

# GUIDO OF AREZZO AND HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Here are a few musical questions for you to ponder:

- Why do we use the lower-case letter “b” to indicate that a note is flat?
- Why do we use the syllables, “Do, Re, Me ...” to represent a musical scale?
- Who came up with the staff lines and clefs that we use to transcribe music to paper?
- Who invented “Shape Notes” to assist people while sight-singing?
- Who was one of history’s first official music educators?

The answers to all of these questions take us directly to a remarkable man: Guido of Arezzo (c AD 995-1050).

He was born Guido Aretinus near Paris and educated by Benedictine monks at the monastery of St. Maur des Fosses. Upon joining their Order, he began to observe the confusion that accompanied the teaching and performance of liturgical melodies. He felt that he could simplify and improve the process and began creating many clever innovations and improvements. Unfortunately his brother monks resented this and eventually had him removed to the monastery of Pomposa near Ferrara in Italy. His ideas didn’t win him much support there either and he escaped the mounting intrigues by asking for and gaining admittance to the monastery of Arezzo. It was here that he was able to develop his new system of notation that was to bring order to the teaching of music. It was now clear to all that Guido’s system was far superior to what had gone before. The total acceptance gave him no small amount of fame and his name eventually found its way to the Pope.

After receiving the third urging request letter from Pope John XIX, Guido came to Rome to demonstrate his system. The Pope was so amazed to find that he could easily read and learn melodies without the aid of a master that he invited Guido to reside in Rome and teach his new system to the Roman clergy. After coming down with “Roman Fever” (probably malaria), Guido felt he needed to leave Rome to protect his health. He returned to the monastery of Pomposa where he had earlier received such opposition to his ideas. Now he was welcomed, his ideas accepted, and he was invited to re-join their brotherhood. His stay however was brief and he returned to Arezzo where he was the choir trainer for the Cathedral of Arezzo. His treatise, *Micrologus*, is the earliest comprehensive treatise on musical practice to include a discussion of polyphonic music and plainchant. Second only to Boethius’ treatise, *De Musica*, it was the most copied and read instruction book of the middle ages.

In Guido’s time there were two different systems of musical notation in

use. Boethius (c AD 470-525) in his 5 textbooks on music theory used the first 15 letters of the alphabet to represent the notes in use at the end of the Roman period. Gregorian chant on the other hand used a system of neumes (from meuma, a nod) which may have evolved from symbols used in the Greek language to denote pitch inflection. Neumes were meant to help the reader recall a tune that had already been learned by ear, giving only hints to the general shape of the melody. These were memory aids for someone who already knew the tune, not an exact way of recording the melody on paper. In attempting to make the neumes more intuitively represent the movement of the melody, the marks came to be written closer and farther from the associated text. Eventually a line was



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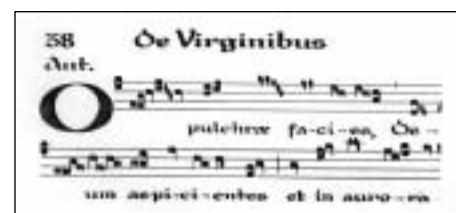


Fig. 1

added as a reference level and the marks were written at various distances above or below this line. When Guido arrived on the scene he found a system that was using two lines. He added two more, a red one upon which F was placed, and a yellow one for C; four lines being sufficient for the ambitus, or range, of the average Gregorian melody of his day (see **Figure 1**). Once his system became widely accepted the four parallel lines evolved into our five line staff, the neumes became our modern notes and the practice of using a line to denote the location of F or C eventually became the clefs that we use today.

Guido developed a form of sight-singing based on the syllables: ut, re, mi, fa, sol and la. The syllables were taken from the hymn *Ut queant laxis* and represent the first word of each phrase, each phrase beginning on a different pitch. This is the basis for the solfeggio or solmization system that we still use today. These six syllables were referred to as the hexachord system. When the hexachord system was replaced by the octave the French added “ti” as the final syllable and replaced Guido’s “ut” with the more sing-able “do”. The value of this system was that it generalized the musical scale and became the main tool available for teaching music.

The six-note-series hexachords began on C, G and F. The G hexachord contained a B-natural which was written as a square b something like our modern natural sign. The F hexachord contained a B-flat and was written as a rounded b just like our current flat symbol. The G hexachord was recited as, “G - ut, A - re, B - mi, C - fa, D - sol and E - la.” This also contains the answer to one of my favorite crossword puzzle clues, “Guido’s high note,” the answer being “ELA.”



Fig. 2

Guido also came up with another teaching aid known as the Guidonian Hand (see **Figure 2**). He used different locations on the hand to represent particular notes and could then just point to these spots while directing his students. He carried this idea even further by giving written notes individual shapes. These shape notes made sight singing and solfeggio accessible to everyone. Shape notes live on today mostly thanks to a hymnal called the Sacred Harp continuously in print since first published in 1844. Shape note hymns (see **Figure 3**) began in New England but took hold in the South when the North lost interest. Today there is a resurgence of interest and many communities have monthly gatherings for Sacred Harp shape note singing (<http://fasola.org/>).

As you can see, Guido of Arezzo was a one-man musical revolution. The body of musical knowledge before Guido could not exceed that which could be memorized and passed along through teaching. Guido provided a method whereby most anyone could sing a melody just by reading it from a page. This allowed the wealth of music to grow in both volume and complexity. Though most people will never know the name Guido of Arezzo they owe him a great debt for our rich musical inheritance. Hope to see you back here for the next column. Until then, please stay tuned.



Fig. 3

Roger Goodman is a musician, mathematician, punster, reader of esoteric books and sometime writer; none of which pays the mortgage. For that, he is a computer network guy for a law firm. He has been part of the Los Angeles old-time & contra-dance music community for over thirty years. While not a dancer, he does play fiddle, guitar, harmonica, mandolin, banjo & spoons. Roger has a penchant for trivia and obscure and sometimes tries to explain how the clock works when asked only for the time. He lives with his wife, Monika White, in Santa Monica.



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