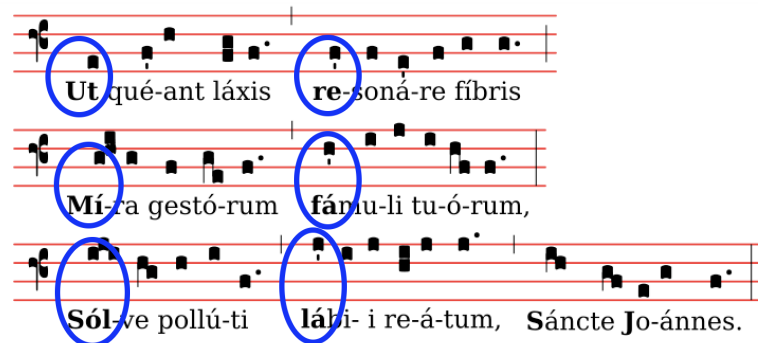


Solfa's Cryptic Origins

The original solfège syllables are attributed to Guido d'Arezzo, an 11th century monk and musician. The apocryphal story is that Guido took "*Ut Quéant Láxis*" (UQL), an already well-known hymn used in the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, in which each phrase starts one step higher than the previous, and adopted the first syllable each half-line to represent relative notes in a scale (called *voces*).

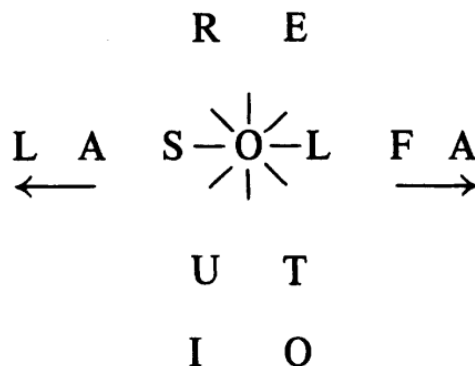


Guido could then teach new melodies by referencing the pitches in UQL. So the names of the syllables were basically serendipitous: *Ut*, *Re*, *Mi*, *Fa*, *Sol*, & *La*. They weren't invented with consideration for what would be the most logical sequence of consonants or vowels to match a musical scale; it is just what the lyrics of the poem happened to be. (Do and Ti came [later](#); they are not part of this story.) It is not unlike how most English speakers learned *Do-Re-Mi* because it is featured in a popular song from the *Sound of Music* in which each phrase is one step higher in the scale and the lyrics start with each syllable. *Never underestimate the power of a good musical mnemonic device.*

In reality, the origin story is more complicated. The hymn was not adopted into the liturgy until the 12th century, so it wasn't actually a well-known song yet when Guido introduced it. More likely, it became popular and was added to the liturgy because of Guido's use of it as a pedagogical tool for teaching music. The poem itself (UQL) was written in the 8th century in a collection attributed to Paulus Deaconus (but possibly not actually written by him); the melody was supposedly from the 10th century, originally to accompany the secular poem "[Ode to Phyllis](#)" by the Roman poet Horatius. If this is true, then Guido's role was to mash these religious lyrics and secular melody together and use the syllables as note names. Guido may have been drawn to the text because it features all five primary vowels (a, e, i, o, and u) and thus was also beneficial for practicing pronunciation and vocal quality in song. Earlier in his teachings (see [Micrologus, Chapter 17](#)), Guido used a composition 'game' to generate practice melodies from texts by assigning each vowel to a specific pitch:



Returning to *UQL*, although Guido may have endowed the syllables with musical significance, he was not the first person to extract these syllables from the text to have a special meaning. According to Jacques Viret and Jacques Chailley*, hundreds of years before *UQL* was ever set to music, the syllables were apparently already part of a mystical cryptogram embedded in the original poem. The message is revealed by arranging the syllables in the form of a cross, or [Christogram](#), a pictographic method of conveying symbolic meaning.



The text is dedicated to John the Baptist (Sancte Ioannes), whose feast was celebrated on the Summer Solstice. *SOL*, at the center of the cross, is Latin for "sun". The "O" in the center is not only a graphic representation of the sun, but was also the Latin symbol for the Greek letter Omega. One of the

common versions of Christograms was the Chi-Rho monogram combined with Alpha and Omega (from "I am the Alpha and Omega"). In the UQL cruciform, sOl (with its central Omega) is flanked by the syllables *La* and *Fa*, which combine to form "*alfa*", the usual Medieval Latin spelling of Alpha. *Mi*, although not part of the cross, is hypothesized to represent the largest numeral "M" (thousand) and the smallest "I" (one), and thus denoting a similar symbolism as Alfa/Omega. The syllable *Re*, at the top, occupies the position of Greek letter Rho. Reading from the top down forms the Latin word "*resolutio*", which has multiple symbolic meanings. It can be interpreted spiritually as the breaking down of the body or untying (from the cross). Another meaning of the word is, very aptly, the "solution" of a puzzle.

It seems unlikely that Guido just happened to pick *UQL* (which was not originally set to music) and coincidentally decided to extract the exact same set of syllables for a special use on his own. If the poem had already been attached to that melody, it could be conceivable that Guido noticed the stepping scale degrees, thought it might be a useful teaching tool, and independently (unknowingly) extracted the very same syllables as the original cryptogram. It would be more likely that Guido discovered the melody first, thought it would make a useful teaching device, but knew he couldn't use it with the very secular, almost hedonist, text of [Ode to Phyllis](#). Guido could have written his own lyrics and chosen syllables that perhaps would have functioned better musically. Instead, he found another, more sacred poem, that fit the melody and meter, was already known for extracting the initial syllables for a special meaning, and he used that feature to highlight the rising scale degrees. Furthermore, it is a text whose literal surface meaning is about singing and which is dedicated to one of the most widely celebrated saints, thus increasing the likelihood that it would become a popular song. What a clever teacher.

UT QUEANT LAXIS Let your servants sing freely
RESONARE FIBRIS with resounding voices
MIRA GESTORUM the admirable gestures
FAMULI TUORUM of your brilliant actions.
SOLVE POLLUTI Absolved from heavy faults,
LABII REATUM of their hesitant tongues
SANCTE IOHANNES we pray to you, Saint John

It is astounding to comprehend, however, that these random nonsense syllables have been imbued with secret, sacred, and sonic meaning for over a thousand years. Guido was not the first to make them special signifiers, nor was he the last. A hundred years after Guido, someone assigned the syllables to finger joints to be able to visually trace out melodies while teaching (i.e.,

a class power point presentation). 700 years after that, John Curwen developed separate hand signs for each syllable.



In the 1600s, Friedrich von Öttingen-Wallerstein translated angels into solfège.

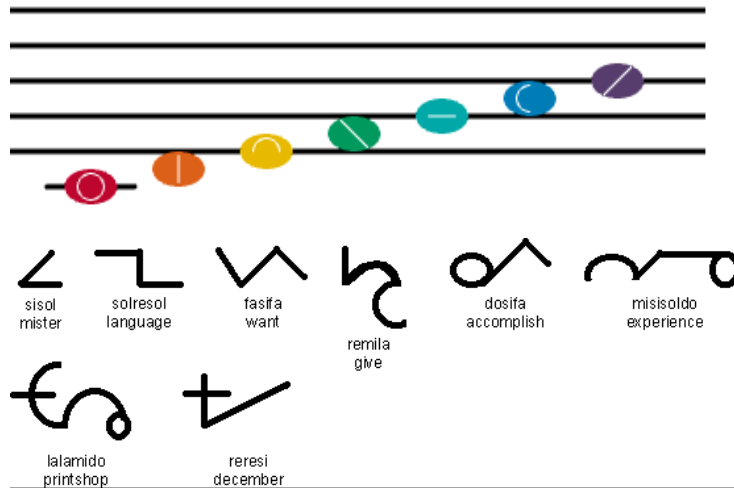
	re	fa	sol	mi	re
re	Enquiriel	Xeraphiel	Seraphiel	Lytrarchiel	brüziel
sol	Torviel	Faxamel	Amyriel	Naziel	Lalalala
fa	Stanziel	Gabriel	Michael	Heodriel	Stefaniel
mi	Walgarziel	Tumziel	Boxziel	Borchziel	Raphaël
re	Lufarchiel	Sogniel	Epandiel	Vriel	Khariel

In the 1800s, Francois Sudre invented an entire language, called [Solrésil](#), in which all the words are formed through a grammatical combination of solfège syllables.

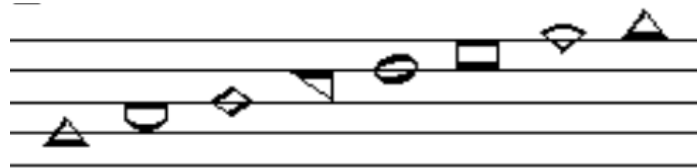
Article 1 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) in Solresol:

Siré misolredo faremi doredore domisimi re misóla, solfalafá
dósila re réfasi. Dófa faremi remila fare dômilafa re dôfasifa,
re fafa fasolfa midolă fare dômisola lasi sîmisila.

Solresol also maps unique colors and glyphs to each syllable to communicate visually.



At around the same time, [Jesse Aikin](#) developed seven distinct noteheads for shapenote singing:



Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do

And then we come full circle.

Guido turned the cryptic text into musical notes; [Solfa Cipher](#) turns those notes back into encrypted messages:



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