Tonic Sol-fa in Contemporary Choral Music Practice
—A South African Case Study

Associate Professor Robin S. Stevens, Deakin University

The Tonic Sol-fa method of teaching choral singing was propagated throughout Britain during the nineteenth century with the dual objectives of enhancing Christian worship and achieving social reform. It was then imported to South Africa where it was introduced to indigenous people principally through Christian missionary activity and government schools. Although entirely of foreign origin, Tonic Sol-fa was so fully assimilated into African culture that it became effectively “indigenized”. Due its widespread use, it became the mainstay of community choral singing and may now be said to represent a significant exogenous aspect of present-day South African musical identity. However, there is little documentation regarding the type and extent of its use in contemporary choral music practice.

This paper will report on the use of Tonic Sol-fa in representative present-day choral music settings. Interview data collected from choir directors, trainers and teachers in Cape Town indicate that there is far from unanimous agreement on several aspects—in particular, the future of Tonic Sol-fa as a pedagogy and notational system. Improving educational opportunities for indigenous South Africans to undertake professional training in music are now threatening the traditional dominance of Tonic Sol-fa in indigenous culture. Nevertheless this research represents a useful case study of the continuing relevance of Tonic Sol-fa to an indigenous population who have “made it their own” and developed a vibrant choral tradition which continues to both enrich and sustain their lives.

Introduction

I first visited South Africa in 1997 and, for me, one of the most surprising aspects of the musical culture that I observed was the use of the nineteenth century English Tonic Sol-fa system as both teaching method and notation in choral music making, not only in educational institutions, but also in community settings. In a recent paper (Stevens 2005), I have argued the case that, since its introduction over one hundred and fifty years ago, Tonic Sol-fa has been adapted by indigenous South Africans to meet the needs of community and church choirs and has been so fully assimilated into the local ethnic culture that it has effectively been “indigenized”. As such, it represents a significant exogenous1 aspect of the contemporary South African musical identity.

Choral music as a community activity has been identified by Van Wyk (1998) as being “without any doubt the most popular and populous musical endeavour in South Africa at the present time, and most especially amongst the Black Communities” and further that indigenous choirs “devote large chunks of their lives to choral music”. He also points out that one of the major factors that motivates South Africans is participation in choral competitions and festivals. More recently, Olwage (2002, p.45) has acknowledged “black choralism’s

1 The term ‘endogenous’ in this context refers to aspects of cultural/social identity originating or developing from inside the culture, where as the term ‘exogenous’ refers to those aspects originating from outside the culture.
compelling presence in contemporary South Africa—it is the largest participatory form of music-making in the country”. Lucía (2004, p.xvi) states that “choralism is phenomenally popular, involving almost half the country’s population and catering for school-children of all ages as well as adults in two huge categories of the national competition circuit that unfolds throughout the year”. The most prominent of these choral music competitions are the Caltex-Cape Argus Festival held in May in Cape Town, the two Nation Building Massed Choir Festivals held in Johannesburg in September and in Durban in November, the Transnet Stica (South African Tertiary Institutions Choral Association) Competition held in Johannesburg in September, the Sasol Choral Festival held in August in Bloemfontein and the Sasol Sowetan Annual National Choral Festival, the Tiriano Schools Choral Eisteddfod, and the Old Mutual National Choir Festival with finals in Johannesburg in November (Khumalo 1998). A significant feature of all major choral competitions and festivals is the publication of prescribed choral pieces in dual notation (staff and Tonic Sol-fa) to meet the needs of participating choirs.

Prior to discovering that Tonic Sol-fa was “alive and well” in South Africa, my interest in the method and its notation had been solely as a music education historian. Indeed, there appears to have been a general misconception among music educators that the Tonic Sol-fa method and its notation are—as far as their contemporary use is concerned—now totally obsolete and no longer in use except in modern adaptations—specifically, the application of its pedagogical principles (sol-fa syllables, sol-fa hand signs, French time names, etc) to the Kodály method in Hungary (and from there, to many countries including Australia) and its adaptation as the New Curwen Method in the United Kingdom.

However, the situation in South Africa is that, although Tonic Sol-fa is widely used as both a choral teaching method and as a means of music notation, there is no documentation of its use or any evidence of research—past or present—into either the extent or the nature of its use. Accordingly, in November 2004, I undertook the collection of data for a case study of the contemporary uses and applications of Tonic Sol-fa in choral music practice in the Cape Town area. One of my reasons for selecting this area was that, historically, Cape Town was the first region where Tonic Sol-fa was introduced in South Africa. Moreover, Cape Colony (as it was then called) was the geographic location where what I have identified as three phases of dissemination of Tonic Sol-fa in South Africa during the nineteenth century are most fully represented: its initial importation by colonists as part of British cultural reproduction, its dissemination by missionaries as one of the means of proselytizing the Christian faith among indigenous people, and finally its introduction to government-supported schools and teacher training (Stevens 2005).

**Research Approach and Procedure**

The approach adopted for this research may best be described as a collective case study in that it involves multiple subjects and multiple settings (Bogdan & Biklen 2003, p.62). According to these authors, the purpose of a collective case study is to compare and contrast different cases, so that some degree of either generalizability or diversity may be identified from the different cases forming the
overall study. Moreover, Kingdon (n.d.) states that case study differs from historical research in that it deals with contemporary events in their natural context and also differs from evaluation where comparisons are made between what happened and what was planned—rather, case study deals with how things happen and the reasons why. In this case study, which seeks to document the use of Tonic Sol-fa in choral music making within a specific (and hopefully representative) geographic area of South Africa, the objective of the research is to determine commonalities and/or differences in the perceptions of, attitudes to and other factors relating to the use of Tonic Sol-fa among choir director participants.

A great many methods of data collection may be employed in case study research—documentary sources and physical artifacts, through to various forms of observation (participatory, non-participatory, systematic observation, etc.). Time constraints did not allow for site visits that would have facilitated observation and, as already mentioned, there was no documentary evidence available. Accordingly, the means of data collection employed in this research involved semi-structured interviews with choral directors, music educators and others who, to varying extents, utilise Tonic Sol-fa notation and/or teaching techniques in their work with choirs. Kingdon (n.d.) notes that interviewees may be regarded as key informants as they often have inside knowledge which is critical to the case and these individuals can enhance the validity of the conclusions drawn. Given restrictions in both the time available to collect data and also the timing of my visit (the end of a school year when school students were undertaking external examinations), data collection for this case study was necessarily limited to interview as the sole source of information.

Interviewees were selected on the recommendations of faculty colleagues at the university at which I was based during my visit to South Africa (Stellenbosch University) as well as of other professional contacts—including the Officer for Choral Music Development at Artscape (formerly the Cape Performing Arts Board) in Cape Town. A conscious effort was made to locate choir directors whose work represented a range of choral music activities and settings—primary and secondary schools, churches and local communities, as well as opinions from a former teacher educator who was currently a youth music coordinator. Phone contact was made with potential interviewees and, due to the fact that the first language of all-but-one of the interviewees was Xhosa, a Plain Language Statement designed specifically for those whose first language was other than English was prepared to outline both the nature of the project and to invite their participation. The seven interviewees agreeing to participate in the project were then asked to sign a standard consent form before the interviews took place. Interviews were then undertaken at the interviewees’ schools or local churches or at Stellenbosch University. All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. The fourteen questions included in the interview schedule were based on potential themes and issues derived from the literature and from discussions with academic and professional colleagues.

Given the limited number of cases in this study (seven), the application of the technique of triangulation—which, according to Stake (1995, pp.107-108), is the principal means used in case study research to both verify data and interpret meaning—was applied to a limited extent only, being used mainly to compare
and contrast data. After being transcribed into text and the interviewees being given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription, data from each of the seven interviews were analysed and grouped according to themes that were either determined by the initial questions or emerged during the course of the interviews.

**Telling it as it is: Presentation of the Interview Data**

The questions put to the interviewees were designed to elicit responses on a wide range of issues. However, the following themes and issues emerged as being the most significant in terms of the experience of the seven choir directors interviewed:

- their introduction to and background in the Tonic Sol-fa method and notation;
- their use of Tonic Sol-fa techniques in their choir training as well as the advantages and disadvantages of Tonic Sol-fa as a pedagogical method;
- their use of music notation in their choir training—specifically their use of Tonic Sol-fa as either the sole notational system or in conjunction with staff notation;
- their use of Tonic Sol-fa in their own composing, arranging and notating of choral music (where applicable); and
- the extent to which Tonic Sol-fa is currently used in their local township communities as well as their predictions regarding its future role and application in the South African context.

**Part of the Culture**

Responses to the first question which asked interviewees to describe their own introduction to Tonic Sol-fa—where, when and by whom—were varied but all confirmed the fact that Tonic Sol-fa is deeply embedded in the indigenous cultural milieu. Most interviewees had been introduced to Tonic Sol-fa at an early age at primary school and in their home environments. One of the interviewees, who was a primary school choir director, recalled:

> My parents used to sing and then we had a group—a family group that would sing in church concerts and so on, and we used to do whatever [with] the songs, preparing and doing them in Tonic Sol-fa. So my parents introduced me to Tonic Sol-fa. And then we were at primary school, pre-primary school, we used to do [the] song that way ... where almost all of them were in Tonic Sol-fa. (Interviewee B)

Another interviewee, who was director of a prominent community-based choir, described his grounding in Tonic Sol-fa as part of his primary school music experiences:

> My first recollection has to be about grade 3—that’s when I was aware there’s singing of doh, ray, me, fah, soh. The funny thing is at that stage our school principal was a friend to a guy who was a classical pianist at the time—a black classical pianist ... [who] used come to us once a week and we’d sing doh, ray, me, fah, so, lah, te, doh. And then when I go to grade 4, I was then part of the primary school choir. And then we started singing ... I think it was in two-part harmony ... But then they would write all the notes on the board by hand in Tonic Sol-fa notation. ... By the time I got to secondary school, I was able to read Tonic Sol-fa because of the background of the primary school. (Interviewee F)
Other interviewees recalled the influence of their own home life and of church experiences. One such recollection came from a retired teachers’ college principal and now youth music coordinator in Cape Town:

... having been brought up in a Christian family, [there was] music making as such, of which choral singing was the core ... It was central to family life, and hymns would be sung and you [would] sing from Tonic Sol-fa. .... But we were also very fortunate in this that our minister then was a Welshman and ... he would stop the congregation and say [when the] singing was not good ... “men don’t sing soprano—men must sing in parts—you have the [Tonic Sol-fa] music there in front of you.” And that is how we grew up with it, with the result that even today I think, I have pitched fairly accurately because of that. It was a good experience. (Interviewee G)

However, there was also an awareness that Tonic Sol-fa may well have been used by the former apartheid government as a means of promoting racial difference. This was well illustrated by the primary school choir director who, in relating his introduction to Tonic Sol-fa notation, recalled:

Most of everything was in Tonic Sol-fa. In fact it was prescribed. It was statutory. It was ... the government that actually prescribed it at black schools ... I think it was [introduced to promote] ...  
(Interviewer: ... a cultural divide between the black community and the European?) That’s correct. Ja (yes). (Interviewee B)

A common theme that became apparent in the course of virtually all of the interviews was that choral singing through Tonic Sol-fa had been an integral part of the family, religious, school and community lives of these choir directors as much as it had been for other members of the indigenous community. However, the issue of what actually constituted Tonic Sol-fa practice and the pedagogical means and methods that these choir directors employed to support choral music making emerged as somewhat different to what, from a British perspective, could be regarded as the tenets of the Tonic Sol-fa system.

Teaching the Melody
The major pedagogical tools or techniques employed in Tonic Sol-fa may be identified as the use of the solfisation syllables, the modulator, pitch hand signs, the mental effects, French time names, rhythm hand signs and “letter” notation. However, although there were exceptions, Tonic Sol-fa as practiced by these choir directors was effectively confined to the use of sol-fa syllables and to Tonic Sol-fa notation, with the only other teaching techniques that were occasionally used being the modulator and French time names.

One of the interviewees was a secondary music teacher who was also director of a youth choir numbering about 85 members. As perhaps one of its most fervent advocates, she employed Tonic Sol-fa in a unique way. As a “classically”-trained musician, she had undertaken conventional university music courses to Masters degree level based on staff notation. However, she outlined her approach as teaching her choir the rhythm first by reading it from the staff and learning through clapping and then locating the position of doh on the staff and adding the pitch by applying sol-fa syllables:
I think now, because I’ve been introduced to the staff notation, that … Sol-fa becomes so easy, easy, easy … because I know the staff notation. … with me, the rhythms of Tonic Sol-fa [notation] aren’t as easy … I can identify easily with the staff notation [of rhythm]. But, because the staff notation I can clap, so then it switches from staff notation [into] Sol-fa sometimes. … But the Tonic Sol-fa [pitch] is always the first thing that comes in. So, for me, to look at the key signature for the staff notation is, like, OK … this is my doh — this is G. So, if this is my doh in the second line, then it becomes easy … The time is easily located when they look at the staff, so we start by clapping the time (rhythm) before we sing. … Because of the Tonic Sol-fa, they can sing [the pitch] — they don’t have a problem [with this]. But the problem is the timing, so we clap the time, then sing the Tonic Sol-fa that is there. (Interviewee C)

There was some use made of the modulator but surprisingly little use made of sol-fa (pitch) hand signs and French time names:

To be honest, I only got to know about the hand signs when I was doing the Kodály method … That’s the only time I learnt about the hand signs. Otherwise before then, no-one had ever [used these] … It was only later … that we learnt the French [time names] … the taa, tua, tata, the tafofe — it was only later when we actually were beginning to learn the other diction — that is the conventional staff notation …

(Interviewee F)

Reading the Score

The role of Tonic Sol-fa notation as opposed to staff notation emerged as an issue of considerable significance and, although there was diversity of opinion, most of the choir directors saw the need for their choirs either ideally to move from reading Tonic Sol-fa notation to the staff system, or at least to be able to read music from dual notation (sol-fa with staff notation). It was nevertheless readily admitted that the vast majority of indigenous people engaged in choral music still read from Tonic Sol-fa notation. As one interviewee summed up the situation,

Actually, most of the choirs in the townships … use Tonic Sol-fa — [in fact] all of them. … if you go to any township in South Africa, you will not see anyone reading staff notation. (Interviewer: So it’s basically going to be all Tonic Sol-fa?) Yeah — whether it’s a church, whether it’s a community park — you will not see anyone [reading staff notation] … In terms of the actual system [of] Tonic Sol-fa, it will [certainly] not die [out] soon. (Interviewee B)

One of the interviewees was also a member of a highly-regarded community choir where staff notation was now prescribed, but nevertheless he still used Tonic Sol-fa for his own church choir. He suggested that it was far easier to use Tonic Sol-fa notation for the teaching of hymns because the Xhosa-language hymn book they used was printed in Tonic Sol-fa notation. This publication, entitled Hosana and produced by the Uniting Reformed Church (1974, with five reprints to 2003) consists of 450 hymns notated exclusively in Tonic Sol-fa (see Figures 1 and 2 below). The result was that no-one in his church choir was familiar with staff notation — he described the choir as “Basically Tonic Sol-fa people”. He went on to explain that “Most Africans — they understand the Tonic Sol-fa better than any other music [system] … It’s a better option … it’s simpler [than staff notation]”. However, alluding to the advantage of the spatial representation of pitch in staff notation, he said “I understand the staff [so it] is much simpler for me now [because it I can see the pitch going up and down] …”

(Interviewee E)
There was nevertheless a recognition that, although Tonic Sol-fa notation was still the mainstay of indigenous choral music practice, there was also a need for choir members to relate to the predominant system of music notation that existed outside their township communities. This was particularly the case for those who aspired to a musical career or who wished to participate in choral singing at an international level. One interviewee confirmed the effectiveness of Tonic Sol-fa notation for use with his secondary school choir but, with a colleague, decided on the basis of his responsibility to students going on to tertiary music studies to introduce staff notation—“We ... decided to teach ourselves staff notation—I mean in depth—[so that we] would be able to teach our kids because we get to get a lot of talented children who want to pursue a career in music ... so we had to learn [staff notation] ...” (Interviewee B).

There was also the issue of “notational isolation”, particularly for choirs who had achieved a sufficiently high standard of musical performance to enable participation at an international level. The director of the community choir that had achieved this status explained the situation in the following terms:

... when we started ... [racially] mixed choirs in South Africa, then we started writing musically in one notation [only] ... [but the non-indigenous community] in South Africa don’t know Tonic Sol-fa. They have no idea what Tonic Sol-fa is [but] black people don’t know staff notation, so we do one notation so that we will sing together, especially learning our music was just about [all] African music. Before [the] 1990s, it was all ... in Tonic Sol-fa. I mean it would be [only] those few religious pieces that are retaining the staff, but then even, those most likely would be taken from [Tonic Sol-fa notation] ... But traditional [African] music, we do only in the affluent colleges that transpose [them] into staff notation ... So the reason for me [promoting staff notation] was that ... it was an empowerment issue so that the choir is [able to be] singing with other choirs. For instance ... last weekend, we had a choir from Sweden that we were hosting. I was not there but my choir hosted them, and [they] sing songs together. So when they got sheet music [in staff notation] from them, then it was no surprise because it was something they could follow ... So it is for those purposes of empowering guys that [we use staff notation]. (Interviewee F)

Another interviewee strongly supported the application of Tonic Sol-fa syllables to staff notation which she likened to oral and written first and second languages:

It’s like [speaking in] English [when] I think in Xhosa. You asked me in English, but the answer is coming in Xhosa first, but I just switch—it’s like that. It’s very quick. But once you know [the] key sig[nature], your doh is ... yeah, then you know [how to sing the melody using Sol-fa names]. It’s so easy, I’m telling you. (Interviewee C)

This led to what many choral directors saw as a compromise situation—the use of dual notation which is now standard practice in publishing of prescribed music for choral music festivals and competitions in South Africa (see Figure 3 below for an example). Dual notation was generally supported by the choral directors interviewed, with one explaining its pedagogical application in some detail.

I brought along something which might interest you to show you to what extent the Sol-fa is used especially in the black community—black meaning Xhosa and Zulu ... They have annually what they call “an eisteddfod”... but in fact it’s a competition. And all the music is set—it’s prescribed—so, whether you’re in Gauteng up in the north, or you’re down here in the Western Cape, they will sing the same music because they going to enter in that particular category. And the books that come out contain all
the music and I brought one of them for you so you can see. (Interviewee shows a music book in dual notation.) This is done right from junior school level through to primary school through to the secondary school level. To just give you an example … you will notice that even at a primary school they sing in four parts. What happens is that all the schools … enter for the section. We’d practice this and the schools—the choirs—will learn the Sol-fa to a point where they know it off by heart. There was no need for them to look at the music and the teacher will tell you “my children now know the Sol-fa.” All right, there is a degree of memory work [here] but it is fixed in the mind, it’s fixed in the ear. That is an advantage. But it’s taken a little bit too far to my way of thinking. (Interviewee G)

There was also support for a “move away” from Tonic Sol-fa notation altogether:

Strangely enough, I started … the choir that I have now … in 2001 and the whole time was slowly moving away from Tonic Sol-fa and I’m almost proud to say that I am slowly achieving that because probably 50%, if not more, … are singing from proper staff notation. Now, for instance, I know longer take a piece of staff notation music and transcribe it into Tonic Sol-fa. I just photocopy it. I give it to the choir. It’s just that I now sit at the piano and “note bash” because we practice once a week and we have about two hours practice so I can’t really take 30 minutes of that [time in] teaching them, you know. … But, as I play, I explain. As I play for them, I explain that you know this rhythm works like this. … They now know, for instance, the up-and-down movement [of pitch] … (Interviewee F)

In relation to the wider issue of the advantages and disadvantages of the Tonic Sol-fa system in contemporary choral music making, there were several positive aspects mentioned by the interviewees:

… the best one is, in many cases, [that] we do not have instruments like the piano and so on. … Because you would go from a doh to a soh without [thinking]—I mean, if you had to look at … staff notation, that distance would not stick to one’s mind like it would with the Tonic Sol-fa. You know you jump from a doh to [whatever note]—you know because of Tonic Sol-fa. That’s one particular advantage.

The second one is then the ability to pick [up music] … if one sings from Tonic Sol-fa, one inadvertently is taught to memorise the music, to harmonise the melodies. They [the choir] sing the notes—the Tonic Sol-fa doh, ray, me, fah, soh—somehow your memory has it there in tact. You have to somehow memorise the notes … because you start with the notes [pitches] and sing the notes [in Sol-fa] … So when you learn … the melody, the [pitches of the] notes are already in your mind. You sing [the lyrics] against that, you know—you sight read [as] you read your lyrics… (Interviewee B)

I think one develops a very good sense of pitch [with Tonic Sol-fa]. It is very difficult for the person who is well trained in Tonic Sol-fa to pitch incorrectly. (Interviewee G)

Transposing keys is not a problem. For instance, locally in the country, there are very few pianists that can transpose our songs. So that is another advantage of Tonic Sol-fa. But its easy … you know [to] transfer keys. You don’t have to worry about different keys. So those are the sort of immediate advantages of singing … and then the other advantage is that you don’t have to think [when you sing]. Well, that’s debatable but you don’t have to think about intervals. … Because doh to me you know … you don’t have to take off a third space or a minor third interval, so people say that staff notation is a visual thing but … [Tonic Sol-fa] is probably much more visual in terms of when … you know from me to doh, this is the distance… (Interviewee F)

Aside from the “notational isolation” represented by a musical literacy based solely on Tonic Sol-fa, there were other disadvantages identified by the interviewees:
... it takes a long time to teach a specific work or music [in] Tonic Sol-fa because you have to “go the long road” of learning the notes [pitches in Tonic Sol-fa] first and then go back to learning the lyrics. But with [the] converse now—with staff notation—you sight read [as] you read your lyrics ... (Interviewee B)

I think it (Tonic Sol-fa) will work only for music which is really tonal, where there is a definite key. If we [attempt to sing] music which goes into a bi-tonal and atonal [idiom], then there’s a problem]... (Interviewee G)

You spoke about the limitations of Tonic Sol-fa ... there’s also change of key—that’s modulation. Now that could be catastrophic and this has happened in some of the choirs I’ve performed [with] because they interpret it incorrectly—where the one sound get two names (bridge tones). So that itself can be a bit of a disadvantage. Whereas, in staff notation, you see it and that’s it. (Interviewee G)

Thinking the Music
One of the most significant factors determining the relevance and effectiveness of Tonic Sol-fa in contemporary choral music practice is undoubtedly the extent to which the approach is used in composition. Interviewees were asked about their use of Tonic Sol-fa in their own composing, arranging and notating of choral music. For one of the choir directors, the issue of composing using any formal means or notational system was unnecessary:

In our community, we compose [for] ourselves ... [we don’t have to think in Sol-fa or staff] ‘cause that is natural in African [culture] ... You know, in the olden days, we didn’t even buy walking frames for our kids (babies) [to learn to walk]. We sing it to them [and they learned through that]. (Interviewee E)

For other choir directors, their use of Tonic Sol-fa was integral to the process of composing choral music:

I think [in] Tonic Sol-fa ... and then, for instance, there was one piece that I arranged for the concert that we had ... I was thinking Tonic Sol-fa and then had to arrange it in staff notation afterwards. (Interviewee B)

For others, there was a duality in their approaches to composing which reflected not only the two notational systems used in South African choral music, but also to conscious and sub-conscious processing of ideas as part of composing.

... this huge piece [I’ve composed] ... it’s an hour and [a] half long ... It’s an African mass in the eleven official South African languages. The strange thing is that I wrote some of it in Tonic Sol-fa first, but some of it I wrote in staff notation [first]. When I want to write something African [in style] ... I write in Tonic Sol-fa first, and I just transcribe it [into staff notation]. When I’m writing something Western in song [style], I write it in staff notation ... but it’s like when I’m talking to you now, I do [so in English but] subconsciously I’m thinking in Xhosa. ... But I now longer have to first think in Xhosa and then talk in English. It happens automatically. That’s how it happens for me in Tonic Sol-fa now. ... I no longer have to first go through that change in my mind, but subconsciously it’s there. (Interviewee F)

Use in the Townships
The final issues that emerged as significant in this research were the extent to which Tonic Sol-fa is currently used in township communities as well as its likely future in South African choral music. Here there were several differing opinions:
[All the churches in my area], they all use [Tonic Sol-fa] ... community choirs, they’re all using Tonic Sol-fa. ... But now some of the kids attending school ... they are taking music [and using the modern system — staff notation] ... but when they’re singing in the township, they’re singing Tonic Sol-fa. [They are using] both systems. Professor Khomalo — listening to his interview on radio — he’s encouraging the youngsters to let go of Tonic Sol-fa. (Interviewer: Is it going to be easy for them to take on staff notation?) It’s going to be easy ... if they start on the basic staff and then it was easy, ... I don’t know how long it will take to implement ... it’s long term. I don’t think those before me in my generation, they’ll be ... interested in staff notation because ... even in church, we’ve got a very large [meeting of] eleven choirs — every September, we go to come together. Now, some of the coloured members, they use the staff and then they have to transcribe it into Tonic Sol-fa, otherwise the other choir won’t participate. (Interviewee E)

[Tonic Sol-fa] is going to grow because the black kids who are so interested in music now have to have this foundation which is there [in] Tonic Sol-fa ... with the black communities, I mean, we think it’s ours (Tonic Sol-fa is ours). And there is no way we can sing without those tones (Sol-fa syllables) — I’m glad that they (the choir kids) [get to] know Tonic Sol-fa because it’s the one thing that’s kept me going. It is the one [thing] that has taught me how to learn staff notation very quickly. (Interviewee C)

Actually, most of the choirs in townships ... use Tonic Sol-fa — [in fact] all of them. You’d only find, you’d rarely find, a person who was “true” around staff notation. Mostly it would either be the conductor or [be] around two persons in the choir. ... My take [on the future of Tonic Sol-fa] is that it’s going to be the main feature. ... Although a lot of people are forgetting [Tonic Sol-fa] themselves ... they can still learn the staff notation ... but it (Tonic Sol-fa) is still going to be a main feature for some time. (Interviewee B)

**Synthesis of Findings and Conclusion**

As outlined above, there were several key issues to have emerged from the interview data. Although it is not possible to generalize about the situation for South Africa as a whole, nor even for the Cape Town area, there are nevertheless sufficient commonalities and differences in the opinions of these choir directors to at least indicate some of the currently held attitudes about and applications of Tonic Sol-fa in contemporary choral music practice in South Africa. In summary, it is clear that that the contention that Tonic Sol-fa is now an integral part of the indigenous cultural milieu has some validity — as one interviewee stated the situation, “Most Africans — they understand Tonic Sol-fa better than any other music [system]”. For all of those interviewed, Tonic Sol-fa had been part of their upbringing which was present in their home, church, community and/or school lives. Indeed, as one interview stated, “... with black communities, I mean, we think it’s ours (Tonic Sol-fa is ours) — and there’s no way we can sing without those tones (Sol-fa syllables) ...” (Interviewee C).

In keeping with the contention that Tonic Sol-fa has been adapted to suit local needs, the application of the various techniques and methods which constitute the Curwen approach was surprisingly limited. For example, the modulator appears to be little used and pitch hand signs even less so. French time names do not appear to be widely employed as a mnemonic device for rhythm reading and the rhythm was often simply taught by rote. Certainly in the case of hymn tunes, the rhythmic dimension is often very simple with the main focus being on the melody and harmony. The solmisation syllables appear to play an essential role, not only
in allowing choirs to achieve a degree of musical literacy but also as a means of actually learning melodic parts, after which the lyrics of the song are added.

One aspect that loomed large for nearly all of the choir directors was that of music notation. One of the interviewees drew attention to the fact that, in the townships where Tonic Sol-fa was widely used in local church and community choirs, there would be few if any choristers who could read staff notation. Instead, Tonic Sol-fa notation was almost universally used in the townships with the implication that it also provided a sense of community cohesion and cultural identity through everyone being “Basically Tonic Sol-fa people”. Indeed the publication of hymn books printed exclusively in Tonic Sol-fa notation tended to encourage and indeed perpetuate the continued use of this form of notation.

However, there was a significant movement, particularly among the directors of better established choirs which participated in competitions, for their members to become literate in staff notation. The major argument in support of this was the more universal use of staff notation which, it was felt, greatly “empowered” local choirs when singing with other overseas choirs—thereby overcoming the “notational isolation” that Tonic Sol-fa admittedly represents. An additional factor which emerged as an entirely valid educational reason for moving to staff notation was in school situations where students were aiming for tertiary music courses that required literacy in staff notation as a prerequisite. Many advocated the use of dual notation which could provide “the best of both worlds”. Nevertheless, when it came to the composing and arranging work that choir directors undertook themselves, most indicated that their “compositional thinking”, particularly for an African style of music, was in Tonic Sol-fa, although their writing out of music was often in staff notation. Indeed many compared the “language” of Tonic Sol-fa pitch syllables as being analogous to thinking in their first language (Xhosa) and yet speaking and/or writing their thoughts in English.

For most of the choir directors, there still appeared to be a future role for Tonic Sol-fa in their communities albeit that, for some, support for a conscious effort to promote staff notation for the younger generation. In the meantime, the compromise achieved through the system of dual notation, now well established in South African choral music publishing—particularly in the case of music for massed choir festivals and choral competitions (so-called amakwanya or ‘competition music’)—ensures that music in Tonic Sol-fa is still available for those who are literate in this notation.

It has been argued elsewhere (Stevens 2003) that the founder of the Tonic Sol-fa method, John Curwen, deliberately kept the level of theoretical complexity of his system to a minimum so that Tonic Sol-fa notation, when taught according to post-1972 and pre-1901 editions of The Standard Course, effectively by-passed the difficulties associated with staff notation and instead relied on an implicit association of the symbol (specifically the Sol-fa letter notation) with its sound (the Sol-fa syllables). In this way, the Tonic Sol-fa system was at least closer to indigenous African ways of practice—typified by an oral tradition—than staff notation system. Furthermore, it could be argued that the Tonic Sol-fa approach to choral singing, which has comparatively less “intellectual” focus per se than
staff notation, represents a closer correlation to the African notion of practical involvement and the fusion of performer and product. The importance of maintaining a sense of “Africanism” in choral music making was mentioned by several of the choir directors but emphasized by one in particular who summed up the situation by saying “South Africa is a singing nation, and we mustn’t kill it by becoming too sophisticated” (Interviewee G). There were certainly calls for a reform of choral music practice in the future—in particular, the phasing out of Tonic Sol-fa in favour of staff notation and by-passing certain aspects of Tonic Sol-fa pedagogy. Nevertheless, Tonic Sol-fa may still claim to be “alive and well” and contributing in a positive way to maintaining choral music as a “compelling presence in contemporary South Africa”.

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About the Author

Robin Stevens is Associate Professor of Music Education at Deakin University and has undertaken research into the history of school music education in Australia, Britain, South Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. His present research is focused on the use of Tonic Sol-fa in countries outside the United Kingdom from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Contact Details

Associate Professor Robin S. Stevens  
Faculty of Education  
Deakin University—Melbourne Campus at Burwood  
221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC. 3125  
Email: rstevens@deakin.edu.au

References


Figures 1 and 2 — Title page and Hymn in Tonic Sol-fa Notation from *Hosana* (Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa, 1974)

Figure 3 — Example of Dual (Tonic Sol-fa and Staff) Notation from *Music for* Caltex-Cape Argus Massed Choir Festival (Cape Town, May 18, 1997)