


## New Millennium – New Approach

By Mary Jean "MJ" Milford 

"*Music isn't the notes, but what happens between the notes.*" Perhaps you've heard this statement or have even said it yourself. Far more than a catchy rehearsal nugget to get choirs to move the music in meaningful phrases, this truth has now become the very foundation of a revolutionary approach in the teaching of sight-singing. Its name is:

# SCALESTHENICS

Although the brain works as a whole, its hemispheres operate somewhat differently from one another. For most of the world's 6.5 billion people, the logical Left Brain decodes, while the artistic Right Brain decorates. One is called "musical" only when Left Brain notes translate into Right Brain nuance. Teaching songs by rote skips this mental transfer.

Brain research shows that the left and right hemispheres speak different languages. The same holds true whether one is learning to read music or learning to read text. Just as cross training benefits the body, so also it benefits the mind. If music educators understood the power they have to affect academic excellence, they would re-evaluate priorities.

In GOOD READERS the brain's two hemispheres efficiently coordinate their efforts. As the Left Brain sees the symbol, the Right Brain sees the sense. As the Left Brain views the parts, the Right Brain views the plan. As information is sorted out in the Left Brain, insight is stimulated in the Right Brain. This mental dance is mandatory for literacy.

In POOR READERS the brain's two hemispheres have trouble coordinating in sync. Comprehension requires that one analyze a text and synthesize its meaning simultaneously. To help struggling students, teachers drill word-attack skills, when what the kids may need more is help in visualizing "*the little girl in pink overalls skipping down the sidewalk.*"

The very act of sight-singing requires highest levels of integrated thinking. It makes continuous, full-throttle demands of both sides of the brain. The neurological connections constructed in moving from score to sound create permanent paths for transferring thought. The process of learning to read notes facilitates the process of learning to read text.

The performance-only music teacher gets lots of applause – but not lots of respect. When we start to demonstrate the payback that training in sight-singing brings in promoting READING READINESS in the lower grades and CRITICAL THINKING in the upper grades, principals and counselors will think twice before calling our beloved art "down time".

When we accept Left and Right Brain differences and adjust our teaching accordingly, students thrive. The left hemisphere is RIGID. It's a rule-enforcing DRILL SERGEANT that doggedly insists, "*Fire trucks are red!*" The right hemisphere is RANDOM. It's a risk-taking DREAM SHAPER that defiantly answers back, "*Not through a stained-glass window!*"

When the Left Brain looks at a fence... it sees a fence. When the Right Brain looks at a fence... it sees a hurdle! That's because the right hemisphere is home to the imagination. There, pageantry trumps precision! Only the Left Brain's ingrained conscience can control the Right Brain's incurable capriciousness. Reading success is a joint-venture effort.

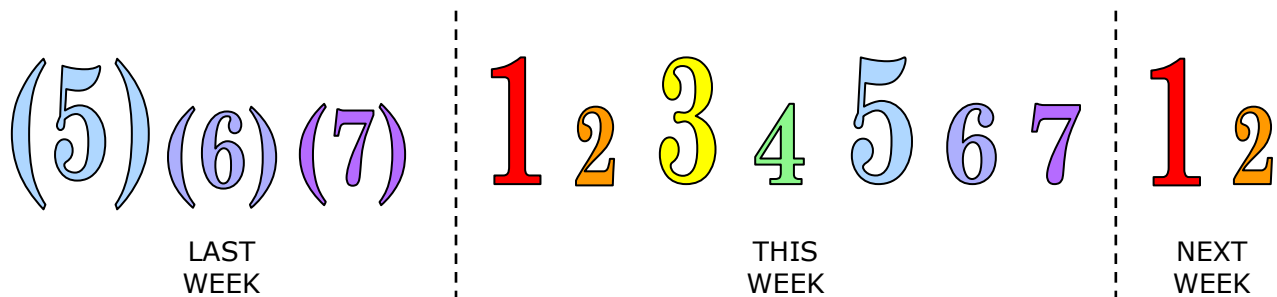
Some music teachers think pitch problems can be fixed by going back to the basics – double doses of "Every good boy does fine!" and "All cows eat grass!" But, KNOWLEDGE is not the same thing as SKILL. It helps little for the Left Brain to get smarter and smarter at naming the dots when the Right Brain remains ignorant about how to connect them.

This wonderful homemade choir poster says it best.

*"It's not enough to know your part. You must know what you're a part of."*

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The twelve scale tones used most often in melodies are:



Note: For convenience's sake, we change the name of "High 1" to "8" and "High 2" to "9".

Note: For clarity's sake, we circle the "Low 5", "Low 6", and "Low 7" descending from "1".

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Inherent in these 12 SCALE TONES are 12 MELODIC PATTERNS, readily accepted by the Right Brain as meaningful pitch imagery. With a minimum of effort these patterns can be chemically "tattooed" as memory ruts on the surface of the brain. What results is a dependable aural vocabulary from which to draw during the tension of note-reading.

The question is: How do we get the mind to transfer the 12 tones and 12 patterns from its temporary RAM to its more permanent hard drive? The answer is in the brain itself. Nestled deep inside is a little structure called the hippocampus. Its role is to decide whether new information is to be stored short-term or long-term, and two things influence it.

1. Does the new data connect with information already stored?

PURPOSE

2. Does the new data trigger a significant emotional response?

PASSION

For the brain's hippocampus to activate long-term memory, BOTH must be detected. Recognizing that different students learn in different ways – aurally, visually, and tactilely, this plan uses all three teaching vehicles. It respects the fact that the side of the brain that sings is programmed not to see detail, but design – not to see threads, but tapestry!

The musically average make up about 80% of most U.S. volunteer choirs. For them, hearing pitch is not intuitive, but chillingly elusive. As much as these garden-variety singers may try, they don't have an innate ability to hear and store scale tones as isolated intervals. Sight-singing success is only attainable when their ears hear tendency relationships.

The remaining 20% are, to varying degrees, musically gifted. We love them because they make us look good! If the truth were known, however, one in four of this group is so capable that he or she barely needs us at all! These 5% "marvels" can't help but wonder if 15% "lesser-lights" aren't a tad dense and 80% "garden-varieties" aren't a tad lazy.

In reality, the problem isn't theirs, but ours. Rather than confess we don't know how to teach singers who aren't like us, we resort to the only tried-and-true option – auditions. We pursue excellence by eliminating the inept. After all, ratings and reputation are at stake. The end justifies the means! Survival of the fittest! Choral tradition! And the tears?

In America, where we value educating the masses, it's time to admit that "sol-mi" is indigenous to some, but not indigenous to all. It's time to make room for something else – **Plan B: SCALESTHENICS**. Instead of starting with "sol-mi" and working out, this method starts with the "whole enchilada" and works in. It gives your sweet "B" singers hope.

The side of the brain that sings is also the side that puts jigsaw puzzles together. Invariably, this visual hemisphere begins with the picture's edge – not the picture's center. It positions the perimeter before it positions the pieces. **SCALESTHENICS** works the same. The **SCALESTHENICS "in a nutshell" Chart** teaches the Right Brain this principle:

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**"SMALL-NUMBER" MOVING TONES HAVE DEFINITE TENDENCIES  
TO MOVE TO SPECIFIC "LARGE-NUMBER" RESTING TONES.**



**THEY DON'T ALWAYS FOLLOW THE RULE.**



**BUT – IF YOU KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT –  
IT HELPS YOU RECOGNIZE THE UNEXPECTED.**

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Common sense says, "Teach step-by-step. Move from the easy to the not-so-easy." That's why **SCALESTHENICS** teaches pitch BEFORE adding the time-stress layer of rhythm. After the scale's relationships are instilled, accidentals are taught as borrowed relationships. Only then can "B" singers aurally grasp the relationship alterations of minor tonality.

**SCALESTHENICS** has been thoroughly field-tested with reports of colossal success. While it does not claim to explore every variable in sight-singing, it does do one thing well. Using football lingo, this approach enables the world's "lesser-lights" and "garden-varieties" to come down from the grandstand and on to the gridiron. Bottom line – IT WORKS.