

“Means to an End: The Role of Tonic Sol-fa in promoting Hymn Singing in the Indian State of Mizoram”

A paper presented to the “Hymns and Race: Agency, Mobility, Coloniality” Virtual Study Day hosted by the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies, Durham University and the International Network for Music Theology, 22 October 2021

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[Please refer to the PDF of PowerPoint slides that accompanied this paper presentation. The appropriate slides are referred to in the text of the paper below.]

[PPT-1] Well-chosen hymns learned by rote convey and reinforce religious dogma and moral principles to church congregations. However, one of the principal difficulties during the nineteenth century in promoting hymn singing was the lack of an effective means of teaching music reading from staff notation. [PPT-2] This problem was addressed by a Congregational minister, John Curwen, who modified a movable doh solmisation system devised by Sarah Glover.¹ and added other pedagogical aids to formalize his system as “The Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching to Sing”.

[PPT-3] The method utilised the first letters of the sol-fa syllables as a mnemonic aid placed under staff notes for pitch, and barlines and punctuation marks for notating rhythm. As he originally conceived it, Curwen aimed to develop music literacy in three stages: (i) reading from sol-fa notation, (ii) reading from staff notation in conjunction with sol-fa notation and (iii) reading from staff notation alone applying Tonic Sol-fa mnemonics. [PPT-4] Curwen also made use of Glover's *Norwich Sol-fa Ladder* which he transformed into *The Tonic Sol-fa Modulator* to train students to vocalize sol-fa note names in various keys. Later still, he utilized French time names as an aid for realising the rhythm. [PPT-5] He also devised handsigns for both pitch and rhythmic which aided the learning process. [PPT-6] However, in 1872, Curwen dispensed with staff notation altogether and relied solely on Tonic Sol-fa notation in his textbooks and vocal music scores. [PPT-7] To promote his method, Curwen established the Tonic Sol-fa College as both a teaching institution and an examining body,² promoted the method through a journal, *The*

¹ For details of Glover's method, see Sarah Anna Glover, *Scheme for Rendering Psalmody Congregational* (Norwich: Jarrold and Sons, 1835).

https://books.google.com.au/books?id=pLFVAAAACAAJ&pg=PA78&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed April 27, 2021).

² See Henry Fisher, *The Musical Profession* (London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1888), 249-54.

Tonic Sol-fa Reporter, later *The Musical Herald*, and produced textbooks and music through his own publishing company.

One area where Tonic Sol-fa made considerable in-roads was the work of overseas missionary societies. Curwen offered training courses for foreign missionaries³ with the result that the method was utilised by many working in Japan, China, the Pacific islands and in British colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa and India.⁴ [PPT-8] The major focus in India was in the Province of Assam where missionaries from the Welsh Calvinistic Mission, the Welsh Presbyterian Foreign Mission and the Baptist Missionary Society introduced the method to communities in two main districts.⁵ Firstly, in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills located northeast of the border with what is present-day Bangladesh and secondly in the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) located in a strip of land between Bangladesh and Myanmar. [PPT-9] An early arrival in the northeast was Robert Evans, a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary who had learnt Tonic Sol-fa at his village school in Wales and who is cited as one of the pioneers of the method in the Khasi Hills.⁶ In 1874, he arrived at Shillong, a hill station in the eastern Khasi Hills, where he established Tonic Sol-fa classes for young people in the district. Later, when stationed at Shangpung, Evans prepared a handbook explaining the Tonic Sol-fa method in the Khasi language based on previous work by Eleazar Roberts,⁷ a pioneer of Tonic Sol-fa in Wales.⁸ According to an 1890 report in *The Musical Herald*, Evans' teaching and his use of the handbook resulted in "the natives [being] wonderfully expert in learning tunes, and hundreds and thousands can use Tonic Sol-fa notation".⁹ In 1910 Evans compiled a book entitled *Solfa bu* (or Sol-fa Book),¹⁰ produced in the Lushai language¹¹ which was reprinted in 1914 and revised and reprinted in 1923 under the title of *Mizo solfa bu* (Mizo Sol-fa Book).¹²

[PPT-10] Evans' work in promoting Tonic Sol-fa was paralleled by other Welsh missionaries working in the lower northeast of India in the Lushai Hills among the Mizo people. Missionaries

³ Ibid.

⁴ See, for example, Robin S. Stevens, "Tonic sol-fa: An Exogenous Aspect of South African Musical Identity," *Music and Identity: Transformation and Negotiation* ed. Eric Akrofi, Maria Smit & Stig-Magritus Thorsén 36-73; Jane Southcott, "The First Tonic Sol-fa Missionary: Reverend Robert Toy in Madagascar," *Research Studies in Music Education*. 2004;23(1): 3-17; Jane Southcott, "Daniel Batchellor and the American Tonic Sol-fa Movement," *Journal of Research in Music Education*. 1995;43(1):60-83; Robin S. Stevens, "Tonic Sol-fa in Asia-Pacific Countries: the Missionary Legacy," *Asia-Pacific Journal for Arts Education*, 2007; 5 (1): 52-76.

⁵ In the 1960s and 1970s, the then State of Assam was divided into three new states: Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

⁶ D. Ben Rees, "Evans, Robert (1849-1916)," *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970*, ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 44-5.

⁷ D. Ben Rees, Rees, "Evans, Robert (1849-1916)," *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 44.

⁸ D. Ben Rees, Rees, "Evans, Robert (1849-1916)," *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 44.

⁹ *The Musical Herald*, July 1890, 450.

¹⁰ A copy of this book is held in the British Library. See catalogue entry at http://primocat.bl.uk/F?func=direct&local_base=ITEMV&doc_number=013729589&con_lng=eng

¹¹ The Lushai language is spoken by Mongol hill people inhabiting the mountainous region between India and what was then called Upper Burma.

¹² Lalzama, "Growth and development of the Mizo language and literature with special reference to the made by contribution made by Christian missionaries from 1897 to 1947," (PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, India, 1990), 336. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/69944> (accessed November 19, 2020).

working in this area included Frederick Savidge¹³ and James Lorrain¹⁴ from the Baptist Missionary Society, and Edwin Rowlands¹⁵ and David Jones¹⁶ from the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, all of whom promoted hymn singing as part of their proselytizing endeavors.

[PPT 11] Lorrain and Savidge arrived at Aizawl in Mizoram at the beginning of 1894 and were joined in their work there by Jones in 1897¹⁷ and Rowlands in 1898. Despite being affiliated with different missionary organizations, there was cooperation among missionaries in contributing to a series of hymn books that were first published in 1899.¹⁸ The words of English and Welsh hymns were translated into the Mizo language and the hymns books they produced continued to be printed in revised and enlarged editions until at least the end of the 1980s.¹⁹

[PPT-12] As Pachuau and van Schendel commented in 2015, the Mizo people already had a rich song culture prior to colonial influence:

*Many Mizos loved to sing, and they found happy companions in the missionaries who came to live in the hills. Quite a few were from Wales and had been sent out by churches with strong choral traditions. Singing became equally essential [to playing instruments] in the churches of Mizoram. As a Governor of Assam, in inimitably essentialist terms, once put it: “The Welsh have a special affinity for the Lushais as the Lushais are as musical as they are”. Soon choirs were formed, and these became a fixture of social life that persists today.*²⁰

[PPT-13] A prominent missionary figure from the 1920s was Katie Hughes, who was a member of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, Charing Cross, where she had developed her musical talent.²¹ She was a trained school teacher and was accepted for missionary work in 1924. On arriving in India, she took charge of a Girls School at Aizawl and established singing classes all over the district, promoted Tonic Sol-fa College examinations, and contributed greatly to an improved standard of choral singing. Hughes qualified as an Associate of the Tonic Sol-fa College and because of her fine singing voice, was given the name *Pi Zali* (the singer or “Madam

¹³ D. Ben Rees, “Savidge, Frederick William (1857-1935),” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 209. Also see biographical details in Christopher Killacky, “Lushai Missionary Society,” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 123-125.

¹⁴ See biography in D. Ben Rees, “Lorrain, James Herbert (1870-1944),” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 121.

¹⁵ See biographical details in “Edwin Rowlands,” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Rowlands (accessed November 19, 2020) and in Christopher Killacky, “Lushai Missionary Society,” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 123-125.

¹⁶ See biography in D. Ben Rees, “Jones, David Evan (1870-1947),” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 80-1.

¹⁷ Christopher Killacky, “Lushai Missionary Society,” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 124.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lalzama, “Growth and development of Mizo language and literature,” 310.

²⁰ Joy L. K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel, *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 40-41.

²¹ D. Ben Rees, “Hughes, Catherine (Katie) (1889-1963),” *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970* ed. D. Ben Rees (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), 63-4.

Singer”) by the Mizo community.²² [PPT-14] Over the following decades, Welsh missions and later the Khasi and Mizo churches produced several Tonic Sol-fa publications, many of which were compiled by Hughes with the assistance of local people.²³

[PPT-15] Another significant aspect of Hughes’ musical mission was her choir work. In 1929 she formed a mixed choir of about forty singers who attended the annual Combined Missions Synod. Her Mizo choir performed choruses from Handel’s *The Messiah* which greatly impressed Synod members and resulted in a choir of thirty men and twelve women, with Hughes as their conductor, undertaking a tour of principal cities in northern India.²⁴ The heritage of choral music making and of congregational hymn singing in Mizoram, based on the Tonic Sol-fa, has continued to the present day.

[PPT-16] A recent search of the internet for hymn sources in Mizoram found several websites with downloadable of hymns in Tonic Sol-fa notation produced by local church groups and individuals. One of the most comprehensive is an app for the Android platform that includes image files from the 18th edition of the *Christian Hymn Book* -- some 600 hymns with words and music of both British and local origin in four-part harmony -- published in 2005 by the Synod Literature and Publications Board in Mizoram. [PPT-17] This a sample page downloaded from this App – this simple hymn tune in four parts was composed by Frederick Savidge and James Lorrain.

There are also detailed explanations of Tonic Sol-fa pedagogy produced in the Mizo (Lushai) language, including *Solfa Zirna* (2017).²⁵ [PPT-18] In addition, several musicians in the Indian northeast have utilized *YouTube* as a medium for teaching Tonic Sol-fa literacy including Bobby Songate’s *Online Tonic Sol-fa Class In Hma*.²⁶

[PPT-19] To conclude – the question inevitably arises as to whether or not the use of Tonic Sol-fa to promote hymn singing represents an imposition by British colonizers on the indigenous population. The answer is unquestionably yes but with qualification. Although aspects of Tonic Sol-fa are included in contemporary school music teaching in many countries, there is now little or no use made of the method for choral singing in Britain. Nevertheless I have argued previously that in South Africa, where Tonic Sol-fa was similarly introduced by missionaries to the indigenous population, the method and its notation became effectively indigenized.²⁷ I have adopted the biomedical term “exogenous” – a condition defined as being “caused by factors or an agent from outside the organism or system” – to describe the incorporation of Tonic Sol-fa into the musical culture of an indigenous community. The result in South Africa is that all of the 450 hymns in the 1974 to 2003 editions of a South African hymnal published in the local African

²² D. Ben Rees, “Hughes, Catherine (Katie) (1889-1963),” 63.

²³ Lalzama, “Growth and development of Mizo language and literature,” 337-8.

²⁴ D. Ben Rees, “Hughes, Catherine (Katie) (1889-1963),” 63-64.

²⁵ This app is available at <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.zofate.kristianhlabu>

²⁶ See this series that is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFGKi0pII2M> (accessed December 8, 2020).

²⁷ See Robin S. Stevens, “Tonic sol-fa: An exogenous aspect of South African musical identity”, *Music and Identity*, E. Akrofi, M. Smit and S-M. Thorsen eds. (AFRICAN SUN MeDIA for the Swedish-South African Research Network (SSARN), Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2004), 37-51.

language editions are notated in Tonic Sol-fa.²⁸ [PPT-20] The Tonic Sol-fa method and its notation have been, and remain, the mainstay of congregational hymn singing in what is now the Indian State of Mizoram. Not only has Tonic Sol-fa become indigenized in Mizoram but also the Christian religion where, accordingly to the most recent census, 87% of the population are adherents. Within the social structure imposed during colonial rule, Tonic Sol-fa represents a significant means through which hymn singing – a musical genre introduced by the colonizers – has been embraced by the colonized through their collective agency and become an exogenous part of present-day Mizo culture.

[PPT-21] [Main reference, contact details, websites of interest.]

²⁸ See Robin S. Stevens, “Tonic Sol-fa in Contemporary Choral Music Practice: A South African Case Study,” *Proceedings of the 2005 Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Music Education* ed. Peter de Vries (Sydney, New South Wales: AARME, 2005), 157-167.