

## **Samuel McBurney: 'The Stanley of Sol-fa'**

An article published in the  
'Great Australian Educators' Series,  
*Unicorn: The Journal of the Australian College of Education*  
Volume 18, No. 3 (September 1992), pp.68–72

by

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In a publication issued to commemorate the jubilee year of the tonic sol-fa method of teaching vocal music in 1891 (Curwen & Graham n.d.), a Scottish immigrant to Victoria, Samuel McBurney, was accorded the title of 'the Stanley of Sol-fa' (after the British explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley) in recognition of his work in propagating the tonic sol-fa method in 'the antipodes'. Many teachers, even of the current (though older) generation, will probably have recollections of singing pitch exercises from the tonic sol-fa modulator and of singing school songs written in tonic sol-fa notation (with or without accompanying staff notation) during their own school days.

The Tonic Sol-fa method was devised by an English Congregational minister, the Reverend John Curwen (1816-1880) who drew upon a number of earlier European and English music teaching systems (see Rainbow 1967). Curwen combined two mnemonic systems (memory aids) for the reading and performance of the pitch and rhythm dimensions of music. Firstly he utilised a system of seven syllables - doh, ray, me, fah, soh, lah and te, each of which represented the corresponding 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 (key). Curwen also devised a series of 'mental effects' for each of the syllables, based on their respective positions in the tonal system (see later description). The sol-fa syllables were represented vertically to form 'The Tonic Sol-fa Modulator' from which teachers would

drill their students by pointing to the various syllables to form melodic exercises. Later, Curwen devised the pitch hand signs which, in a slightly modified form, are familiar to most contemporary music educators as part of the so-called Kodály method which also uses the same solmisation syllables. Curwen also incorporated a mnemonic system of French time names into his Tonic Sol-fa method to assist students with the rhythmic dimension of musical performance which again forms part of the Kodály method.

Curwen devised a special system of tonic sol-fa notation, deciding on a pitch representation system which utilised the first letter (in lower case) of each of the solmisation tones together with a rhythmic notational system based on bar lines, half bar lines and colons, full stops and commas thus (the first two phrases of 'Advance Australia Fair'):

Key C { : s | d' : s | m : s | d' : - . d' | d' : m' | r' : d' | t : d' | r' : - | -  
 Aust - ral - ians all , let us re - joice, For we are young and free

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. From modest beginnings and an estimated 2,000 tonic sol-fa singers in 1853, the movement was able to claim 315,000 followers by 1872 (Curwen & Graham n.d., pp.21, 23) and to have spread throughout the British Isles and then to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, the United States, India, China, Japan and the Pacific Islands. As a school music teaching method, tonic sol-fa was officially recognised by the English Education Department in 1860 and by 1891, it was estimated that two-and-a-half million elementary school children were being taught vocal music by tonic sol-fa (Curwen & Graham n.d., p.33). The method was also adopted by several educational authorities overseas, including those in Australia. One of the pioneers who 'hoisted the sol-fa banner' in Australia was Samuel McBurney.

Born at Glasgow in 1847, McBurney was taught to read music by the tonic sol-fa system from an early age and became involved in teaching singing by this method while still a boy (Stevens 1974, p.128). He attended the University of Glasgow but, as was then quite common, left without completing his studies. He opened a school at Bathgate near Edinburgh but, for health reasons, decided to emigrate to the colony of Victoria in 1870 where he held several teaching positions before being appointed as the district singing master at Portland by the Education Department in 1875.

The following year McBurney returned to England where he attended the Summer Session of the Tonic Sol-fa College in London which had recently been incorporated as the official training school of the tonic sol-fa method. Having passed all the examinations available at the time, McBurney returned to Australia and with his wife, took over operation of the Geelong Ladies College.

In an effort to disseminate tonic sol-fa as a choral singing method, McBurney called together all the 'tonic sol-fa-ists' whom he could locate in the colony and founded the Victorian Tonic Sol-fa Association in 1878. This led to the formation of several tonic sol-fa choral societies and the adoption of the method by many church choirs. In 1883 McBurney organised the first Inter-colonial Tonic Sol-fa Conference at the Geelong Ladies College and in further efforts to propagate tonic sol-fa, he commenced choral singing classes, undertook lecture tours, offered postal courses and examined candidates for certificates of the Tonic Sol-fa College.

McBurney then began to campaign for recognition of the tonic sol-fa method for use in Victorian Education Department schools. The Inspector of School Music, Joseph Summers (see Stevens 1976), and several of the senior singing masters in the Education Department were strongly opposed these moves, preferring instead Waite's 'tonic numeral' method which

employed scale degree numbers as a mnemonic aid to reading music from staff notation. A vigorous battle was waged chiefly through the daily press and a monthly education journal, *The Australasian Schoolmaster*, and it was not until 1887 that an alternative music program based on the tonic sol-fa method and its notational system was finally placed on an equal footing with the existing staff notation program in Victorian state schools (Stevens 1980, p.333).

Early in 1887 McBurney and his wife left Victoria on an extended tour of the eastern Australian colonies, New Zealand and the United States *en route* to Britain. McBurney's Australian tour was undertaken with a threefold purpose - to collect data on local dialect peculiarities for the English phonetician Dr. A.J. Ellis, to investigate the state of music education in state schools, and to disseminate the tonic sol-fa system wherever possible through lectures, public meetings and, in the case of Queensland and New South Wales, establishing of tonic sol-fa associations to carry on the work of disseminating the method. After a similar tour of New Zealand, McBurney left for San Francisco early in November 1887 and on arrival in the United States, began his efforts to disseminate the tonic sol-fa method in the American school system. During his eight months on the West Coast, he lectured extensively on the tonic sol-fa system at teachers colleges and teachers institutes before embarking on a lecture tour across the American continent, including a visit to Canada.

After attending the 1889 Summer Session of the Tonic Sol-fa College in London, McBurney became determined to demonstrate that the tonic sol-fa system could be successfully applied to the highest levels of musical scholarship. He therefore entered for the Bachelor of Music examinations at Trinity College, Dublin and having gained the degree, successfully attempted the examinations for the Doctor of Music degree a few months later.<sup>1</sup> He also passed all the examinations of the Tonic Sol-fa College to qualify as a Fellow of that institution in July 1891, thereby attaining the distinction of holding the highest qualifications in both staff notation and tonic sol-fa notation (*The Musical Herald* 1891, p.35). Before embarking again for Australia, McBurney spent several months examining the state of music education in Germany and France and briefly returned to London to participate in the Tonic Sol-fa Jubilee celebrations.

On arriving back in the colony of Victoria, McBurney was commissioned to report on musical standards in Education Department schools as compared with those in Europe and America. After a time acting as relieving Inspector of Music for the Education Department, he was officially appointed to that position at the beginning of 1893. Unfortunately this appointment was short-lived as, due to the worsening economic depression, the position of Inspector of Music together with all positions for specialist music teachers in state schools were abolished in June of that year (Stevens 1974, p.128). McBurney and his wife then took over Oberwyl Ladies College in St. Kilda. As well as resuming his public choral classes and postal courses, McBurney also conducted in-service training courses in the tonic sol-fa method for state school teachers, adjudicated at choral festivals and competitions both in Victoria and in other states, and kept up a steady stream of propaganda in support of tonic sol-fa in *The Australasian Schoolmaster*. In 1902 McBurney revived the Victorian Tonic Sol-fa Association, again becoming its president, and the following year joined the staff of the University of Melbourne Conservatorium of Music as a teacher of sight singing and ear training, having been admitted to the degree of Doctor of Music (*ad eundem*) in 1891. McBurney's fervent advocacy of the tonic sol-fa system ceased only with his death in 1909 at the age of sixty-two.

In addition to his work as a tonic sol-fa advocate, McBurney contributed significantly to school music teaching pedagogy, particularly at the kindergarten level, as well as having contributed to local Victorian musical culture through his choral compositions. During the early 1890s McBurney published a number of school songbooks including a two-volume work entitled *The Australian Progressive Songster*. Being for junior and senior school classes respectively, these two volumes formed a course of 'graded songs, rounds and exercises in staff notation, tonic sol-fa and numerals ... specially prepared for Australian schools'. Another publication, *Hints on Infant and Elementary Music Teaching* (1892) was

followed by a sequel entitled *Kindergarten Music Training* which was published by J. Curwen and Sons about 1894. This textbook (which included sixty-six 'Bird Songs') together with the separately-published *Bird Modulator*<sup>2</sup> formed an exceedingly well-devised kindergarten music teaching method.

Firmly believing that the tonic sol-fa system could be successfully taught to kindergarten children, McBurney devised his coloured *Bird Modulator* to illustrate to children the 'mental effects' of the scale tones by correlating each with a particular bird and its characteristic colour or an assigned colour. Thus the tonic note *doh* - the strong or firm tone was represented by the 'Black Crow', *ray* - the rousing or hopeful tone was represented by an orange humming bird, *me* - the calm and steady tone by two green parrots ('Love Birds'), *fah* - the desolate or awe-inspiring tone by a blue owl, *soh* - the grand and bright tone by a red parrot ('Pretty Joe'), *lah* - the sad or weeping tone by a lavender dove, *te* - the piercing or sensitive tone by a yellow canary and the upper tonic - *doh'* - by a black jackdaw (a near relation of the crow). McBurney appears to have devised the *Bird Modulator* during the late 1880s, having demonstrated it while on tour in the United States and also in England at the Tonic Sol-fa Jubilee Exhibition in 1891. The *Bird Modulator* was used in conjunction with the specially composed 'bird songs' to teach children how to read from sol-fa notation.

McBurney's literary output, aside from numerous articles advocating the tonic sol-fa system, included a chapter on 'Pronunciation and Musical Terms' which was published in a revised edition of Curwen's *The Standard Course* in 1900. McBurney's interest in the education of blind people led him to devise a new form of Braille raised type for tonic sol-fa notation which improved upon the existing tonic sol-fa Braille. He introduced this new Braille system to blind asylums in Scotland in 1889 and it was featured in the Tonic Sol-fa Jubilee Exhibition held in London in 1891. McBurney also utilized the system in Australia at the Victorian Institute for the Blind during the late 1890s and early 1900s.

McBurney's compositional output, although not large, included several part songs composed for the use of local choral societies, and several patriotic songs composed in support of the movement advocating the federation of the Australian colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia. His principal contribution as a composer was however the repertoire of school songs and school anthems which he produced as part of his promotion of the tonic sol-fa system for use in teaching school music.

A life-long interest in linguistics and dialects led McBurney to take an active part in the Victorian Esperanto Society, having served as its secretary for several years. He also collected material on colonial dialect peculiarities during his tour of the eastern Australian colonies in 1887 and his findings were published in A.J. Ellis's *On English Pronunciation, Part Five* (London, 1889).

During his lifetime, Samuel McBurney devoted himself almost single mindedly to the propagation of the tonic sol-fa method as well as to the cause of music in schools not only in Australia - the country of his adoption, but also abroad - in New Zealand, in the United States and in Britain. His influence as a music educator, more particularly as a tonic sol-fa advocate, in Victoria as well as in other Australian states extended well into the twentieth century as the foundations he laid for teaching music using tonic sol-fa were built upon by successive generations of teachers. Indeed, McBurney's stature as a music educator must surely remain almost unsurpassed in the annals of Australian education to the present day and his pioneering work as a tonic sol-fa advocate most justly earned him the title of 'the Stanley of sol-fa'.

## Notes

1. McBurney chose Dublin University because it was the only British university at this time where the Mus. Bac. and Mus. Doc. degrees could be attempted consecutively without a prescribed period of standing. Five years had to elapse between the two degrees at Oxford and three years at Cambridge.
2. The only extant copy of McBurney's 'Bird Modulator' known to the author is one held in the Mona McBurney Collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

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