

King Tut's Daddy, Guido, and Julie Andrews:
How Modern Music Got that Way

King Tut's father, Akhenaten, was a difficult child and grew into a difficult adult. He looked and acted sort of nerdish. He had a beautiful wife, Nefertiti, and several children but only one god, Re. Now everyone else had several gods, which, incidentally, always made more sense to me. How can you thank and curse one god for both the good and the bad things that happen to you? With the complexities of today's living, one needs several gods. Everyone else has specialized. Can the god business be any different? I sort of like the idea of a god for the sump pump and a god for the computer. Then you know exactly who is to blame when things go wrong and, conversely, who to thank when they go right. Anyway, since Mr. A. had one god, and he was the boss (pharaoh), he made sure that everyone else had only one god also. This was about 1300 BC. Now Moses, whose name, by the way, is Egyptian, was there around the same time and may have picked up a few ideas including monotheism. After all, nothing is new under the sun. For example, Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, saw and survived a "world-wide" flood in a large boat and sent out a bird to find land in about 2000 BC. All this perhaps 500 years before Noah got his feet wet.

Although, the Egyptian god Re fell out of favor, the monotheism idea persisted and Yahweh, later God, and still later Allah got voted in and the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims, have been duking it out ever since. They have been killing each other for hundreds of years in support of their respective faiths, a sort of pious equivalent of "My Dad can beat up your Dad". In reality, however, it has been and is still being done for economic gain. Yahweh has more tradition, God more cash, and Allah more oil. This problem has yet to be resolved and probably never will be.

Meanwhile, the Christians were also dealing with weighty theological problems, such as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. These conundrums have been left behind as we have advanced scientifically and now ponder the exact timing of the beginning of the human spirit.

There seems to be only one good thing to come out of this long and sad scenario, and that is that the Christians, in the process of worshipping their God, developed the best music. At least, I think they did.

These early Christians, when they weren't worrying about pins and angels, busied themselves by singing chants. As there was no notation system, these three and four note "songs" were passed down orally from singer to singer. Now you can imagine how that went. We can't even do "Hello Mary Lou" like it's written. As Christianity grew in popularity and spread to other countries, more chants developed. Trying to learn them all and to teach them so they would continue to be uniform and unchanged became an impossible task.

Enter Guido. Remember Guido? I mentioned him in a previous article about "Down With Do, Re, Mi..." but I didn't know who Guido was. Thanks to Duane Ainlay's "Techniques of Sight Reading and Music Understanding", I found where he came from and was able to do a little research. Guido Aretinus was born in France about 995 A.D. He became a Benedictine monk and traveled to Italy in 1025 to work for Bishop Theobald in Arezzo, Italy (becoming Guido d'Arezzo). Although not a composer himself, Guido recognized musical chaos when he saw it. He set out to develop a method of notation by which the chants could be preserved, passed down, and remain unchanged, a part of the historical record.

He took the staff currently in use that had two lines, and added two lines giving us a four line staff. (Now you all know how many lines we have in our modern day staff. Please tell me that you do. If you don't, stop reading this and go count them now). He also used the spaces between the line as well as the lines. Now that is really thinking outside the box! But he needed to name these lines and spaces. He noted that a popular hymn of the day moved up one note with each line. So the next step was to do a bit of obvious borrowing, to whit:

St. John Hymn "Ut queant laxis" (ca. 800 A.D.)	
U t queant laxis	That (ut) your servants
R esonare fibris	May freely sing (resonare)
M ira gestorum	The miracles
F amuli tuorum	Of your deeds
S olve poluti	Remove (solve) all stains (of sin)
L abii reatum	From their unclean lips (Labii)
Sancte Ioannes	St. John

Thus you have ut, re, mi, fa, so, and la. This system of notation is called solmisation after sol and mi. The French, ah the French..., still use it today. Later, another note was added to the system and another line and space to the staff to bring it up to what is in current use. The French, ah the French..., still use ut (try to sing ut) while the Italians use do, re, mi fa, sol, la, si, do.

The Brits, represented by Sarah Glover (1785-1867) and John Curwen (1816-1880), were aware of the moral and religious value (?) of hymn singing ("My God's better than your God") and further codified the system. They utilized a movable do and the solmisation symbols in what Curwen called the "Tonic Sol-Fa Method". This proved extremely popular as it taught people to sight read off the music staff. Curwen went even further and pushed music to be read from staff notation alone. No notes as we know them were to be found. This did not succeed, but his "Method" did and crossed the Atlantic to become influential in 19th century music in the U. S.

Julie Andrews? She just sang about do, re, mi, etc. in "The Sound of Music".

And there you have it. From King Tut's daddy to Julie Andrews, there is a continuing series of connections, but I still don't know how many angels can do the "Macarina" on the head of a pin.

(Now please read last months article in the Arlingtuner, 'Down With Do, Re, Mi; Up With 1,2, and 3', to get a more current perspective.)

July 2002