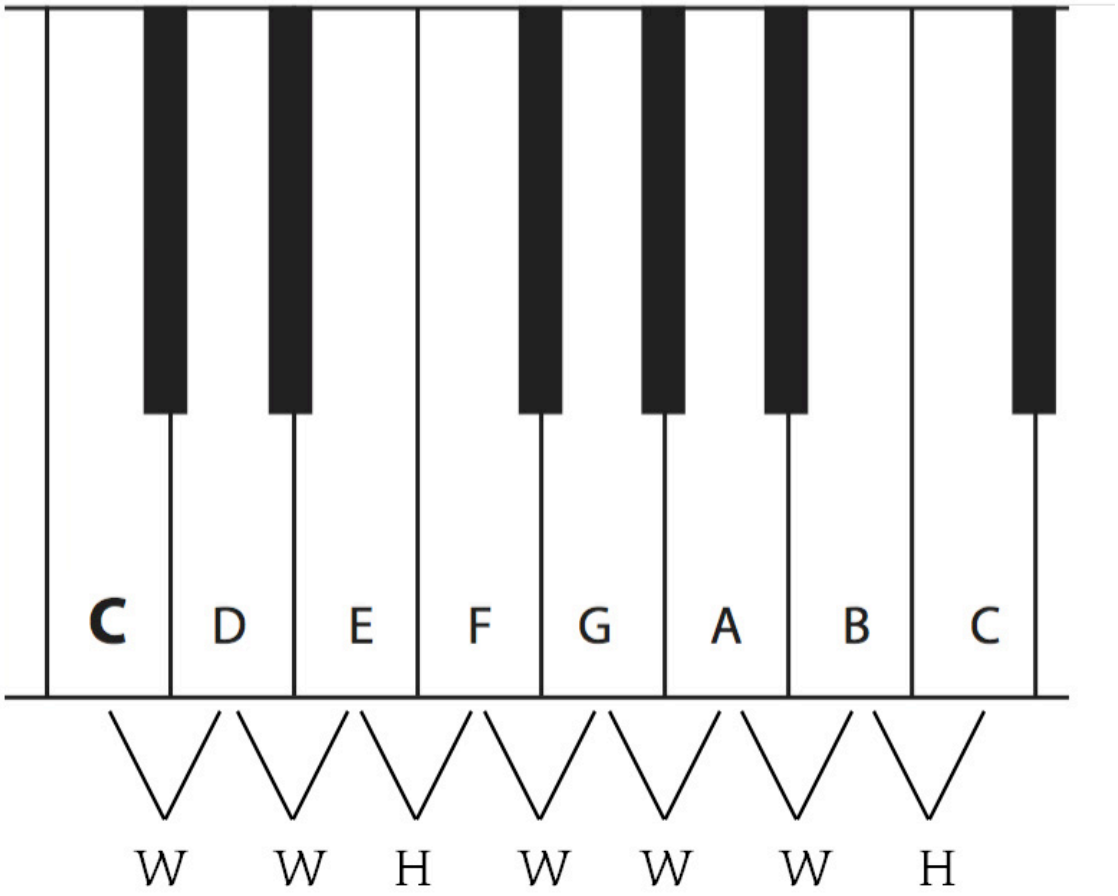
Introduction to Solfege

Every major scale has the same pattern of intervals (distances between notes). That pattern is what makes it sound like a major scale. Solfege makes use of this pattern to create a system of note names that works for any key and helps to train your ear for sight-singing.

Intervals are measured in half-steps (indicated by "H" in these diagrams). A half-step is this distance between any two neighboring keys on a piano, including both white and black keys. A whole step ("W") is two half-steps.

If you look at a C major scale on a piano keyboard, you'll see that most notes are a whole step apart, but only a half-step in a couple instances. A C major scale uses only the white keys on a piano, and there are black keys between most white keys, except between E and F, and between B and C. So the distances between those notes are only half-steps.

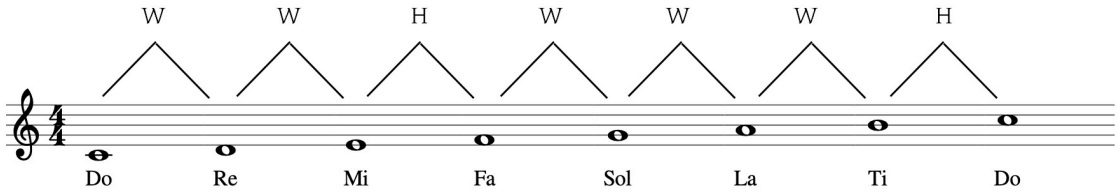


A scale can start on any note, but in order to sound specifically like a *major* scale, the intervals between the notes will have to follow this pattern. So if you start on any note other than C, you'll need to substitute in sharps or flats (the black keys on a piano) to make the pattern work out.

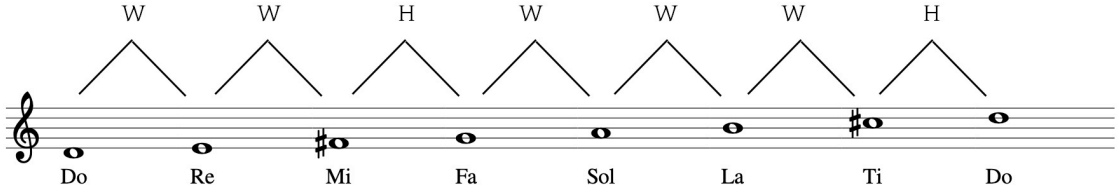
But because the scale will still come out sounding like the same "tune," it's actually helpful for singers to give the notes different names that correspond to where they are in the scale, rather than referring to their actual literal note name on an instrument.

Thus, the first note of a scale is called "Do," the second is "Re," then "Mi," "Fa," "Sol," "La," "Ti," and finally "Do" again.

So here is the C major scale:

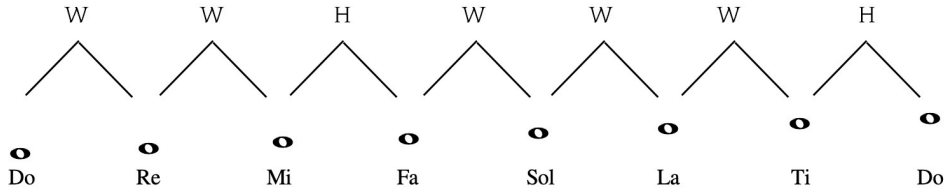


And here is the D major scale, which will sound exactly the same, just slightly higher:



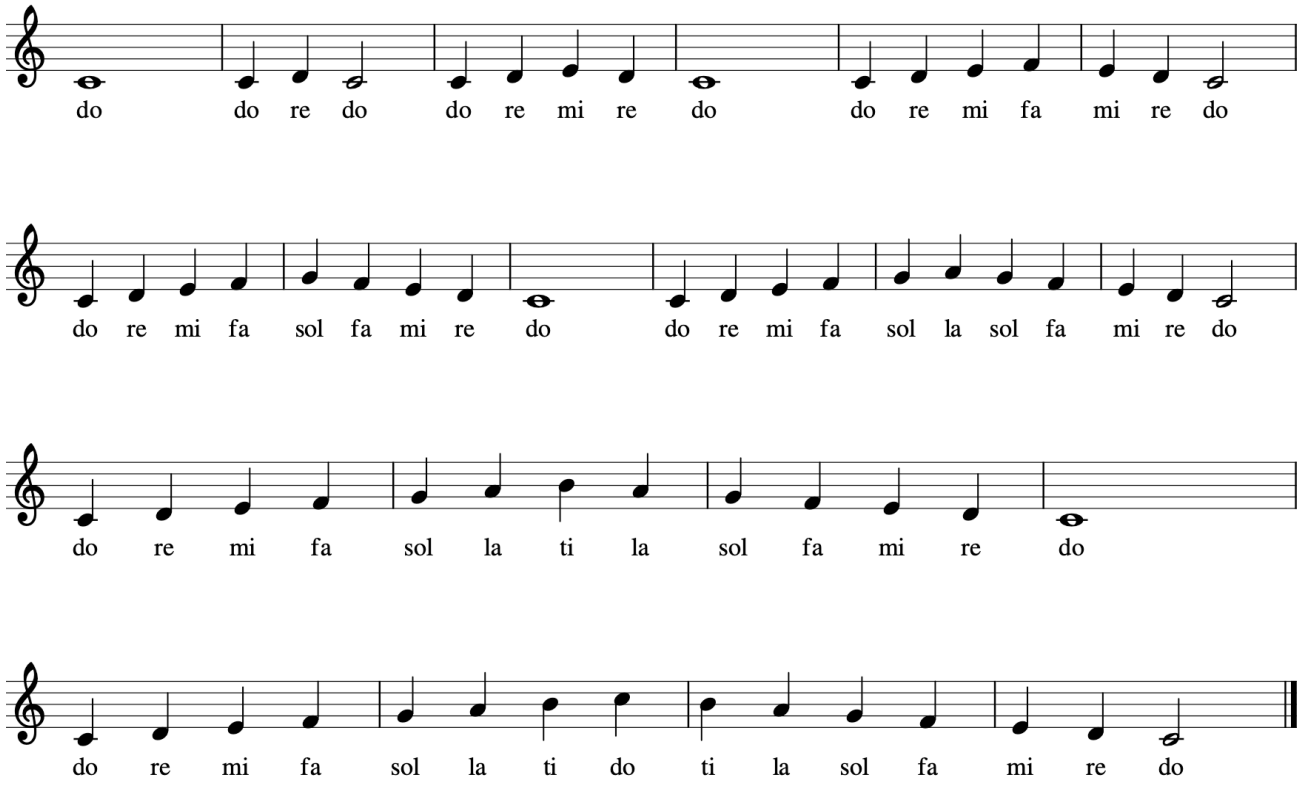
Notice that if we were playing an instrument, we'd have to figure out how to play the F# and the C# instead of the regular F and C. But as singers, we don't care. They're still just Mi and Ti, respectively.

That means that we can sing ANY major scale, just by starting on a different pitch:

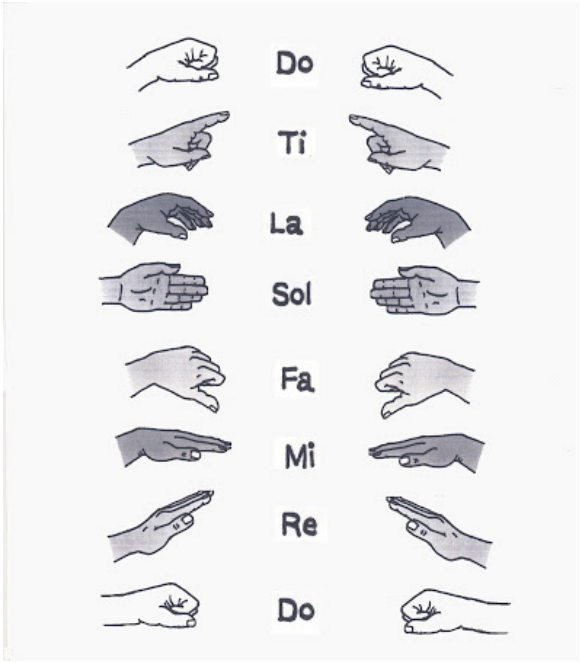


Learning these names for the notes, and practicing singing them, helps you engrain the intervals in your memory, and recognize them again when they come up in music.

For instance, here is a good beginning exercise. Feel free to start with just the first line or two, and then move on when you're comfortable with that.



There are hand signs associated with the solfege syllables as well, which some people find helpful, since it adds a kinesthetic component to the memory. (Only one hand is typically used—the diagram just shows left and right to cover either preference.)



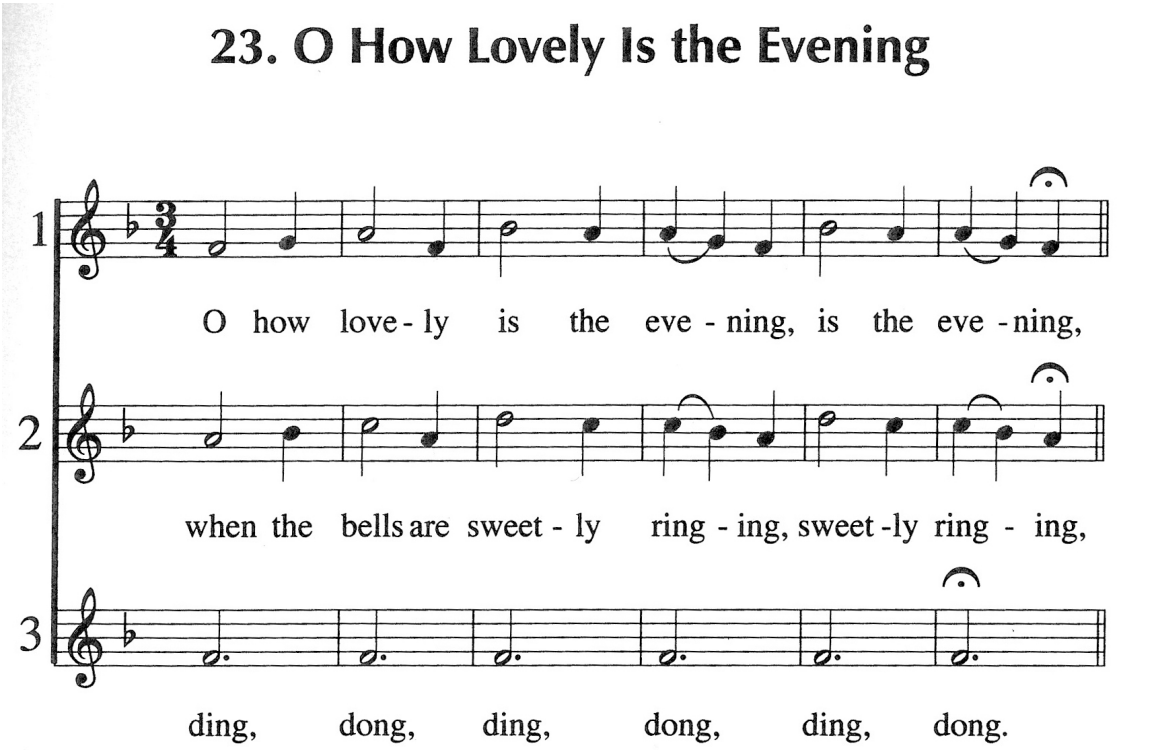
Here's an example we'll go through together in class. If you listen to someone sing this, you can hear that it's in a major key, and that the last note of the song sounds the most "resolved" (stable or finished). So that note will be our "do." Notice other places it shows up in the music. You might even circle them all, as landmarks. Choose a comfortable note to sing (maybe a medium-low note) and call that your "do."

Look at the beginning of the first line: It starts on do and then goes up to the next two notes in the scale, re and mi, just like we practiced in our scales above!

As an exercise, write the solfege name of each note underneath it.

Notice all the places in the song where the notes step up or down to adjacent lines and spaces. If you've practiced the scales, you will have practiced all these sequences already, and you'll start to just know what "sol-fa-mi" sounds like, etc., so that when you see them in the music, you'll know what they should sound like.

When you see a bigger jump between notes, you can sing a scale up to that note to find out what it sounds like, then go back and try jumping directly to it.



This takes practice, so just do a bit at a time if it seems difficult. Over time it will get easier!

(Bonus: This song is meant to be sung as a round, so once you learn it, you can teach it to two friends or family members and sing in harmony! The numbers indicate when each voice joins in.)