JOHN CURVEN:  
TEACHING THE TONIC SOL-FA METHOD  
1816-1880

An English minister proposed teaching music through the sound of tones and only later using notation.

by Ruth Zinar

John Curwen was an English congregational minister whose principles, although not generally accepted during his lifetime, have had an effect on current thought in music education. He was interested in teaching children to sing and "cipher." His ideas, advanced for his time, included a "look and say" method of reading whole words instead of learning the ABCs, using concrete objects for arithmetic calculations, and picturing ideas.

Commissioned to study

In 1841, he was commissioned to find the simplest way to teach singing by note, for use by choirs and in home singing, and his method gradually evolved, leading to the publication in 1858 of The Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-Fa Method of Teaching Music. His work explains what he called the "great principles...the thought before the name" and the simple before the complex. Before the pupil needs to learn to read pitch notation, he or she is already very familiar with the sounds of the tones.

Curwen employed the mutable do because of the rehension that all other tones have to the key of tonic. He believed that while there are "many other sources for the effect produced on the mind by a musical sound," the most important is its relative pitch or key relationship, "the thing first taught, first seen, and most prominent." He believed the fixed do system to be "a most fatal heresy."

At first, all notation was eliminated in Curwen's method. This was only temporary, because he had no intention of overthrowing what he called the "old" notation. Instead, his aim was to enable his students to sing more readily from standard pitch notation. Starting with the tones of the tonic chord (do, re, mi, sol), the teacher sang various patterns that the class echoed. Then, a Modulator was used. (See Figure 1.)

The Modulator method

The Modulator, an essential part of Curwen's method, was a chart on which syllables representing tones of the scale were written vertically in ascending order with the notes one and job (the third and fourth steps of the scale) and le and job (the seventh and eighth steps) placed close together to insinuate the half-step intervals. As the teacher pointed to the syllables, the students sang the corresponding syllables and tones.

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All syllables on the Modulator, the pupils would sing familiar melodic patterns.

When skill in singing patterns from the Modulator was achieved, the melodies would then be indicated solely by what Curwen called "interpretive notation," the first letter of each syllable. Thus, notation sung as oh, pe, ne, sol would be written as O, P, N, S.

f, ah, te, and lab were introduced, with emphasis being placed on the individuality of each sound rather than on the study of intervals, the change in the small motions was formally made. Chromatics, modulations, minor mode, and harmonic ear training followed.

Hand signals and Kodaly
Curwen also employed a system of hand signals for the tones of the scale and these are now world famous as the signals used by Zoltan Kodaly in his method. These signals not only distinguished the tones of the scale, but attempted to represent the "effekt" of the tone. Thus, the signal above, spoken by a firm, strong, "ah," sound, was to indicate "joy and happiness." The syllables were combined and used to build the total system of interpretation.

The purpose of the hand signals was to indicate the "es" base note, while the fingers, in combination with the base notes, would give each tone a distinct personality in relationship to the tonic. Curwen did not intend that his descriptions of each syllable were either definitive or exact; anyone could have his or her own interpretation of the effects of the tones. The important thing was to recognize that each tone has a unique character in relationship to the base note.

The hand signals, Curwen stated, have the advantage of enabling the teacher, so to speak, to "write his praises (or his complaints) through the pupil's voice in a language of his own." The teacher tells the pupil what he or she wants the pupil to do by means of a language that can be learned by just about anyone, regardless of intelligence or ability.

A special part of the lesson was on the interpretation of the tone objects and the pupil was not allowed to interpret the objects in any way he or she wanted. He or she could only interpret the objects as his or her teacher told him or her to do.

As a teacher of children, the pupil is not allowed to interpret the objects in any way he or she wants. He or she can only interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do.

At this stage, Curwen wrote, the pupils recognize the "es" base note, and then as the teacher added more and more objects to the various objects, the pupil would be able to interpret them. He explained this by saying that the pupil should be able to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do.

When the pupil starts to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do, he or she is beginning to learn to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do. He or she is not yet able to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do.

When the pupil is able to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do, he or she is beginning to learn to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do. He or she is not yet able to interpret the objects as his or her teacher tells him or her to do.

In addition to his approach to teaching melody reading, Curwen used a system of dots and dashes combined with interpretation notation to indicate rhythmic notation. Although this system was not adopted, an important principle underlying it has been accepted, for Curwen tried to stress teaching not so much the arithmetical relationships of quarter, eighth, and half notes, but the feeling for the basic beat underlying the durations of the notes.

A practicing musician, choir teacher, and music lover, Curwen was not a professional musician. His work caused opposition because it was mistakenly seen as an effort to abolish pitch notation. Actually, Curwen used what he called his three assistants—the hand signals, the memory-helping syllables, and the Modulator—to help develop the ability to read from standard pitch notation.

Although they have been obscured, Curwen's contributions to music education have been of considerable value. First of all, the hand signals he originated are now widely used. Second, he emphasized developing a feeling for the beat rather than just an intellectual understanding of the mathematics of rhythmic notation. In addition, he opposed teaching notation until he came the idea to the pupil that the pupil's voice is the whole work of learning to sing.