone just goes into the clapping rhythm and on to the next person. Just as we keep going in a performance, we keep going in the game. (At the teacher’s discretion, he or she may pause the relentless game for a moment to allow a student to think.)
3) Everybody takes a turn. If a student decides to pass their four counts in silence, or to make a joke by being intentionally silly, give them their four counts without commenting, and bring in the ensemble on the right beat. We want to emphasize the group-nature of the game, rather than the pressure any individual might feel to be perfect.

This game has several powerful benefits. Each child will be attempting to replicate the same pattern, so the idea will be reinforced in their hearing and vision as many times as there are participants. Students will not be bored hearing the pattern twenty times because they will be in a heightened state of awareness while anticipating their turn or watching their friends. All the while, the rhythm of the game is constant, giving it a musical quality.

By insisting that the students are respectful during the game, we are encouraging a sense of classroom community. Mutual respect is essential if we want to make any kind of music together, and it results in a better class no matter what we're doing.

By not asking for, or expecting perfection in the actual execution of the pattern, one might think we are encouraging sloppiness or letting something go unlearned. But when we allow the students freedom to make mistakes in the game, we are minimizing their anxiety as they interact with the symbol for the very first time. Even the students who are so afraid of messing up that they choose to remain silent, or intentionally try to mess up, are still benefiting. If they are not allowed to call too much attention to themselves then the game continues easily, and they will still have a chance to hear other students do the pattern correctly. In this forgiving environment, everyone focuses on the idea and not their ability.

Chapter Two

Once we have two pitches, we can begin to make melodies. And not just any melody, but fundamentally recognizable ones. Choosing the *right* second note is crucial. That second note is *mi*.

What to tell the kids:

This is *mi*.

Mi is “the school.” It’s one of the places you can go on the bus from *so*. It goes here:

Let's pretend we just got to *Solfege Town* and we're planning to live there. The first place we're going to go is the bus-station so we can get around. Before we move into the town, we need to be sure it has a good school. We take the bus, *so*, to the school, *mi*.

When we take the bus to school, we go from *so* to *mi.* This is what it sounds like to go from *so* to *mi:* <sing and hand-sign> *"so mi."* Does that sound familiar to anyone? Are there any songs that sound a little like that? (How about "Rain, Rain, Go Away"?)

When you're at school, you *know* something. When you're on *mi*, you know something, too. What do you know? You know where you are in town. You have somewhere to go.

Now we know two places in *Solfege Town*. What are they again? ***So,* the bus station** and ***mi*, the school!**

For the teacher:

What you "know" is where you are in the scale. *Mi*, when heard in context with *so* establishes tonality by implying the tonic major chord. When we use these two notes in a song without any other notes, we generally assume they are *so* and *mi*. *Mi* gives us information, and so becomes our "school."

Songs to reinforce *so-mi*

While very few actual songs consist of only two notes, a number of songs *begin* with two notes and serve as an excellent way to connect this interval of a minor third with something more familiar.

The most familiar use of *so-mi* will be in the child's chant "Rain, rain, go away," which begins on the notes "*so, mi, so-so, mi*." The second half of the chant contains *la*, but the melody can be altered so that it contains nothing but *so* and *mi* (replacing the *la* with *mi*). One variant that really does use just the two notes is the United States folk song "Charlie Over the Water." Also, the words to the wishing game "Star Light, Star Bright" have been set as a folk song.

"This Old Man" is doubly useful as a familiar song, and as a movement game. Even third-graders are not above playing a game like this for a short while to remind them of their "younger days." The humor of the situation aids the reinforcement of the notes and signs. For this song, the teacher can simply replace the initial words "This old man, he played one" with "*so mi so, so mi so*," and then continue with the regular lyrics.

So and *mi* lend themselves well to "musical conversations" in which the teacher sings a relevant phrase to the students and the students reply in the same pattern.

"Hello, every-bo-dy." "Hello, Mr. Co-le!"

so so mi mi so mi *so so mi mi so mi*

(calling roll) "Samantha!" "He-re!"

mi so mi *so mi*

These kinds of conversations can be a regular interaction in the classroom, reinforcing symbolic understanding with playful singing.

Included in this book is a song called “Mi Mi Mi,” written specifically to teach the new Solfege syllable. It uses only the two notes, *so* and *mi,* and makes a pun on the word “me.” In the song, the entire class sings a question, “Who is the nicest person here?” on the note *so*. One person in the class responds by singing “Me, me, me” on *mi*. The song continues, with other attributes like “neatest” and “quietest” claimed by different members of the class.

Games to reinforce *so-mi*

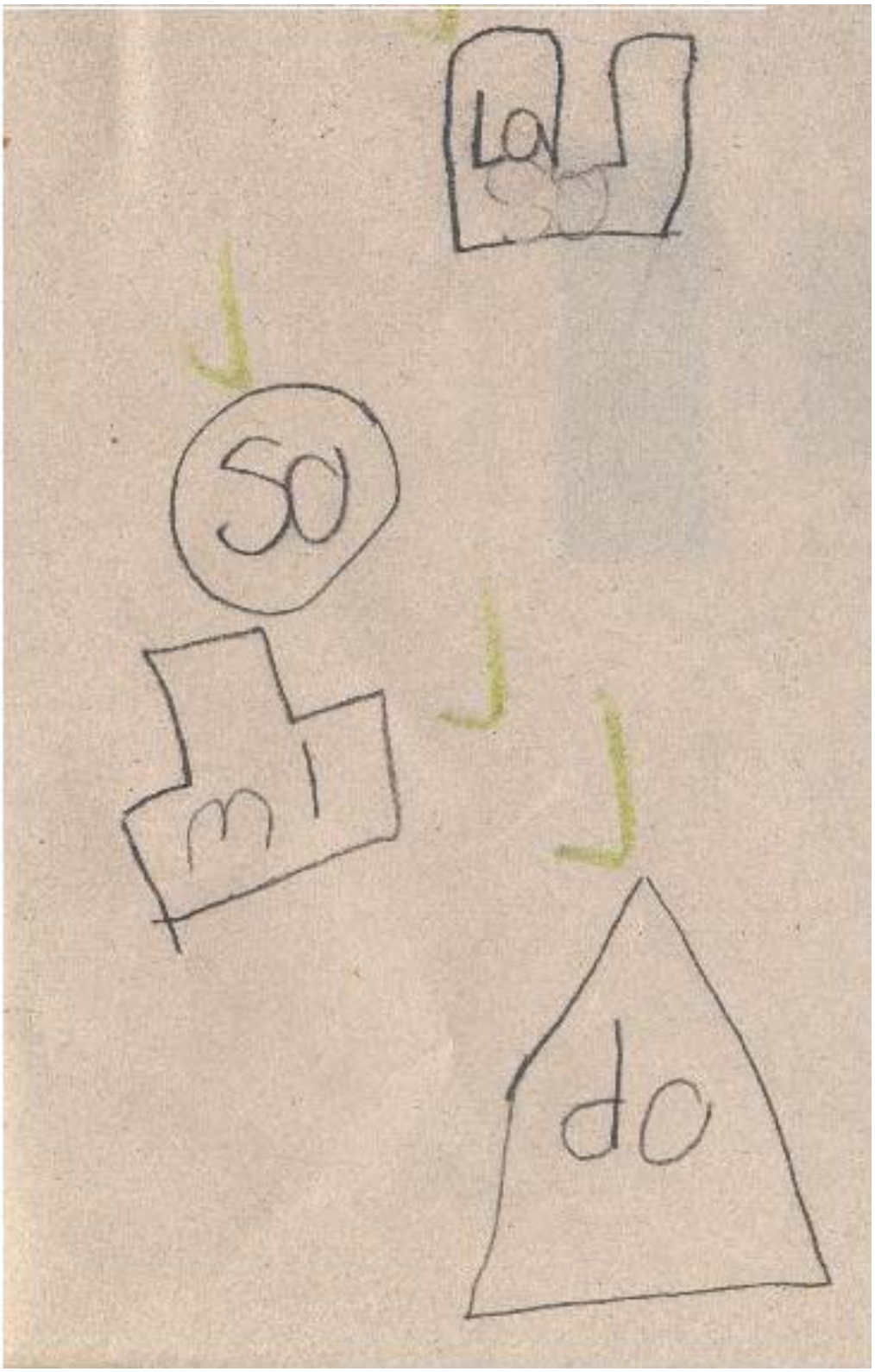
Now that we have two notes, we have more interesting possibilities for our So-circle. If we want, we can offer the students a great number of choices for things to sing on their turn. Added to “*so so so so*” is “*mi mi mi mi*” of course, but we can also create combinations like “*so mi so mi*” or “*mi so so mi*.”

If we’re interested in furthering the children’s’ improvisatory skills, we can offer them a choice of patterns. “Sing either *‘so mi so mi’* or *‘so so mi mi.’”* If the students don’t like these two choices, let two brave kids come up with a pattern each for the group to try. Or (heaven forbid) we could open it up and let each child make up their own pattern on the spot!

If we decide to be so brave, we should always give the children a “default” pattern to do if they can’t think of anything. “If you can’t make up a pattern, just say *so so so so*.” This allows those children who are being challenged by the basic exercise to stay in the ensemble with those who want to move ahead.

Of course, if we open the game up to improvisation this early, we are likely to lose the accuracy of the interval. For this reason, we may want to hold off until later in the year, using this game as a review of the simple interval. Whatever we decide to do, this five-minute

demonstration and game should not be their only exposure to this note-pairing. With twenty-five to forty minutes left in class and the concept of the two notes firmly established with a picture and a story, we're in a great position to more carefully explore the actual notes through songs and musical conversation.



Sydney, first grade

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