

The Case for a Revival of Tonic Sol-fa in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

The impetus for this paper comes from three sources. The first is a paper that I presented recently at the Third Asia-Pacific Symposium on Music Education Research held in Japan on the introduction and promotion of Tonic Sol-fa in the Cape Colony, South Africa, through Christian missions in rural areas and government-supported schools in urban areas during the nineteenth century.¹ Almost a century-and-a-half later, the result is that Tonic Sol-fa—both its teaching method and its notation—has become the mainstay of the South African choral singing movement. The second source of impetus is the fact that Tonic Sol-fa system is “alive and well” not only in South Africa but also, to some extent at least, in several other developing countries including Ghana, Indonesia, Fiji and Vanuatu. The third source is anecdotal evidence suggesting that many members of church and community-based choirs are simply unable to read staff notation and therefore need to learn their parts through time-consuming “rote” methods.²

Taken together, these factors suggested to me that there could well be a case for a revival of Tonic Sol-fa for use in community-based choral singing. Because staff notation is so entrenched in Australia, I believe there is little likelihood of Tonic Sol-fa being adopted in this country. However, in developing countries in Africa, South-East Asia and the Pacific where there may be minimal opportunities for even a basic primary school education and therefore low levels of literacy in the general population, there may be a good argument for such countries to utilise Tonic Sol-fa for choral music in both school and community settings.

The aim of this paper is to explore the potential for using Curwen’s Tonic Sol-fa system in situations where Western style music is performed by school and community-based choirs. The paper will briefly consider some of the problems presented by staff notation before a more detailed consideration of the Tonic Sol-fa teaching method and notational

¹ Stevens, R. S. 2001, “Propagation of Tonic Sol-fa in South Africa during the Nineteenth Century and its Survival in Indigenous Community Choirs to the Present Day”, in *Proceedings of the Third Asia-Pacific Symposium on Music Education Research*, Volume 1, Nagoya, Japan: Aichi University of Education, pp.139-146.

² This was the situation described by Susan Repien Brook, a Western Australian choir director, in an interview with Geraldine Doogue on ABC Radio National, “Teaching Children Music”, *Life Matters*, April 30, 2001.

system. The historical background associated with Tonic Sol-fa notation will be considered as well as its past and present use in South Africa. The paper will conclude by calling for a re-appraisal of the potential of Tonic Sol-fa in the contemporary context.

The Problems of Staff Notation

As musicians, we are all familiar with the historical development of the staff notation. Percy Scholes points out that “our present universal notation has ‘grown up’ rather than been designed, and that, moreover, its main features were fixed at a period when music was merely melodic and in other respects enormously simpler than at present. Musicians generally are so accustomed to it that they do not stop to reflect upon its defects ...”.³ It is the serendipitous nature of its evolution that has created so many problems for the teaching and learning of staff notation. The spatial representation of the two principle dimensions of music—rhythm and pitch—requires a complex system of symbols to firstly represent rhythm on the horizontal plane and secondly use of the same symbols on the vertical plane to indicate absolute pitch. In addition, there are other aspects of notation—dynamics, tempo, accentuation, etc.—that result in a highly complex visual representation of music which, particularly for the young learner, makes the acquiring of music literacy a long and often arduous process. Moreover, staff notation of pitch bears no immediate relation to its most common visual representation—the keyboard—in terms of the intervallic relationships between notes, nor does it give any immediate indication of the tonal context. In addition, there is a need to have an understanding of the theory of music—scale construction, key signatures, time signatures, etc.—in order to decipher the meaning of many additional symbols that relate to the tonal and rhythmic characteristics of a musical work.

As Scholes again points out, there have been many “bold attempts ... made to reform the staff notation but they have invariably failed and probably always will do so until a change in the whole musical system brings about an unavoidable corresponding change in the methods of representing music on paper”.⁴ Nevertheless he concludes with the comment that “The only reformed notations that up to the present have ever established themselves have been certain notations for choral music. The chief of these [is] ... *Tonic Sol-fa*”.⁵

The Tonic Sol-fa System: Its Pedagogy and Notation

The Tonic Sol-fa method of teaching vocal music was codified by the English Congregational minister, John Curwen (1816-1880), who drew upon a number of earlier European and English music teaching systems but most significantly upon Norwich Sol-fa which was devised by Sarah Glover (1785-1867). Glover’s method utilised movable solmisation syllables and a “letter” notation as aids to reading staff notation. Although Bernarr Rainbow asserts that “The meticulous care with which John Curwen always acknowledged his indebtedness to Sarah Glover should not lead us to suppose that he was

³ Scholes, P.A. 1963, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Ninth Edition, London: Oxford University Press, p.696.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Op. cit., p.697.

a plagiarist”,⁶ Jane Southcott, in a recent paper quite rightly I think, implies that Curwen effectively “appropriated” much of Glover’s method for his own purposes and only later tried to rectify the situation.⁷

In 1841 Curwen was commissioned by a conference of Sunday school teachers to discover and promote the simplest way of teaching music. Without seeking her permission, Curwen made several modifications to Glover’s method and finally adopted two mnemonic (memory aid) systems for reading pitch and rhythm. He utilised the solmisation syllables—*doh, ray, me, fah, soh, lah* and *te*—to represent the degrees of the major scale. This solmisation system was moveable in terms of absolute pitch so that it could be applied to any major tonality.⁸ The sol-fa syllables were represented vertically to form *The Tonic Sol-fa Modulator* (derived from Glover’s *Norwich Sol-fa Ladder*) which teachers utilised to drill their students by pointing to the various syllables to form melodic exercises.⁹ Curwen also utilised so-called “mental effects” (derived from *Jeu de Berneval*) for each of the syllables, based on their respective positions in the tonal system.¹⁰ Later, Curwen devised the pitch hand signs which, in a slightly modified form, are now used in the Kodály method. Curwen also incorporated the system of French time names (derived from Aimé Paris) into the Tonic Sol-fa method—a mnemonic device which has also been used in the Kodály method.

Again drawing heavily on Glover’s work, Curwen devised a system of Tonic Sol-fa notation. His pitch representation system utilised the first letter (in lower case) of each of the solmisation tones and his rhythmic notation system utilised bar lines, half bar lines and semicolons prefixing strong beats, medium beats and weak beats respectively in each measure. For marking the subdivisions of beats, Curwen used a full stop for half divisions and a comma for quarter divisions, an inverted comma for division into three, and the dash for the continuation of a tone from one beat (or part beat) to the next. As he originally conceived it, Curwen aimed to develop music literacy in three successive phases: firstly reading from sol-fa notation, secondly reading from staff notation in conjunction with sol-fa notation below (see Figure 1), and thirdly reading from staff notation alone.

⁶ Rainbow, B., *John Curwen: A Short Critical Biography*, Sevenoaks, Kent: Novello, p.45.

⁷ Southcott, J.E. 2001, “Sarah Glover: Music Educator and Theoretician”, in *Proceedings of the Third Asia-Pacific Symposium on Music Education Research*, Volume 1, Nagoya, Japan: Aichi University of Education pp.75-80.

⁸ The system also accommodated the minor mode by starting on *lah* for the tonic minor scale and using the syllables *fe* and *se* for the raised sixth and seventh degrees.

⁹ The modulator provided a “proportional” representation of the tone and semitone intervallic distances between the degrees of particular scale forms.

¹⁰ Thus, *doh* was the strong or firm tone, *ray* was the rousing or hopeful tone, *me* was the calm and steady tone, *fah* was the desolate or awe-inspiring tone, *soh* was the grand and bright tone, *lah* was the sad or weeping tone, and *te* was the piercing or sensitive tone.

KEY E. Exercise 28.—A ROUND FOR FOUR VOICES. (M.) M. 112.

Come and sing a mer-ry song, Wake the cheer-ful glee;
 En-vy, an-ger, hence a-way, E-vil pas-sions fly;

Now the joy-ous tones pro-long, Hap-py, hap-py we.
 Why should we in-dulge them, say, Why should you or I?

Oh! hap-py we, Oh! hap-py we, Oh! hap-py, HAP-
 PY WE; Hap-py, hap-py we.

D.C.

Figure 1. From *The Standard Course of Lessons on the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching to Sing* (pp.19-20) by J. Curwen, n.d. (c.1866), London, England: Tonic Sol-fa Agency.

One of the means that Curwen used to propagate his method was the publication of a textbooks and songbooks including *The Standard Course of Lessons on the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching to Sing*, first published in 1858. However in the 1872 edition of *The Standard Course*, Curwen allowed Tonic Sol-fa notation to go beyond its former function as a mnemonic aid to reading staff notation and to become an end in itself. He took this decisive step by totally excluding staff notation (which he now termed “Old Notation”) from the Tonic Sol-fa course, henceforth relying solely on his own system in the publication of textbooks, vocal music and even instrumental music (see Figure 2).

Ex. 195--6. FIFTH STEP. 93

FORGIVE THINE ENEMY.

Ex. 195. KEY G. D. t. Fuchs.

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d : \\ \text{For} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t_1 : \\ \text{give} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s_1 : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ l_1 : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t_1 : \\ \text{e} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} f d' : \\ \text{For} - \\ df : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t : \\ \text{give} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} l : \\ \text{en} - \\ f : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t : \\ \text{e} - \\ : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$
$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d' : \\ \text{my,} \\ m : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s' : \\ \text{thine} \\ : \\ r \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} - \\ f' : \\ \text{en} \\ e - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ m' : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} - \\ r' : \\ \text{e} - \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d' : \\ \text{thine} \\ l_1 : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} t : \\ \text{thine} \\ f : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d' : \\ r - \\ o - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t : \\ e - \\ : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d' : \\ \text{my,} \\ d : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$
$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ - \\ f : \\ \text{Forgive} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d : \\ \text{e} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} r : \\ : \\ r : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ r : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ m : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ f : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ l : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} - \\ : \\ s : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$
$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} m : \\ \text{my,} \\ d : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d' : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} - \\ : \\ t : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} l : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ se : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} l : \\ m : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ l : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} - \\ : \\ se : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} l : \\ : \\ l_1 : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ f : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$
$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d' : \\ \text{For} - \\ \text{give} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t : \\ \text{give} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} l : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d' : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} t : \\ m : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ r' : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} l : \\ t : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$
$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ r : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d : \\ \text{give} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ m : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ f : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ m : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ r : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ m : \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ l : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ f : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$

f. G.

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d' : \\ \text{thine} \\ r l_1 : \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} r : \\ \text{For} \\ d : \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ f : \\ \text{give} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ m : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ r : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t_1 : \\ \text{thine} \\ \text{en} - \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ s_1 : \\ \text{my,} \\ \text{thine} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ d : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} : \\ t_1 : \\ \text{en} - \\ \text{my,} \end{array} \right.$
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Figure 2. From *The Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching to Music* (p.93) by J. Curwen, 1872, London, England: Tonic Sol-fa Agency.

In *The Teacher's Manual of the Tonic Sol-fa Method* (c.1876), Curwen argued that in the early years of Tonic Sol-fa there had been a need for staff notation, particularly in the case of psalmody.¹¹ Staff notation had therefore been essential for the Intermediate and Advanced Certificates of the Tonic Sol-fa School (later the Tonic Sol-fa College) during the early years of the movement but, by 1863, the need had been met by the publication of Tonic Sol-fa notation editions of the major psalm-tune books and the staff notation requirement had become optional for Tonic Sol-fa certificates. Curwen described how, “since the discussion on the subject, in December, 1865, it has become the habit of our teachers *not* to teach the Staff notation *in class*, but to teach it by writing exercise done at *home*.”¹² Nevertheless, although emphasising the value of understanding staff notation, Curwen formally abandoned the application of Tonic Sol-fa to staff notation in the 1872 and successive editions of *The Standard Course*.

It has been argued that this isolation from the mainstream of music printed in staff notation was to lead to the eventual decline of Tonic Sol-fa as a choral singing method.¹³

¹¹ Curwen, J. n.d. (c.1876), *The Teacher's Manual of the Tonic Sol-fa Method*, London: The Tonic Sol-fa Press, p.221.

¹² Op. cit., p.222.

¹³ Stevens, R.S. 1978, *Music in State Supported-Education in New South Wales and Victoria, 1848-1920*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, p.27.

However, it was not until after the turn of the century that any real manifestation of this decline became apparent. Indeed the growth of Tonic Sol-fa as a choral singing method in Britain surpassed that of any other choral singing method during the nineteenth century. It spread throughout Britain and its colonies—Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and Canada—as well as to the United States, Madagascar, China, Japan and the Pacific islands.

However, some years after Curwen’s death in 1880, there were moves among prominent Tonic Sol-fa-ists to re-align the method with its original purpose of facilitating music reading from staff notation. For example, a “symposium” of views on the topic was published in *The Musical Herald* (the official journal of the Tonic Sol-fa movement) in 1891. Written contributions were invited from leading Tonic Sol-fa-ists including Dr Samuel Mc Burney¹⁴ who supported continued use of Tonic Sol-fa notation for amateur music:

While I insist that all who aim in being musicians should master both notations, I still firmly hold that the Tonic Sol-fa notation *alone* will make the mass of people musical. Sol-fa *must* be the notation of the schools: it *must* be largely employed in church choirs and choral societies if really satisfactory results are to be obtained and music of any difficulty performed. ... The potentiality of great things lies in our notation, including a complete mastery of the staff, as I have tried to prove by taking academical honours; but for the great mass of the people we must confine our attention to the Tonic Sol-fa notation alone, and not dissipate our energies in attempting to overcome what will always present many unnecessary difficulties to the non-professional mind.¹⁵

Debate continued however, with one of the principal issues being whether or not the Tonic Sol-fa College should issue certificates for successful examinations in staff notation without the candidate having first completed the Elementary Tonic Sol-fa Certificate. This question loomed as a highly significant issue and, during a debate at the Tonic Sol-fa Association held in 1895, battle lines among members of the Council of the Tonic Sol-fa College were drawn according to opposing “amateur” and “professional” views on music notation.¹⁶ By 1897, Dr. W. G. McNaught argued the case for the Tonic Sol-fa College to “boldly declare that they are fully willing to recognise all results that are secured by the movable *do* principle, whether from the staff or the Tonic Sol-fa notation”.¹⁷ Such arguments effectively opened the way for the re-introduction of staff notation to the “New Edition, Re-written, 1900” of *The Standard Course*.

Nevertheless, there had been a considerable period of time—almost thirty years from 1872 until the turn of the century—during which Tonic Sol-fa notation had effectively been the only form of music notation taught as part of the method. This was also the period when the method was promoted most widely, not only in Britain, but overseas.

¹⁴ McBurney was an Australian music educator who was then located in London; see Stevens, R. S. 1986, “Samuel McBurney - Australian Tonic Sol-fa Advocate”, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer 1986), pp.77-87.

¹⁵ *The Musical Herald*, (No. 515), February 1, 1891, p.48.

¹⁶ *The Musical Herald*, (No. 565), April 1, 1895, p.48.

¹⁷ *The Musical Herald*, (No. 587), February 1, 1897, p.59.

This accounts for the fact that in South Africa, Tonic Sol-fa notation became not only the sole means through which the method was taught but also the principal means of publishing music for use by amateur choral music ensembles and church choirs.

Tonic Sol-fa in South Africa

When I visited South Africa in 1997, one of the most surprising aspects of South African music education was to find that the Tonic Sol-fa method was “alive and well”. Indeed, the universities that I visited included a study of Tonic Sol-fa—particularly how to transcribe staff notation into Tonic Sol-fa—as part of their undergraduate music courses. One of the principal reasons for Tonic Sol-fa’s survival today is its use by indigenous community choirs throughout the country. This is graphically illustrated in the printed music used for the annual Caltex / Cape Argus Massed Choir Festival which is produced in dual notation—staff and Tonic Sol-fa.

The earliest recorded use of Tonic Sol-fa in South Africa was at mission stations in the Cape Colony and adjacent regions such as Basutoland and Orange Free State. One of the most prominent missions was the Lovedale Missionary Institution which was established in the 1820s near the inland town of Alice in what is now Eastern Cape Province. Aside from religious activity, the mission's principle objective was the education of the indigenous Xhosa people, including hundreds of Xhosa teachers who were trained there.¹⁸ Tonic Sol-fa was adopted at Lovedale with considerable success and a fine tradition of choral music established there. The printing press at Lovedale enabled the production of music in Tonic Sol-fa notation and this led to the publication of music composed by indigenous South Africans.

The two most famous indigenous composers were the Reverend John Knox Bokwe (1855-1922)—who has been cited as “the father of our African choral music competition[s]”¹⁹—and Enoch Sontonga (1873-1905)—who was the composer of the first part of the new (1994) National Anthem of the Republic of South Africa.²⁰ Both Bokwe and Sontonga were educated at Lovedale, both were Tonic Sol-fa teachers, and both had their choral music published in Tonic Sol-fa notation by the Lovedale Press.²¹

Although Lovedale Training Institution appears to have been a major centre for Tonic Sol-fa teaching well into the twentieth century, there were many other missions where the method was utilised not only in teacher training but also as part of the evangelical

¹⁸ Gandhi, M.K. 1905, “Education among the Kaffirs”, *Indian Opinion* (30 December 1905), in *Complete Work of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 5*, <<http://mkgandhi.org/vol5/ch045.htm>> (accessed 13 April 2001).

¹⁹ Khumalo, M. 1998, “Choirs”, *1998 Guide to South African Arts, Culture and Heritage*, <<http://www.artsdiary.org.za/guide/choirs.html>> (accessed 2 May 2001).

²⁰ The new South African National Anthem consists of two parts: the first part is “Nkosi Sikelel’ i Afrika”, music by Enoch Sontonga, and the second part is “The Call of South Africa”, music by M.L. de Villiers. (For the official musical arrangement in dual Tonic Sol-fa / staff notation, see Republic of South Africa, *Government Gazette*, No. 18341 [10 Oct 1997], pp.3-5).

²¹ *The Musical Herald*, (No. 564), March 1, 1895, p.95; Malan, J.P. (1979a), “Bokwe, John Knox”, in J.P. Malan (ed.), *South African Music Encyclopedia*, vol. I. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, p.201; Kirby, P.R. 1979, “Sontonga, Enoch”, in J.P. Malan (ed.), *South African Music Encyclopedia*, vol. IV. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, p.245.

outreach to indigenous communities. Although, the influence of the missions was less apparent in urban areas, Tonic Sol-fa nevertheless assumed an important role in public and other government-supported schools in larger centres of population. There were several key figures—both music educators and education administrators—within the educational establishment who promoted and supported Tonic Sol-fa in urban schools.²²

Almost a century later, the legacy of a music education based largely on the use of the Tonic Sol-fa method and notation in urban schools and rural missions is rich indeed. Van Wyk asserts that “Choral singing is without any doubt the most popular and populous musical endeavour in South Africa at the present time, and most especially amongst the Black Communities. ... The choral movement has played a significant role in educating people, and has had an empowering political function as well”.²³ He points out that indigenous choirs “devote large chunks of their lives to choral music” and that one of the major factors that motivates them is participation in numerous choral competitions and festivals—such as the Caltex-Cape Argus Festival held annually in May at Cape Town. According to another writer, Mngoma, Africans have had a tendency to “indigenise” certain Western music traits and have successfully adopted and adapted many aspects of Western music—including Tonic Sol-fa—to form their own musical culture.²⁴ Other factors which may also have contributed to method's survival were the long period of apartheid and the years during which United Nations sanctions were in force which together resulted in isolation, particularly for indigenous communities, from developments in music teaching methods overseas. Nevertheless, the result has been the development of a community-based musical culture that is thoroughly consistent with what the founder of Tonic Sol-fa, John Curwen, had in mind when he devised and promoted the method.

Conclusion

Given the South Africa experience as well as the admittedly, as yet, not properly documented use of the Tonic Sol-fa in other African, Asian and Pacific countries, it is possible to argue the case for the wider use of Tonic Sol-fa in developing countries where Western music—or adaptations of Western (tonal) music—is used for schools and community choral music. Ease of learning a system where the pitch mnemonic is an integral part of the notational system, where the pitch and rhythmic dimensions are combined into a single spatial dimension, and where there is no necessity to learn the theory of music to be musically literate surely has merit in promoting amateur music making in the contemporary context. As its founder quite rightly asserted through the motto of the movement, the Tonic Sol-fa method is “Easy, Cheap and True” and I believe that the potential of the system deserves to be re-appraised as an alternative and possibly more effective and efficient means than staff notation of promoting amateur choral music performance in specific cultural settings.

²² Key figures were Thomas Daines, Christopher Birkett, James Ashley, Dr (later Sir) Langham Dale, Henry Nixon, Dr Thomas Muir, Arthur Lee and Frederick Farrington; see Stevens, 2001, op.cit.

²³ Van Wyk, C. 1998, “Choral Singing in South Africa”, *South African Music Teacher Magazine*, No. 132.

²⁴ Mngoma, K. 1990, “The Teaching of Music in South Africa”, *South African Journal of Musicology*, No. 10, pp.121-126.