

Introduction

I've always thought Snoopy's plagiarized "*It was a dark and stormy night...*" was a great way to start a book. But then, what do I know? I topped out at Nancy Drew. The nice people in our library know me, but only because I go there to check out fiction for my 87-year-old mother. The reason I so identify with this novel opener is because of my own "dark and stormy" back in 1973. It came packaged in these paralyzing words: "*Wait, guys, wait! You're only half finished. There's still the sight-reading room.*"

My junior high boys had finished singing their performance competition songs and were heading for the bus. I froze in my tracks. "*What's the sight-reading room?*" Was I ever about to find out! My first seven years of teaching had been in California during Haight-Ashbury's hippie days. There, the prevailing wind was to sit on the floor, let the kids call you by your first name – I didn't do either – and to have feel-good choirs. To facilitate that mind-set choir directors had a choice of comments or ratings at festivals. For those risking a rating, the options weren't traumatic: "**Superior - Excellent - Good.**" By comparison, the Texas "**I - II - III - IV - V**" was brutal... but now sight-reading?

Not only were the surgical lights of the sight-reading room a stark contrast from the subdued lights of the auditorium, these judges were up close – not blurred silhouettes. **Crisis #1** was the scarcity of octavos. Even though two of the judges yielded their music, the boys had to share – in one place five to a copy. That should have been my first clue. Clearly... junior high TTB choirs of 50+ weren't the norm. My "*Come one – Come all*" teaching philosophy was about to be greatly tested.

Crisis #2 was a profound ignorance of Texas sight-reading competition protocol. "*Don't open the music! Don't open the music!*" There went all semblance of optimism. The rule was read that the director had six minutes to look over the song and talk about it to the choir. Dilemma! Should I try to dazzle the judges with my MA in Music Theory or – more pragmatic – should I try to help my clueless kids? I decided to take "**Door #2**" and hope for the best. All I could think to tell the guys (that they would understand) was, "*Everyone starts on the same note and you sing it three times.*" As my brain scrambled for something else, I remembered the monitor's hurried advice as we "walked the plank" to the sight-reading room. "*Tell them to keep singing no matter what.*" And so with that, I called for the beginning pitch. One judge tried to help. "*You still have some time left.*" I said, "*That's OK. We're ready.*" The truth... I had no idea what to expect.

When singers get a "**I**" – it says, "*Fabulous!*" When singers get a "**V**" – it says, "*You should have stayed home!*" Receiving even one "**V**" is enough to warrant therapy. How about getting a "**V**" from all three judges, with one adding in John Hancock script, "*I'm only giving you this because there's not a rating that's lower!*" I'm not saying that it wasn't deserved. Once my boys matched the piano's pitch, they hung on for dear life, singing it confidentially through every repeat until they reached the end. What troopers! If only Texas had a prize for tenacity. Of course, the fact I was convulsing with giggles by the last page didn't help, especially when the judges remained stone-faced throughout. If only "*Johnny One-Note*" had been the title of the song!

Needless to say, my supervisor wasn't the least bit amused, but thankfully he kept me on with a strong word to the wise that he expected different results the following year. My reply: *"I don't think you can teach kids to sight-read. Either they can or they can't."* His *"You'd better find a way!"* countenance was enough to make me rethink my position and dig out my list of interval songs from college days. From the very first day of school I drilled the kids – *"The Eyes of Texas"* for the P4th up – *"Born Free"* for the P4th down. In 1974 we managed to get all *"III's"* – and in 1975 [*drum roll*] two *"II's"* and one *"I"*. My supervisor transferred me to elementary anyway.

In education, teachers are introduced to "new and improved" instructional trends on a regular basis. What's "OK" this year is often changed to "not OK" the next year. Such a philosophical whiplash occurred in Texas elementary music during the late 1970s. The edict: *"Out with Music Appreciation! In with Behavioral Objectives!"*

Now armed with Guido's syllables, Curwen's hand signs, and Kodály's folksongs, the district's music teachers scattered to greet their new charges. After a month we met to report progress. In some schools success was rampant – in others, including mine – not so. The next day I wailed to my principal, *"It's not working! It's not working!"*

In one way my school was cutting-edge because it housed the new, experimental "gifted and talented" program. Of the children who actually lived in the community, however, many were two grade-levels behind in reading. I can still see the twinkle in my principal's eye as she said, *"I believe in you, MJ. You'll find a way to make it possible."*

Nothing encourages a teacher like getting that kind of administrative green light! The answer to the problem was still unknown, but I felt free and full of hope. When I got back to my classroom, I put my head down on my desk and prayed this short prayer: *"Father God, I know You love these kids. Please show me how to help them."*

In that moment the tension-release principles unfolded in my mind's eye and ear. Why not take the very essence of what music is and use it as the strategy to master it? Almost a decade would pass before I learned why the four little exercises work so well. The reason – they speak directly to the brain hemisphere where pitch is rooted.

My students loved helping me work out the arm-hand positions and movements. Every music class contributed something. At times it got hilarious as I tried to dignify, yet scale down enthusiastic, exaggerated gyrations. Some only a contortionist could do. In no time at all I was able to put improvised melodies on the board for the kids to read. What a joy to see literacy take shape. In anticipation of my supervisor's evaluation visit, the kids clamored... *"Give us a hard one, Mrs. Milford. We can do it."*

The next day Olympic drama filled the room as I wrote my melody on the board. Though tough, the kids sang every note absolutely flawlessly. I was so proud of them. While celebrating their accomplishment I stole a glance to see my supervisor's reaction. His head was down and he was writing... whatever that meant. I had been hoping for some amazement when my 5th graders nailed the dim.5th before the final Tonic.

The following day was our monthly music teachers' meeting. When I walked in, there was my melody on the supervisor's board. The early-arrivers had gathered around and were trying to sing it. Most couldn't. When someone asked him where it came from, he said, *"I copied it from Mrs. Milford's board yesterday. I wanted to see if my select group could read it."* When asked if they could, his reply made me smile. *"Not all of it."* The teachers wanted to know more. Because my fledgling strategy was such a departure from the curriculum's new mandates, I waited for his "go ahead" nod. It came.

When I told the teachers there were four exercises, surprisingly they all stood up. *"Hey, does this have a name... because if it doesn't... I know what you need to call it."* The half-question / half-comment came from a new teacher in the back of the room.

"No name," I told him. *"I haven't thought that far."*

"It's like you're using calisthenics to exercise the scale. Call it 'Scalesthenics'." I was hoping he couldn't read my mind. Who in the world could pronounce that!

Immediately, others affirmed his suggestion. *"Yeah, Scalesthenics – it's perfect!"* The name stuck. [*Instead of starting "calisthenics" with "cal" – start it with "scale."*]

As this 1978-1979 school year ended, publishing sugarplums danced in my head, but circumstances had a different plan. In August I moved to the Texas Gulf Coast area. Fortunately, a teaching position was still available 30 minutes from my new hometown. Unfortunately, I had to promise I would teach Kodály and never mention *Scalesthenics*. Fortunately, I only needed to be there a year. Our local choir director decided to retire.

At that time our town's population was 6000. All school buildings were lined up along one city block, so I taught 6th grade choir, junior high choir, and high school choir. The feeder program consisted of dedicated classroom teachers whose idea of good music was holding contests to see which class could sing loudest from opposite ends of the hall. With no formal curriculum in place, I was free to use *Scalesthenics*. The question was... how would it be received by teens? With contest looming, I decided to take a chance. When the students saw – in one day – what the exercises could do, they were hooked.

Not once in my twelve years (a generation of school kids) did we ever get straight "I's" in performance. In districts like ours it's more about recruiting than auditioning. With a small enrollment, the lure of marching band, and Texas rule – "No Pass-No Play," choir directors must vie for students any way they can. In my prime I even arm-wrestled a few "peach fuzz" guys into choir. I knew in time they would become tenors and basses. In a high school like mine you don't take your top choir to contest. You take "the" choir. To do that, you pretty much have to embrace the entire spectrum of musical giftedness. With performance "I's" beyond reach, I looked elsewhere for a sense of accomplishment. My focus became life-skill, the marvelous journey of teaching kids to sing songs at sight. Before long we were adding "I" plaques in sight-reading to our choir room trophy shelf. Remember the Kodály district 30 minutes from my town? The high school choir director cornered me at a region meeting and asked: *"What in the world are you doing, MJ?"*

Another joy came when my students started placing in the Texas All-State Choir. It happened first during the 1987-1988 school year. While waiting in line for the concert, I heard a familiar voice above the chatter of the crowd. *“MJ, what are you doing here?”* It was my yesteryear’s supervisor. *“If you’re not meeting somebody, let’s sit together.”* As we took our seats and scanned the program, neither of us could believe what we saw. There were two names from my school – one name from his. OK, I admit it – *sweet!*

Just when I was thinking nothing could top this moment – June 1989 came with its unparalleled excitement. Over the years I had had the opportunity to travel quite a bit, but never had I arrived at my destination to find a note like this on the hotel’s front door: *“The American Embassy advises all American citizens to stay in their hotels and not to go out onto the streets.”* Midnight jet lag is surreal enough. Now add to that the news of the Tiananmen Square massacre having occurred while we were in flight over the Pacific. Now factor in the detail that just three more miles down the hotel’s road was Tiananmen. After 48 hours we were airlifted out, but not before the last live CNN report filmed my “thumbs up” at the Beijing airport. Friends here had prayed for a sign that I was OK.

Fast-forward to May 1990 – the annual Sandy Lake Choir Competition in Dallas. As my group was leaving the risers, the contest’s head judge summoned me to their table. It couldn’t be good news. Our last song had been an a cappella number that I had written to accommodate the “still eligible” SSA voices after “No Pass-No Play” had had its way. A month earlier a judge had written a negative comment about my using an original work as the optional number. Why had I given in to the girls’ pleas that they loved it and wanted to sing it one last time? I was kicking myself for being such a pushover when this judge said, *“Wonderful song! May I keep a copy of it?”* Are you kidding? Of course, Dr. Gene Brooks, ACDA Executive Director, could keep it – and make a zillion copies!

“Do you do anything else creative?” Lump in my throat.

“Uh... I’ve written a sight-reading method,” I sputtered.

“Tell me about it.” The next group was already on stage.

I showed him the exercises, explained the idea, and that was that – or so I thought. While focusing on eight Music Theory kids, concurrently enrolled at our junior college in eight hours of Music Theory I - II and Sight-Singing / Ear-Training I - II, I got a call from Janis Dawson, asking if I would present at the Oklahoma Music Educators Association’s convention in January 1992. All I could manage was... *“My goodness... who are you... and how in the world did you find out about **Scalesthenics**?”*

Her response... *“I was the judge sitting by Gene Brooks at Sandy Lake last year.”* She hadn’t said a word during our exchange. *“I was intrigued with what you were saying and promised myself that, if I ever got into position to invite you to speak, I would do it.”* As it turned out, she was OMEA Vocal Vice-President in charge of finding presenters for the state music teachers’ meetings. How do you thank a lady who is willing to risk her professional status on a complete unknown – based on two minutes of show-and-tell?

The presentation went well. Many stood in line to buy, and some assured me that invitations would be forthcoming. I'll never forget an Asian-American man who waited for everybody to leave, then through tears said: "*MJ, You've been depriving the world.*"

After that extraordinary moment I went home and waited for the telephone to start ringing off the wall. The "publishing sugarplums" were back! Days – weeks – months went by with nary a call. In August I understood why. While visiting missionary-friends in Ukraine, God spoke to my heart to join them. I didn't just put *Scalesthenics* on hold. I left behind 27 years of teaching.

The Ukrainian people are wonderful – the most hospitable people I've ever met. Getting up every day to work with interpreters to translate praise and worship choruses into Russian was so interesting... so invigorating. It never crossed my mind it might end. Then three years later – to my astonishment – I found myself absent-mindedly singing the *Scalesthenics* theme song. God was speaking again. I returned during December 1995 and discovered He had already gone before to prepare a spring-term opening.

I was grateful for the 5th and 6th job, but it didn't match the excitement of Ukraine. So, I focused on the big picture. After this semester and two more years – I could retire. I didn't dream I'd come to absolutely adore the other two music teachers and understand that this school assignment was the perfect setting for *Scalesthenics* to come full-circle. Lori had Kodály training and was trying to use it. Tracy had never learned to sight-sing. In the 100-voice choir we co-taught, they learned the exercises along with the kids.

In 1998 I again presented in Oklahoma, which led to Kansas and North Carolina. In one city I was disappointed to find out that all eight of the high school choir directors were involved in another meeting. Imagine my surprise in June 2002, to get a call from the district requesting *Scalesthenics* for their campuses. The younger kids had grown up! The person placing the order said, "*Do the materials still cost the same?*"

I winced. The price for hand-drawn cartoons with typed text and a cassette tape was steep – \$144.00. "*Yes, it's the same price...*" I answered "*...but maybe I could...*" Interruption. The caller wanted to do some figuring. Seconds turned to minutes. Hmm.

"OK, MJ... our P.O. is going to say – 'Eight books at \$175.00 each.'"

"Excuse me?" Even in my good ear – my hearing falls short of 100 %.

"Compared to what else is out there, you're short-changing yourself."

I was still reeling from that event when another call surprised me in August 2002. Remember the Kodály district 30 minutes away – with the high school choir director who cornered me at the region meeting and asked, "*What in the world are you doing, MJ?*" – she wanted an immediate workshop and *Scalesthenics* placed in every school – 13 books.

"It was a dark and stormy night..." just skipped to "*...and they lived happily ever after!*"

In the fall of 2002 I stayed at the home of a friend who was completing a Ph.D. While there I scanned several back issues of *The Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*. When I read a 1996 book review by Dr. Michael Rogers, I knew I'd never be the same.

He wrote: *"In spite of my overall favorable impression of this book, something seems to be missing. I must admit that this 'something' is missing also from nearly every sight-singing and dictation book I have ever seen. In short, this book lacks a point of view."*¹

That was like saying, "Sic 'em!" to this ol' Texan. Since 1992 *Scalesthenics* had been available on a grassroots basis. Then in 2000 someone notified me that the method had found its way into a university-level chat room. The descriptor posted there was... *"effective - but campy."* Being part of the "pre-campy" generation, I wasn't sure whether to clap or hiss. No matter. My target audience was teachers and students in the trenches, so I didn't lose sleep worrying what academia thought.

Then came Kathy... my friend in search of the best way to teach sight-singing. Her qualitative research included a freshman, introduced to *Scalesthenics* in high school. Being thorough... she wrote me to find out more about this strategy that seems to draw outside tradition's box. Our e-mails led to an invitation to do a workshop at her school, Oklahoma Christian University. After seeing the imagery that drives the method's tenets, Kathy encouraged me to write an accompanying text. I had spent thirty years of teaching trying to simplify sight-singing – finally "dumbing it down" to cartoons and a soundtrack. I didn't know if I could ratchet it back up.

Then, when I read that fateful book review, it was though Dr. Rogers himself had "thrown down the gauntlet." On January 1, 2003 I typed in "Sight Singing" on *Google*. Wow! No point adding yet another title to the already bulging stack of 645,000 entries! And so, I began writing anyway, hoping my "yet another title" might make the difference in someone's finally being able to acquire the sweet skill of singing a song at sight.

Both my "second wind" and my "seven-fold amen" came from *Reader's Digest*. In its June 2004 issue Tucker Carlson told graduates, *"Now that you're leaving college... you're going to have to become a realist. What matters now is what works."*² Then... in its October 2004 issue the South Bronx KIPP orchestra conductor Jesus Concepción was honored and quoted. *"Most music teachers just want to work with the gifted kids."*³ My mind raced. Words are icebergs. From a vocal perspective, what's the real message?

"Most music teachers DON'T KNOW HOW to work with kids that sing 4-part unison!"

Scalesthenics in Principle isn't written head-to-head – but rather heart-to-heart. Instead of being strictly an "owner's manual" to the original book, it has lots of surprises. The politically correct may chafe at the unabashed mention of music's spiritual roots. And city folks, get ready for country sayings. I still believe in their power to persuade. Most of all, this book challenges Music Education's status quo – both "how" and "why" we teach the way we do. Admittedly, it reflects the peculiarities of *my* teaching reality.

One of my first challenges was a good-looking kid named **DAVID**, a sophomore transfer student from Houston. In spite of an adjustment from being the tennis champ there to doing the barnyard shuffle here, he settled in nicely. During his senior year the drama teacher and I had a “delusion-of-grandeur” seizure. We co-produced our school’s first (and only) musical – “*You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown.*” Because of a roof leak in the district’s ancient auditorium, the production had to be staged in the intimate setting of our high school choir room. On opening night, during the “rabbit chase” scene, it just about did us in when David decided it would be hilarious to “lift his little Snoopy leg” on an unsuspecting, but thankfully amused administrator who was sitting on the front row. Ten years later David was a professional on Broadway, singing and dancing his way through the premier of Walt Disney’s first musical, “*Beauty and the Beast.*” Amazing!

Shortly after David came a freckled-face kid named **JOHN**. Even as a freshman, I knew his natural ear for tenor would make him a shoo-in for Region Choir. The main audition piece that fall was the Renaissance number, “*Super Flumina Babylonis Nostris.*” While working parts in class, I’d heard some repressed giggles but chose to ignore them. I naively hoped that the beautiful contrapuntal lines would override whatever was funny. At the after-school rehearsal John’s giggles became full-blown. He put the music down and said, “*I’m sorry... but I just can’t sing about the flared nostrils of the Babylonians.*” Boy, was my work was cut out for me! The following year he was the perfect choice for the “Charlie Brown” role. What a thrill it was many “*Super Fluminas*” later when John was graduated from my own university with a 4.0 GPA in Church Music. Amazing!

Then there was **RICKY**, a first-rate trumpet player. On our campus the band hall and the choir room were miles apart. What was true in logistics was also true in attitude. Our band director’s ultimate insult was: “*If you don’t shape up, I’m going to draw you a map to the choir room!*” So, when Ricky appeared at my door and asked if I would teach him to sing, he was thinking one-on-one, with sacks over our heads. Then I saw a hook. Ricky wanted to take Music Theory. Of course, you have to sign up for choir to do that! When gazing at a honest-to-goodness tenor, one uses whatever bait one has. I decided to let the handful of students sit wherever they wanted. Why Ricky felt the floor next to the trashcan was inspired is still a mystery, but it worked for him. A few years later it was he that I called when I needed an orchestral soundtrack for *Scalesthenics*. Amazing!

But of all the kids that I ever taught, the one that sticks in my heart and mind most is a charmer named **MICHAEL**, a guy with curly brown hair and sharp-as-a-tack wit. The problem – his supposedly innate “sol-mi” was the “*diablos de musica!*” – a dim.5th. What’s interesting is that his mother sang to him from the womb. She faithfully took him to children’s choir at church and paid for piano and guitar lessons from the best teachers. But, when it came to hearing and matching pitch, none of these activities seemed to help. The number of keys Michael touched when he sang “*Happy Birthday*” was legendary.

Breakthrough came in 8th grade. When Michael left for the Christmas holidays, he was a soprano (of sorts). When he returned, he was a bass. His **Low G** to **Octave C** not only was in tune but was gorgeous, the answer to a junior high choir director’s prayer. He mumbled something about having had a bad cold.

Never mind the catalyst. That Perfect 4th brought celebration tears to my eyes. Michael was so proud. Defying norms, he had found his own “*Ur Song*” – his own way. The other guys in choir were green with envy. In vain they tried to match his prowess. But... on that day... there was no equal.

Sadly, our jubilation was short-lived. Michael’s ability to dazzle us with a **Low G** had a cruel downside. The notes from **Middle C** to **Octave C** were completely missing! From **Middle C** up he could sing a fair falsetto, but gusts of air and surrealistic whines inhabited the octave below. Take your pick... basement or attic... nothing in between.

To Michael’s credit he hung in there, always auditioning on Bass II and making it because the contest cuts invariably asked for his luscious low tones. In the meantime... he concentrated on Music Theory. For some reason, regardless of octave, he could hear melodic dictation. It was as though pitch was locked in his mind but was unable to find expression through his voice.

Who would have guessed that in his junior year Michael would make us all proud with a “**T**” on the state’s Music Theory exam! Eventually the obnoxious octave filled in – one note at a time. Although pitch security never reached perfection, he did learn to hear tuning discrepancies and fix them on his own.

Teachers lose track of most former students, but during one week of my 30th year I heard from all four of these guys. Surely it is the directors of struggling choirs that are the most blessed. It’s true... they’ll never get to conduct the choral classics, nor will they ever have a teaching assistant, or a staff accompanist, or a paid secretary.

And, it’s true... they’ll never know what it’s like to have a hand-picked group that can sing complex rhythms and atonal sol-fa at sight. But “in the trenches” teachers know one thing well – what gut-level grassroots teaching is all about. When Michael called during that week (four years after he finally found his voice in my choir), it was to tell me that he had just led worship in his first revival service. *I’m so proud of you, son!*

Scalesthenics reflects not only my teaching reality... but also my personal reality. Most who read this have fond memories of having sung in choir in high school. I don’t. The audition siphoned off singers of my ability. The way I got to hear the rich sounds of “*Madame Jeanette*” and “*Beautiful Savior*” was because I’d practiced diligently enough to become the student accompanist. You see... our high school choir was of such quality that it attracted clinicians of the stature of Paul J. Christiansen and Dr. Lloyd Pfausch. Don’t feel sorry for me. I had the best seat in the house.

Longing to stand before my own choir, I set my face like flint to major in music. Of the 25 in my fall class of freshman Music Theory only 8 returned for spring semester. Of the 5 who survived that, only 3 endured to get Music Education degrees. Of these, only 1 made public school teaching a life-long career. My “less traveled” path has given me both a story to tell and a point of view to put forward. If some of my statements sting, forgive me. My heart is to help you hear the silent weeping of the “unchosen” singer.