

La-re-so: Teaching the Tibetan *Dranyen* through Solfege
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The *dranyen* (sgra snyan) is the Tibetan long-necked lute, with six strings in three courses in a re-entrant tuning of *la-re-sol* (that is, in scale degrees: 6, 2, 5). The Central Tibetan version of the instrument is played all over the Tibetan plateau, and throughout the Tibetan Diaspora, and related instruments are played in Himalayan areas of Nepal and India. While other instruments are important in Tibetan music, the *dranyen* is widely considered to be the most characteristically Tibetan in its appearance and timbre; it is regarded as an emblem of Tibetan culture.¹

The emblematic status of the *dranyen* has been especially stressed in the diasporic refugee community of Tibetans, which has existed since the Dalai Lama established a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, following the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. One of the priorities of this government has been the preservation of Tibetan language and culture. An important site for that project has been the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), established in Dharamsala in 1961 for the purpose of training youth in the performing arts of *Lhamo* (opera), song, dance, and instrumental musicianship.

The TIPA desire to represent a version of Tibetan music in exile has also fueled a trend toward standardizing a repertoire and its methods of transmission.² Besides producing several generations of performing artists, TIPA has also developed an active music education program, training thousands of music teachers over the decades, who have spread around the Diaspora and taught music to students in boarding schools, monasteries, and community centers. TIPA also has a number of branch schools, called *Lhamo Tshokpa* (Tibetan Opera Association) in Nepal and India. These teachers use techniques that make learning the instrument extremely simple,

and that ease of learning, combined with the importance of the *dranyen*'s emblematic status, means that it is now unusual, in diasporic communities of India and Nepal, to find a young Tibetan person who has *not* had any instruction on the instrument.

I studied *dranyen* with three different teachers in Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2014 and 2015. The late Sonam Tsering (d. 2015), Pema Tenzin, and Tenzin Namgyal. All three of these teachers were trained at TIPA and used very similar techniques in teaching me. Sonam Tsering and Tenzin Namgyal both taught at the Kathmandu *Lhamo Tshokpa*, in the Boudhanath district, while Pema Tenzin taught privately near his home across the valley in Swayambunath. These teachers all use pedagogical techniques that involve oral/aural learning supported by notation, and the use of memorization by solfege singing prior to playing the melody on the instrument.

The notation used by TIPA is a Sino-Japanese version of standard Western notation, in which the notes are represented by numbers denoting the scale degree. Rhythm is indicated by dashes, or lines, underneath the scale degrees that operate exactly like the beams on eighth- and sixteenth-notes. Bar lines then separate groupings of notes equaling two quarter-notes, or 2/4 time. This can be seen in Pema Tenzin's transcription of the *dranyen* part for the song *Nubri Töshe* (the Tibetan script at the top of this example reads "rolcha tongpa," literally "empty instrument," or "instrumental part"):

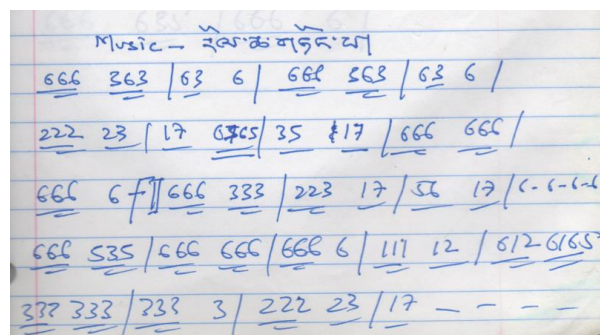


Figure 1: Pema Tenzin's transcription of the *dranyen* part for *Nubri Töshe*

The tuning of the *dranyen* is re-entrant, meaning that the first of three courses of strings is the lowest in pitch while the second course is the highest in pitch. The strings are tuned to scale degrees 6, 2, and 5, with 5 being below 1 and 6 below 2.³ Thus, when the diatonic scale is played, the scale is *re-entered*, at an octave below, on scale degree 5 (fig. 2).

Since the *dranyen* is never played above first position, this is true whether or not the song melody extends to more than one octave. In other words, there is only one place to play any given scale degree regardless of the octave being sung (with the exception of scale degree 6, which can be played either on the third course open or on the first course with the first finger). This results in extremely simple fingering. Only the index and middle fingers of the left hand are used, with open strings being employed as much as possible.

Thus the student need only memorize seven basic fingerings or open notes, which are associated both with their numerical scale degree and solfege syllable. The tuning is usually in the neighborhood of D3-G3-C3, with scale degree 1, or *do*, a minor third above the open third string (course). Thus, if the instrument is tuned to D3-G3-C3, the major scale starts on F fingered on the third course with the second or middle finger:

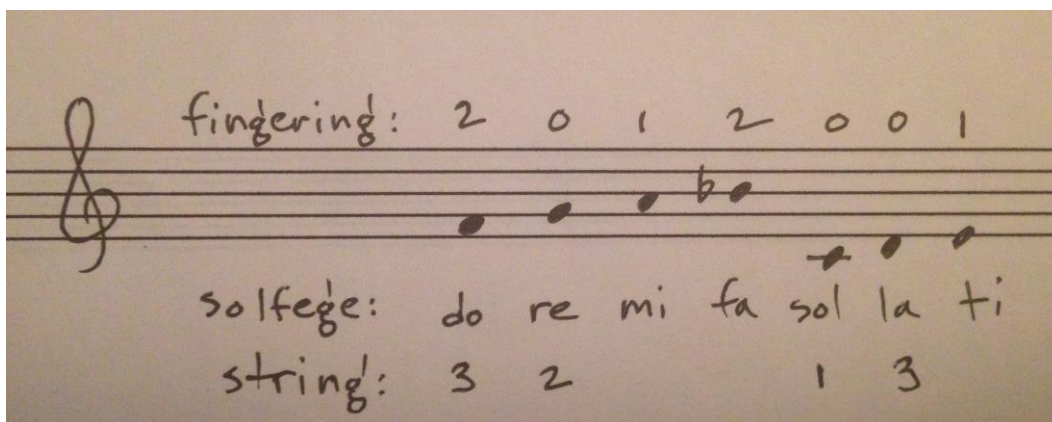


Figure 2: *dranyen* notes and fingerings

The TIPA teachers use Western solfege syllables (*do, re, mi, etc.*) to sing the melodies of songs *before* they attempt to play them on an instrument. A group of Tibetan students practicing a melody by singing may be thought of as analogous to a shape-note choir singing a song with syllables prior to singing it with the text. This allows the student to memorize the melody, not only as sound, but also with the syllables that are associated through practice with the physical locations of the notes on the instrument. Thus the student can then go to the instrument and play the melody relatively immediately.

Not having to try to learn the tune at the same time as learning its location on the instrument makes this an extremely effective method for teaching instrumental melody, because it separates aural memorization of the tune from the process of finding the notes on the instrument while at the same time embedding the knowledge of the locations of those notes in the memorization process through solfege. The notation is used as a support for oral learning because once the student memorizes the tune through sight-singing the notation is generally removed for playing the tune on the instrument. Once the student is trained to sight-sing from notation, transmission can take place through solfege singing alone.

Two of the three teachers with whom I studied in Kathmandu, Sonam Tsering and Pema Tenzin, consistently taught me this way. First, they would write down the tune (see fig. 2, above) in numerical scale degrees, then they would make me sing it with them several times in solfege. Only when they were satisfied that I had the tune in my head would they let me try it on the instrument, when they would continue to sing along in solfege to support my finger-memory. I have heard a number of young students learning this way, and they seem to be able to learn a large number of melodies in a short time.

Tenzin Namgyal also uses this technique, which is standard TIPA practice, but as his lessons with me were mostly focused on dance, and our time together was somewhat limited, he did not go through this process with me on each tune. Instead, he gave me notation and let me record multiple tunes to learn at a later time. Since I had already had a number of lessons with the highly respected Sonam Tsering, I think Tenzin Namgyal believed I was capable of teaching the tunes to myself, and that enabled him to transmit several songs to me in one lesson.

I have also used a similar technique in teaching melodies—though not necessarily Tibetan ones—to my own students, and while I have not used solfege for teaching Irish, old-time, or Balkan tunes, I have found that simply learning to hum or sing the melody first expedites the process of learning the mechanics and somatic memory of playing it on an instrument. Other traditions have long used similar techniques of teaching melodic content—Indian classical music, for example—but by comparison they are more exclusively oral. The Tibetan practice of supporting oral transmission with written notation is very fast and efficient, and could easily be adapted to the teaching of other vernacular musics in academic settings. This approach equally and simultaneously engages the cognitive and somatic, and unifies understanding on three levels: the solfege syllable, the numeric scale degree, and the physical position of the note on the instrument.

While as an ethnomusicologist I would caution against incorporating the Tibetan system into a universalizing “repertory non-specific approach” to teaching music theory in general and instead seek to “articulate difference rather than impose it,”⁴ this approach, which seems to accelerate learning, could go a long way toward compensating for the fact that students in vernacular music ensembles often only have a single semester to learn orally transmitted musics that ordinarily take years to learn. In my experience, Tibetan music students trained with

TIPA techniques are consistently better at solfege than American conservatory students.

Therefore the Tibetan approach could prove useful for teaching solfege to Western music majors as well as students of vernacular music.

¹ Ian Collinge, "The Dra-nyen (the Himalayan Lute): An Emblem of Tibetan Culture," *Chime* 6 (1993): 22-23.

² Anna Morcom, "History, traditions, identities and nationalism: Drawing and redrawing the musical cultural map of Tibet," *PLATS 2006* (2006).

³ For instance, the third course is tuned to D3 and the second course to G3 a fourth higher, while the first course is tuned to C2 (or a fifth below the second course and a major second below the third course). D is "6" because the tonic is F a minor third above (fingered on the D course with the middle finger), so G is "2" and C is "5."

⁴ Brenda M Romero, "A Theory of Infinite Variation," in *Discourses in African Musicology: J.H. Kwabena Nketia Festschrift*. Kwasi Ampene and Godwin Kwafo Adje, editors. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Maize Books, 124-154). 2015 (138).