

# A SYSTEM AHEAD OF ITS TIME

Look back and admire! Sound pedagogical principles from the nineteenth century have direct relevance in today's music education, says ROBIN STEVENS.

As teachers, we are familiar with a range of pedagogical theories and their proponents: Piaget, Bruner and others. However, many of these theories—which continue to inform our work today—have their roots in the initiatives of educators working over a hundred years before. It is remarkable that the work of John Curwen and his predecessors resonates with a number of current theories, and is directly relevant to raising present-day standards in music literacy.

## Reading music at sight—what's changed?

The teaching of music literacy is an age-old problem. The first music educator to address this issue was the eleventh century Benedictine monk, Guido d'Arezzo (995–1050), who discovered that his choristers were able to remember how to pitch the notes of what we now know as the major scale by referring back to the initial syllables of the first six musical phrases of the hymn to St John, each of which began on a successively higher note of the scale.

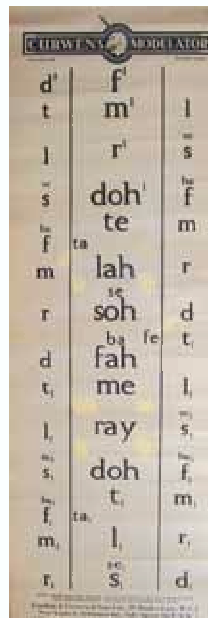
This system was formalised into what was known as the Gamut, which became a visual representation of pitch. Guido d'Arezzo is also credited with the invention of the Guidonian hand, a widely used mnemonic system in which note names are mapped to parts of the human hand.

Several centuries of development based on Guidonian principles followed in Continental Europe, eventually resulting in the predominance of the **fixed doh** method of teaching singing. In England, however, attempts to introduce the fixed doh system achieved only limited success.

Then, in 1841, a young Methodist minister, the Rev. John Curwen (1816–1880), was commissioned by a conference of Sunday School teachers to recommend 'some simple method to the churches which should enable all to sing with ease and propriety'. There was a social reason for this directive. Remember that the mid-nineteenth century saw the industrial revolution in Britain in full swing. Most factory workers lived miserable existences, often with only one day's rest per week—and this was intended for church attendance. The notion of singing in church and community settings was felt to be a wholesome activity—an antidote to moral decadence. The sol-fa system appealed for its relatively easy access to music notation, even for the poorly educated worker. After extensive investigations, Curwen drew on several English and Continental sources including Sarah Ann Glover's **Norwich Sol-fa** system to develop his own **Tonic Sol-fa** system.

Sarah Glover, the eldest daughter of the rector of St Lawrence Church in Norwich, had developed a method of teaching singing which she published in a book entitled *Scheme to Render Psalmody Congregational*. Glover utilised a movable doh system in which the first letters in uppercase of each of

the sol-fa syllables became symbols for what she called 'supplementary notation' which she used as a mnemonic aid for reading from the staff. She also made use of a system of bar lines and punctuation marks to denote the rhythm in her system of supplementary notation. She deliberately postponed the use of staff notation until the supplementary notation had been fully mastered. She also developed a visual representation of pitch as a means of drilling her pupils by 'sol-fa-ing' tunes pointed out note-by-note on the Sol-fa Ladder.

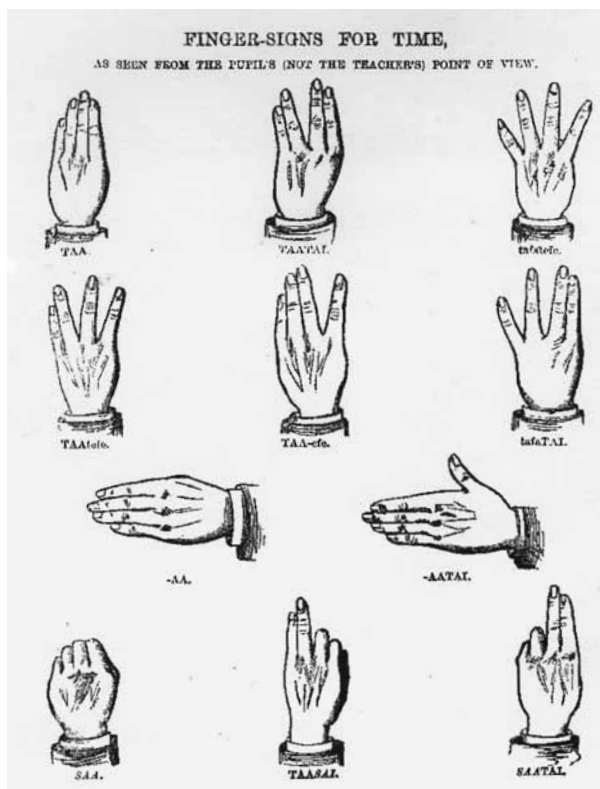


John Curwen, having observed her work in Norwich, 'borrowed' and adapted several of her pedagogical techniques ... but he also introduced several new features to his Tonic Sol-fa method and its system of letter notation. Curwen set out his method in several editions of a textbook entitled *The Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching Music*, first published in 1858. The motto of the Tonic Sol-fa movement—*Easy, Cheap and True*—was adopted by Curwen during the 1860s. The motto aptly describes, first, the relative ease of teaching music literacy compared with other contemporary approaches. Second, it was less expensive to print, as standard printing characters conveniently could be used, instead of the special characters and processes required for staff notation.

Finally, Curwen also utilised the **movable-doh** system, which was 'true' in both a theoretical and a practical sense. The seven tones of the major scale could also be applied to the relative minor scale by starting and ending the scale on *lah*. Modulation to related keys was effected by means of 'bridge-tones'. Curwen 'borrowed' Glover's *Norwich Sol-fa Ladder*

which he adapted into *The Tonic Sol-fa Modulator*. Curwen also devised the sol-fa hand-signs which became part of the method in 1870.

For teaching rhythm, Curwen adopted the system of French time names (which he incorporated into Tonic Sol-fa in 1867 from a model by Chev ). He also devised a rather complex system of finger-signs for rhythm.



### A pedagogy for today

The relevance of Curwen's Tonic Sol-fa system to today's music educators lies in the sound pedagogy that underpins the method. Curwen deliberately kept the level of theoretical complexity to a minimum so that Tonic Sol-fa notation, if taught according to post-1872 and pre-1901 editions of *The Standard Course*, effectively by-passed the difficulties associated with staff notation, by utilising the implicit association of the symbols (d : m : s) with vocalised syllables (*doh, me, soh*). The system represents a carefully graded and systematic method of teaching not only music literacy but also aural perception and *audiation*—that is, mental hearing—to use Edwin Gordon's term. In his *Teacher's Manual* (c.1876), Curwen set out the following precepts, which form the basis of good teaching even today:

- let the easy come before the difficult.
- introduce the real and concrete before the ideal or abstract.
- teach the elemental before the compound and do one thing at a time.
- introduce, both for explanation and practice, the common before the uncommon.
- teach the thing before the sign, and when the thing is apprehended, attach to it a distinct sign.
- let each step, as far as possible, rise out of that which goes before, and lead up to that which comes after.
- call in the understanding to assist the skill at every stage.

(Curwen, n.d., p.221)

### Not really solemn

*Solmisation* refers to reading at sight through singing the syllables *doh, ray, me, fah, soh, lah* and *te*, to the seven different tones forming the major scale, as a mnemonic or memory aid.

There are two ways in which solmisation is used. Historically, the first was according to the **movable doh** principle, where *doh* is the first note of the particular major scale concerned, and the tone or semitone relationship between the syllables is maintained whatever the key. Movable doh solmisation can be thought of as being a template which can be applied to any major tonality or, if beginning and ending on the syllable *lah*, to minor tonalities as well.

The second way is on the **fixed doh** principle, where *do[h]* is always the note C, *re [ray]* is always D and so on. The 'fixed' method is often called *solf ge* or *solfeggio*. Sharps and flats are accommodated by changing the vowel sound of a particular syllable so that, for example, C# would be *da* (instead of *do[h]*), D# would be *ri* (instead of *re [ray]*), Db would be *ra[h]* (instead of *re [ray]*), and so on. Unfortunately there is no consistency in the way that the vowels of these syllables change, so this makes the fixed doh solmisation system increasingly complex, the further you move away from the key of C.

Generally speaking, the movable doh system was employed in Britain and its colonies during the nineteenth century and then taken up again in the twentieth century in Hungary through the Kod ly method, from where it spread to North America, Australia and elsewhere. The fixed doh system was, and still is, widely employed in Western European countries (particularly France) and also in Latin America.

## Tonic Sol-fa in Australia

It was inevitable that trained Tonic Sol-fa teachers from Britain would bring the system to Australia during the nineteenth century. Proponents included:

**James Churchill Fisher** (1826–1891) who produced the first Tonic Sol-fa publication in Australia—*The Singing Class Manual*—in 1855 and went on to be appointed as Singing Master to the New South Wales Council of Education in 1867, gaining official recognition for Tonic Sol-fa in New South Wales schools and providing the foundations for his successor and the first Superintendent of Music, **Hugo Alpen**, to further promote the Tonic Sol-fa method.

An even more significant figure both in Australia and internationally was **Dr Samuel McBurney** (1847–1909). McBurney, a fellow of the Tonic Sol-fa College, London, became Inspector of Music in the Victorian Education Department and continued his Tonic Sol-fa advocacy until his post was abolished as a result of the 1890s depression.

**The Kodály method** was introduced to Australia in the late 1970s. The method is fairly prominent in New South Wales and other states, and probably now strongest in Queensland.

Aside from his ability to both adapt from other sources and devise new music teaching techniques, Curwen had remarkable insights into, and an ability to apply, what is now termed cognitive-developmental theory. Indeed Curwen's development of the Tonic Sol-fa pedagogy correlates remarkably well with the concept development stages of Jerome Bruner.

O'Brien (1983) outlines Bruner's (1966) model of learning which is based on three stages of concept development in children—enactive, iconic and symbolic. Significant parallels may be drawn between aspects of Curwen's Tonic Sol-fa method and Bruner's concept development model.

First, the enactive mode is essentially experiential learning in which musical concepts are formed mentally through a physical manifestation of the concepts. An example in the Tonic Sol-fa method would be the singing of pitched notes with accompanying hand-signs—the physical shape and placement of the hand assists in forming the mental image of the sound within its tonal context and promotes its audiation as well as its realisation as a sung note.

During the second stage, iconic representation allows learners to categorise musical phenomena into concepts—for example, hand-signs allow the concept of relative pitch to be established; likewise, finger-signs for time allow rhythmic duration—specifically subdivisions of the beat—to be established as discrete musical concepts. In line with the notion of audiation, the iconic representation of both pitch and rhythm should assist learners to mentally manipulate the sub-elements (individual tones and beat patterns) in their minds without necessarily realising them acoustically.

Finally, transfer of the iconic representations of pitch hand-signs and time finger-signs to symbolic representations such as the pitch modulator, and then into music notation itself, completes the process whereby these labels become the means for more abstract thinking. There are doubtless other parallels that may be drawn with other contemporary learning theories, but the point hopefully is well made that Curwen's development of the Tonic Sol-fa method is sufficiently well conceived from a present-

day perspective to have 'universal' pedagogical legitimacy, regardless of differences in cultural setting.

### Phenomenal growth

By 1872 Curwen had taken the decisive step of breaking away entirely from staff notation so that Tonic Sol-fa notation became a notational system in its own right. Part of the reason for this was Curwen's belief that his notation was sufficiently comprehensive that it could provide for all aspects of musical representation.

Pitch was notated using the first letters of the solmisation syllables together with vertical dashes above or below notes to indicate octave placement. Rhythmic notation consisted of vertical 'bar' lines and other punctuation marks—the colon, comma, etc—for divisions of the beat. Rests were notated by a blank space preceded by a punctuation mark.

The growth of Tonic Sol-fa as a music teaching method and notation system for school and community choral singing—and also as a social movement in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century—was phenomenal.

Tonic Sol-fa became the mainstay of congregational singing, not only in Methodist churches, but also in churches of other denominations. The method was also widely employed by temperance workers and other social reformers. From modest beginnings and an estimated 2,000 Tonic Sol-fa-ists in 1853, the movement was able to claim 315,000 followers by 1872, and then to spread throughout Britain, to its colonies and to many other countries.

In order to propagate the Tonic Sol-fa method, Curwen established the Tonic Sol-fa Agency, then the Tonic Sol-fa Press in 1863, which later become the music publishers J. Curwen and Sons. He also published a monthly journal entitled *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, later *The Musical Herald*, which was subscribed to by readers from all over the world. In 1869, Curwen founded The Tonic Sol-fa College which conducted singing classes, correspondence courses and summer schools and administered a system of public music examinations ranging from Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced Certificates to Associate, Licentiate and Fellowship diplomas.

### Tonic Sol-fa today

With competition from other music teaching methods, Tonic Sol-fa began to decline in Britain from the early 1920s. By the 1980s, the Tonic Sol-fa College had become the Curwen Institute, now The John Curwen Society. The Society has developed the *New Curwen Method* and has published a series of music teaching resources. The focus of the *New Curwen Method* is now on teaching music literacy by applying sol-fa principles to staff notation, but its impact on British school music has been only slight.

Tonic Sol-fa has, of course, had a considerable influence on the Hungarian-based Kodály method. Zoltán Kodály visited England in 1927 where he observed Tonic Sol-fa being used again, by this time, as a means of teaching pupils to read from staff notation. Two aspects of Tonic Sol-fa in particular were adopted by Kodály. The first was the use of Curwen's solmisation syllables and letter notation, not in its form as letters and punctuation marks, but rather in combination with Rousseau's *Tonika Do* version, where there is a separation of pitch and rhythm in preparation for combining them for reading staff notation.

The second was the use of Curwen hand signs which, with slight modifications, remains an integral part of the Kodály method. Certainly, in the foreword to the first English edition of his *Choral Method*, Kodály acknowledged his indebtedness to Tonic Sol-fa with the comment: 'I am now pleased to return to the English what I learned from them, and was able to adapt to our needs in Hungary.'

The Tonic Sol-fa system remains a proven approach to improve and maintain the standards of music literacy for choral music in school and community. I am a firm advocate for the wider application of movable doh solmisation in school music education, through a sequential and developmental curriculum, and by using pedagogies such as the Kodály method. **M in A**

#### Robin Stevens

Robin Stevens is Associate Professor of Music Education in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, and a Principal Fellow in the Faculty of Music, The University of Melbourne. His 1979 PhD thesis was a history of school music education in New South Wales and Victoria 1848–1920; his current research is focused on both the history of music in schools, and past and present applications of sol-fa methods for teaching singing in school and community settings. Robin is a member of ISME's History Standing Committee and a former President of the Australian Association for Research in Music Education. He was also the principal investigator for the Music Council of Australia's report *Trends in the Provision of School Music Education in Australia* (2002–03), a member of the Steering Committee of the National Review of School Music Education, and is presently a member of the Music Education Advisory Group (DEEWR).

*Robin Stevens joins Music in Action as Editor, from our next issue.*

### Further reading

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**The Curwen Method**  
<http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/music-ed/curwen-method/>

**History of Music Education in Australia**  
<http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/music-ed/history/>

**The John Curwen Society**  
<http://www.johncurwensociety.org.uk/>

**Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia** <http://www.kodaly.org.au/>