

Hugo Alpen - New South Wales Superintendent of Music, 1884-1908**An article published in the****'Great Australian Educators' Series,*****Unicorn: The Journal of the Australian College of Education,*****Vol.19, No. 3 (September 1993), pp. 93-96****by****Robin S. Stevens**

Hugo Alpen was born at Kellinghusen near Hamburg in Germany on October 26, 1842. He most probably received his early musical training from his father who was conductor of the local leidertafel (men's singing society). Alpen later studied with Professor Jacques Schmidt, a celebrated music teacher of the time and then, on emigrating to Australia, he undertook harmony and counterpoint studies with Charles Horsley.¹ From 1873 until 1879 Alpen was employed by the New South Wales Council of Education as an itinerant singing master in the Albury District. Then in 1880 he was appointed by the newly-established Department of Public Instruction as assistant singing master to James Fisher who was then the singing master for Sydney schools (including the Fort Street [Teacher] Training College).² The following year Alpen was appointed as Departmental music examiner and when Fisher resigned in 1884, Alpen took over from him as singing master at the Fort Street and Hurlstone Training Colleges. He was also appointed to the newly-created position of Superintendent of Music in the Department of Public Instruction.

During Fisher's period as singing master, music in New South Wales schools had been taught exclusively by the tonic sol-fa method and its system of music notation. However Alpen was concerned that children should also be taught to read music from the more universally-accepted staff system of notation in the upper levels of primary schools. By exerting his influence as Superintendent of Music, Alpen was able to introduce what he termed the 'movable doh' method of teaching children to sing from staff notation into the majority of

Sydney schools by 1887 and also to have it adopted in the new primary school 'Standards of Proficiency' brought into operation in 1890.

Alpen outlined the principles and operation of his 'movable doh' method in a series of articles published in the *New South Wales Educational Gazette* during 1896-97 and subsequently re-published as a booklet entitled *Practical Hints for the Teaching of Vocal Music in Public Schools* in 1897. From these accounts it would appear that Alpen had evolved a school music teaching method which was unique for the period in Australia and was, in fact, far in advance of contemporary school music teaching practice in England. The distinguishing feature of the 'movable doh' method was the incorporation of three distinct systems of music teaching - (1) singing by ear, (2) the tonic sol-fa system and (3) the staff system - into a single methodological approach.

The first stage in Alpen's method aimed at 'the acquisition of musical perception' and was introduced to children during their first year at school. The main objectives here were: to develop the ability of pupils to hear, and correctly reproduce vocally, any pitched sound before progressing to the singing of 'simple melodies by ear'; to remedy faults in singing, particularly loud or coarse tone and poor enunciation; and to introduce the concepts of accentuation and rhythm through action songs.

The second stage (from the lower second class to the lower third class) involved teaching children to sing from tonic sol-fa notation. Alpen employed all of the usual tonic sol-fa teaching procedures except that he excluded French time names and their hand signs from the teaching of rhythm.

The final stage (from the middle third class upwards) involved teaching staff notation by the 'movable doh' method. The rudiments of staff notation (clefs, pitch names of lines and spaces, time signatures and note values) were taught as purely theoretical concepts whilst the tonic sol-fa notation was retained for sight singing. Music reading was then gradually transferred to the staff by means of the 'movable doh' system which involved the use of durational notes

on the five lines and four spaces of the staff but without the use of clef or key signature. Instead, every tonic note (*doh*) was marked with a star and children were 'exercised' in reading the names of other notes according to the positions they occupied in relation to the tonic. As Alpen expressed the essence of the method, 'the star [marking the tonic or *doh*] really means the future key signature'. Key signatures were eventually introduced, but as functional rather than theoretical aspects of staff notation so that children simply learnt to identify the position of the tonic note (*doh*) without having to be concerned whether notes in the melody were sharp, flat or natural.

The Three Stages of Alpen's 'Movable Doh' Method of
Teaching Children to Sing from Staff Notation
(Musical example: *Advance Australia Fair*)

Stage 1 - Singing by ear (first class)

Aust - ral - ians all , let us re - joice, For we are young and free

Stage 2 - Singing from tonic sol-fa notation (lower second class to the lower third class)

Key D { : s | d' : s | m : s | d' : - . d' | d' : m' | r' : d' | t : d' | r' : - | -

Aust - ral - ians all , let us re - joice, For we are young and free

Stage 3a - Singing from 'clefless' staff notation using the 'movable doh' method
(from the middle third class)

Key D
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Aust - ral - ians all , let us re - joice, For we are young and free

Stage 3b - Singing from staff notation using the 'movable doh' method (upper classes)

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Aust - ral - ians all , let us re - joice, For we are young and free

Essentially, Alpen's 'movable doh' method was based upon two main principles: first, an application of tonic sol-fa pitch names initially to 'clefless' staff notation and then to the

normal staff notation, and second, an avoidance of the theoretical complexities traditionally associated with teaching staff notation, namely scale construction and keys.

In England during this period, the main school music teaching method was tonic sol-fa which by this time had evolved to become an end in itself, having its own system of notation totally divorced from staff notation. Alpen's 'movable doh' method so impressed a visiting British music educationist, Dr. Charles Vincent, that he publicly advocated its adoption in English schools. Vincent who visited Sydney in 1897 on an examining tour for Trinity College, London inspected music classes at Fort Street School and, on his return to England, published an article in the British periodical *The Organist and Choirmaster* in which he described the sight singing feats of the Fort Street pupils: 'My visit convinced me that sight reading can be easily taught in public schools and there is no possible excuse why we in England should be content with tonic sol-fa only'.³ It is important to note that it was not until 1898 that a combined tonic sol-fa and staff notation syllabus (such as Alpen had introduced in New South Wales in 1890) was finally adopted for English schools as an alternative to the existing choice of either a tonic sol-fa syllabus or a staff notation syllabus. Alpen's 'movable doh' method and its official adoption in New South Wales may therefore be viewed as an important innovation to school music teaching methodology during the late 1880s and early 1890s, and one which foreshadowed by almost a decade the adoption of a similar tonic-based, staff notation syllabus in England.

Alpen's other main concern as Superintendent of Music was for 'the production of purer tone and clearer enunciation' in school singing in New South Wales. Both these aspects of vocal performance as well as sight singing certainly received ample opportunity for improvement during the 1890s with the many public concerts and musical demonstrations presented by school children under Alpen's direction. Quite early in the decade Alpen composed an *Arbor Day Cantata* which was presented on Arbor Day 1891 at school concerts throughout New South Wales. Then in 1897, Alpen conducted a musical performance presented by a chorus of over five thousand school children as part of the celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Two years later as part of the Fort Street School's Jubilee in 1899, a performance was given

by the pupils of a *Commemoration Ode*, written by Frank Hutchins and set to music by Alpen, and in May 1900 a 'great chorus' of school children, assembled at the Sydney Cricket Ground, presented Alpen's *Patriotic Cantata*. However Alpen's supreme musical triumph was his direction of a chorus of ten thousand school children - 'the largest chorus ever gathered in Australia' - before the then Prince George and Princess Mary at the inauguration ceremony of the Commonwealth of Australia on January 1, 1901 when several patriotic songs including his own composition *Federated Australia* were creditably performed.

In addition to his numerous school songs - many of which were published in his *Songs for Schools and Singing Classes* (c.1886) and *A New Book of Songs for Schools and Singing Classes* (1901), Alpen also achieved prominence as a composer of sacred music including several masses. As a performing musician Alpen gained the respect of his profession, having held positions as organist at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, Church Hill in Sydney for eighteen years and at St. Benedict's, Broadway for thirteen years. Alpen also adjudicated at eisteddfods as far afield from Sydney as Charters Towers and Toowoomba in Queensland and Bendigo in Victoria.

Following his retirement from the Department of Public Instruction in 1908 Alpen undertook an extended tour through Europe and England and, when he returned to New South Wales, resided at Strathfield in Sydney until his death at the age of seventy-three on June 20, 1917. Hugo Alpen undoubtedly possessed those qualities of leadership and integrity necessary for the demanding task of promoting school music in New South Wales and he also achieved a measure of international recognition for his application of the 'movable doh' method to teaching children to sing from staff notation. Part of his success was ascribed to his 'energy and buoyant spirit' and it was undoubtedly these personal qualities, together with his abilities as a composer, a musician and an educationalist, that enabled him to so successfully promote music as an important and integral part of primary education in New South Wales.

Notes

1. Charles Edward Horsley (1822-76) was an English-born composer and a pupil and friend of Mendelssohn. He was later resident in Melbourne where he achieved considerable success as a composer and conductor.
2. James Churchill Fisher (1826-91), a teacher of the tonic sol-fa method, was appointed as singing master for Sydney schools in 1967.
3. For a brief overview of the tonic sol-fa method, see STEVENS, R.S. (1992?) 'Samuel McBurney - *The Stanley of Sol-fa*', *Unicorn* 18(?), pp.??-??.
4. See reprint of this article in *The School Music Review*, February 1, 1898, p.178.

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