Charles Edward McGuire, ***Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-fa Movement***

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Reviewed by Robin Stevens

Comparatively little is now known about the once flourishing Tonic Sol-fa Method and its letter notation. This method of 'teaching to sing' was developed and propagated by the Reverend John Curwen from the early 1840s. By the time of his death in 1880, Tonic Sol-fa had become a major force in British society, and leadership of the movement then passed to Curwen's son, John Spencer Curwen, with his second son, John Spedding Curwen, taking a minor role. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Tonic Sol-fa represented not only a significant means of promoting musical culture through choral singing but, as McGuire argues, also a form of philanthropic endeavour, both in Britain and abroad.

To date, most of the research undertaken on Tonic Sol-fa has focused on its applications in educational settings, principally in public school systems and to a lesser extent in the evangelical and educational work of Christian missionaries in Africa and Asia. Drawing principally on the belief systems espoused by John Curwen and his sons over a period of nearly seventy years, McGuire considers in turn the influence of Tonic Sol-fa on three broad aspects of Victorian society: the temperance movement, missionary work (both domestic and foreign), and universal suffrage. Although making some use of secondary sources, McGuire relies on the official journal of the Tonic Sol-fa movement—*The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter* (1851–1888), then *The Musical Herald* (1889–1920), *The Musical News and Herald* (1921–1926), and finally *The Musical News* (1927–1929)—as his principle source of data.

The preface and opening chapter clearly set out the purposes of the book, as well as providing a summary of the essential musical context of and social background to the rise and later fall of Tonic Sol-fa in popular appeal. As Scholes has described the situation, the latter part of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century constituted 'the sight singing century' in Britain, to which Tonic Sol-fa contributed in no small measure as part of this 'most extraordinary mania.'[1] McGuire explains the origins and theoretical bases of the Tonic Sol-fa method as a movable system of solmisation (sol-fa syllables) that he adapted from Sarah Ann Glover's 1845 publication *Scheme for Rendering Psalmody Congregational* which was commonly known as Norwich Sol-fa. Curwen further refined Glover's notational system using the first lower-case (instead of upper-case) letters of the solomisation syllables for pitch notation and a system of barlines and punctuation symbols for rhythmic notation. Although McGuire gives acknowledgement to Curwen's opportunism in adapting Norwich Sol-fa to his own purposes, some scholars would regard Curwen's self-confessed indebtedness to Glover more in terms of an appropriation than an adaptation.[2]

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[1] Percy A. Scholes, *The Mirror of Music, 1844–1944* (London: Novello & Co, 1947).

[2] See, for example, Jane E. Southcott, '"Dear Madam"—The Letters of Sarah Glover and John Curwen,' ed. K. Hartwig, *Artistic Practice as Research: Proceedings of the XXVth Annual Conference* (Melbourne: Australian Association for Research in Music Education, 2004).

McGuire then gives a fairly comprehensive account of Curwen's promotion of Tonic Sol-fa through his various publications including the *Reporter* (and its successors) and his many instructional textbooks. McGuire makes much of John Curwen's promotion, as a Dissenting minister, of moral and philanthropic principles through Tonic Sol-fa. This 'means to ends' approach in which music was used as a medium for improving working class society was the underpinning of John Curwen's moral philanthropy. This was in contrast to his successor, Spencer Curwen, who, by the late 1880s, was more focused on linking the 'specialised' community of Tonic Sol-fa singers to the larger community of mainstream, predominantly middle class music makers. Spencer Curwen's approach—as revealed through editorials and other writing in the *Reporter* and the *Musical Herald*—was that the standing of Tonic Sol-fa singers would be elevated not so much by their proficiency as singers as through the excellence of the musical repertoire they performed. Accordingly, the focus in editorial content of the *Musical Herald* shifted from advocating music as the socially reforming influence and as a morally wholesome recreation, to the promotion of art music for middle class consumption through choral masterworks by Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn, as well as the contemporary repertoire of Stanford, Stainer, Macfarren, Parry and Elgar.

In the following chapters, McGuire covers the relationship of Tonic Sol-fa to the temperance movement, to missionary work—both at home and abroad—and to the suffrage movement. In Chapter 2, McGuire draws similarities between the Tonic Sol-fa and the temperance movements, citing in particular their use of the same organisational and promotional strategies at both local and national levels. As in the following chapter, McGuire makes use of a case study—in this instance, the Preston Temperance Society—to point out parallels between temperance and Tonic Sol-fa in their use of publishing and 'the publicity machine' to promote their respective as well as mutually held objectives. The argument is put that neither movement really achieved its ultimate goal, the temperance movement because both the working and the middle classes often refused to be 'saved' and frequently turned to entertainments that were accompanied by alcohol, and Tonic Sol-fa because it took individuals beyond the limited moral and evangelical compass of choral music and into the less morally focused areas of music such as opera, music drama and instrumental music.

A case study is also employed in Chapter 3, where McGuire discusses the introduction of music through Tonic Sol-fa by members of the London Missionary Society and other missionary organisations in Madagascar. There is also mention of missionaries employing Tonic Sol-fa in their work in China and other parts of Asia, as well as in South Africa. Interestingly, McGuire has chosen to rely solely on contemporary nineteenth-century sources—chiefly, the *Reporter*—for his data and to by-pass some of the existing research literature in this area.[3] Nevertheless, McGuire makes the useful observation that Christian missionaries utilised Tonic Sol-fa not only as a means of moral education, but as a means of exercising paternalistic control over indigenous converts; denial of 'communion' with the rites and practices (including music) of the church was a powerful means of ensuring conformity. Moreover, missionaries in Madagascar

[3] See, for example, Jane E. Southcott, 'The First Tonic Sol-fa Missionary: Reverend Robert Toy in Madagascar', *Research Studies in Music Education* 23.1 (Dec. 2004): 3-17; Robin S. Stevens, 'Tonic Sol-Fa in Asia-Pacific Countries: The Missionary Legacy', *Asia-Pacific Journal for Arts Education* 5.1 (2007): 52-76; Robin S. Stevens, 'Tonic Sol-fa: An Exogenous Aspect of South African Musical Identity', ed. E. Akrofi, M. Smit and S-M. Thorsén, *Music and Identity* (Stellenbosch, South Africa: African Sun Press, 2007).

considered it their duty to suppress and indeed obliterate Malagasy singing (it being viewed as a hindrance to Christian worship) and instead replace it with a repertoire of British choral music (realised through Tonic Sol-fa notation) that was deemed to be the hallmark of civilised and cultured people.

McGuire devotes Chapter 4 to a discussion—based not only on the editorial content of Tonic Sol-fa periodicals, but on other contemporary writing—of the role of music and, to a lesser extent, of Tonic Sol-fa in the women's suffrage movement in Britain. The author makes the point that the Curwens, although not openly supporting suffrage, nevertheless aimed for 'a better society based on the image of Non-Conformist Protestant ideals of social equality'.[4] While fully recognising and discussing the use of music—such as the compositions of Ethel Smyth ('March of the Women' for example)—as a drawcard for suffrage meetings, McGuire contends that the extent of Curwens' support, often stated in an somewhat opinionated, offhand and patronising manner in the editorial content of the *Reporter* and the *Musical Herald*, was limited to promoting women's role as a moral influence in Victorian domesticity. McGuire points out that, in keeping with this somewhat idealised role, the Curwens chose to characterise the female Tonic Sol-fa-ist as a choral singer (part of a strong working- and lower middle-class community) as opposed to a solo singer (who might be thought of as demonstrating musical autonomy and personal independence characteristic of the middle and upper classes). Nevertheless, despite Spencer Curwen and the Curwen Press avoiding any overt support for the suffrage cause, the movement itself made good use of Tonic Sol-fa for its own purposes, so that that method was seen to be 'moving beyond the scope of their [the Curwens'] imaginations and desires'.[5]

Some useful points are made by the author in the final chapter, which is aptly titled 'Epilogue: Tonic Sol-fa, the Public, and the End of an Era.' McGuire points out that John Curwen did not consider himself to be a musician but rather a moralist and educator. For him, music was purely functional—first as an aid to Christian worship, and second as a means of effecting moral reform—with the aesthetic effect of music hardly being considered. However, after his death in 1880, British music entered what has been described as the 'English Musical Renaissance,' which extended from 1880 to 1930 and became more focussed on the aesthetic qualities of music than on any utilitarian applications. During this period, other historical forces led to a decline of Tonic Sol-fa—the temperance movement became less of a national force, and the focus of missionary activity turned more towards the domestic rather than foreign fields with the rise of the Salvation Army and Church Army—and Spencer Curwen (by then, leader of the Tonic Sol-fa movement) did not give any overt support to new social movements such as women's suffrage. Moreover, in the face of competition in music publishing from the now more easily and inexpensively printed music in staff notation, Tonic Sol-fa began to wane. With the death of Spencer Curwen in 1916 and that of Spedding Curwen (the family's business manager) in 1919, John Kenneth Curwen took over the reins of the Curwen Press. This resulted in the publishing of oratorios and other forms of art music, and this was reflected in the content of the by-then re-titled *Musical News and Herald* that now focussed on music *per se*, rather than on Tonic Sol-fa. As McGuire so aptly sums up the situation, by the time that

[4] McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy*, 165.
[5] McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy*, 170.

the *Musical News* ceased publication in 1929, a new culture of leisure and therefore a focus on 'music as recreation' became the sole pre-occupation of the British musical public.

McGuire has included a worthwhile appendix on 'Tonic Sol-fa Sources' that outlines the range of primary and secondary source materials he consulted in the course of compiling this book, and has thoughtfully listed the locations where the letterpress issues of the *Reporter* and its successors may be accessed by future researchers.

Worthy as this book is in bringing to light the philanthropic bases of the once vibrant Tonic Sol-fa movement, there is, from this reviewer's perspective, an unfortunate limitation in the author's interpretation of the word 'philanthropy.' If the word is interpreted along the lines of 'the effort or inclination to increase the well-being of humankind' or 'something, such as an activity or institution, intended to promote human welfare,'[6] the aspect of education should surely feature more prominently. Firstly, aside from an explanation of the principles of solmisation and Tonic Sol-fa notation (incorporating both pitch and rhythmic elements) in the section entitled 'A Brief History of Tonic Sol-fa' in Chapter 1, there is, regrettably, no discussion about the other pedagogical means and methods developed by Curwen or adapted by him from other music teaching methods. Such aspects as the modulator (adapted from Glover's Norwich Sol-fa Ladder), sol-fa hand signs and the 'mental effects' of the solmisation syllables, French time names (adapted from Aimé Paris' *Langue de durées*), and rhythm hand signs, which underpin the 'easy, cheap and true' catch cry of the method, are unfortunately not considered. Although mention is made of John Curwen's principal roles as 'moralist and educator,' there is no discussion of his well-conceived pedagogical precepts as outlined in his *Teacher's Manual*, nor of his development of the Tonic Sol-fa curriculum as represented in successive editions of *The Standard Course of Lessons in the Tonic Sol-fa Method*.

Another notable omission is any consideration of the evolution of Tonic Sol-fa notation and the momentous decision by Curwen in the 1872 edition of *The Standard Course* to dispense with his earlier application (based on Glover's approach) of using Tonic Sol-fa as a form of supplementary notation to staff notation. This decision resulted in the 'notational isolation' of Tonic Sol-fa from mainstream music performance and publishing in staff notation, and, despite attempts to return to a system of dual staff and Tonic Sol-fa notation, this may well have played a significant role in the decline of Tonic Sol-fa during the early twentieth century.

Of perhaps greater significance is the omission of any consideration of the role of Tonic Sol-fa in educational settings—specifically in public schools and in missionary education. Mention is certainly made in the opening chapter of this book of Curwen's interest in promoting Tonic sol-fa in Ragged Schools, but there is no discussion of the then widely perceived 'civilising and humanising' influences of music in elementary schools, both at home and abroad. Even references to existing research studies that have focussed on the use of Tonic Sol-fa in school education would have been worthwhile as a means of recognising this aspect of nineteenth-century philanthropic endeavor. Given the plethora of references to the use of Tonic Sol-fa in school music in the *Reporter* and its successors, the omission of this aspect of philanthropy is surprising.

However, no publication of this type can ever be 'all things to all people.' There is no doubt that *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-fa Movement* is an excellent publication that

[6] See definition of 'philanthropy' in The Free Dictionary [online resource], <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/philanthropy>, accessed 13 December 2011.

exhibits the author's fine scholarship and well-informed interpretation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social and cultural history in relation to Tonic Sol-fa. This book has been meticulously researched and carefully written, and is sure to contribute much to the understanding and appreciation of the unique input that Tonic Sol-fa had to the British way of life, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Shane Homan and Tony Mitchell, eds, *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now: Popular Music In Australia*

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Reviewed by Kath Nelligan

Shane Homan and Tony Mitchell's *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now* is a collection of essays that provides an informative overview of Australian popular music practices, reflecting on sociological and cultural scholarship. Discussing popular music in Australian contexts raises questions about what is considered 'popular music' and what is understood as 'Australian.' Indeed, the label 'Australian Popular Music' evokes debates around nationalism, cultural imperialism, globalisation, appropriation, authenticity and local identity: themes that appear throughout this volume. Australian national identities are diverse, spanning postcolonial, Indigenous, migrant and so on; one would, therefore, expect this diversity to be reflected or integrated into Australian popular music practices (p. 2). This is certainly the case when considering the way some Australian hip hop artists incorporate languages other than English into their lyrics (p. 235), or when Indigenous artists conflate native instruments with non-Indigenous styles of music, like rock or country. However, despite this, the diversity of Australian national identity is grossly underrepresented in popular culture. One recalls Baz Lurhmann's *Australia*, a 2008 film that depicts Australia as a rural, cattle-droving and kangaroo-jumping landscape. In popular music, the tradition of 'Oz Rock' has all too often been the genre of choic—at least in popular culture contexts—for representing a typically Australian sound and identity, and much has been written examining and debating this point.[1]

As recently as 2011, Universal Music Australia released a compilation double CD entitled *The Great Australian Songbook* featuring songs that reflect the Oz Rock tradition. Some of the bands featured on that release are Midnight Oil, Cold Chisel, Men at Work, Daddy Cool, The Easybeats and GANGgajang. Of the forty songs, only six are by female artists (five of whom appear on the second CD) and only one is by an Indigenous Australian. These bands, which are indicative of 1980s pub rock and white working class masculinity, are presented as a summation of 'great' Australian popular music and songs. Idealising Oz Rock as the typical Australian sound presents several problems: first, female and Indigenous artists are

[1] See Jon Stratton, *Australian Rock: Essays on Popular Music* (Perth: Network Books, 2007) 57–62; James Cockington, *Long Way to the Top: Stories of Australian Rock and Roll* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2001); and the first chapter of the volume under review.