

MUSIC AND VICTORIAN PHILANTHROPY

Providing a fresh approach to the social history of the Victorian era, this book examines the history and development of the Tonic Sol-fa sight-singing system, and its impact on British society. Instead of focusing on the popular classical music canon, McGuire combines musicology, social history, and theology to investigate the perceived power of music within the Victorian era. Through case studies of temperance, missionaries, and women's suffrage, the book traces how John Curwen and his son transformed Sarah Glover's sight-singing notation from a strictly local phenomenon into an internationally used system. They built an infrastructure that promoted its use within Great Britain and beyond, to British colonies and other lands experiencing British influence, such as India, South Africa, and especially Madagascar. McGuire demonstrates how it was believed that Tonic Sol-fa's importance went beyond music education – that music could improve the morals of singers and listeners, thus transforming society.

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MUSIC AND VICTORIAN PHILANTHROPY

The Tonic Sol-fa Movement

CHARLES EDWARD McGUIRE



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*“And philanthropy seems to me to have become simply the
refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow-creatures.”*

Oscar Wilde, An Ideal Husband, Act I

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Dissenters, philanthropists, and the world of Tonic Sol-fa	i
2 Temperance and Tonic Sol-fa	68
3 Missionary work and Tonic Sol-fa	113
4 A garb of reverence: suffragists, suffragettes, domestic ideals, and Tonic Sol-fa	165
Epilogue: Tonic Sol-fa, the public, and the end of an era	208
Appendix: Tonic Sol-fa sources	220
<i>Bibliography</i>	224
<i>Index</i>	234

Illustrations

Ex 1.1a	J. S. Bach, “Commit Thy Way, O Weeper,” <i>Tonic Sol-fa Reporter</i> , July 1857, mp, pp. 49–50	page 9
Ex 1.1b	Staff notation transcription of Bach’s “Commit Thy Way, O Weeper”	10
Ex 1.2	Table of mixed doh vs. movable doh sol-fa systems	11
Ex 1.3a	John Stainer, <i>The Crucifixion</i> , “God So Loved the World” in Tonic Sol-fa notation	14
Ex 1.3b	Stainer, <i>The Crucifixion</i> , “God So Loved the World” in staff notation	15
Ex 1.3c	Adolphe Adam, “Cantique de Noël” (“O Holy Night”) in parallel staff and Tonic Sol-fa notation, mm. 3–5, <i>Thirty Christmas Songs and Carols by Various Composers</i> , p. 1	16
Ex 1.4	Tonic Sol-fa symbol from the December 1864 edition of the Reporter	46
Ex 2.1	Preston Temperance Society Lecture Series, 1856–7	74
Ex 2.2	Performances for the Fitzroy “Musical Entertainment for the People,” fourteenth season (1872). <i>Jubilee Sketch of the Fitzroy Teetotal Association</i> (London: Committee of the Fitzroy Teetotal Association, 1889), p. 110	75
Ex 2.3a	Transcription into staff notation of “Touch Not the Cup,” from “Temperance Songs no. 1,” <i>Reporter</i> , August 1854, mp	87
Ex 2.3b	Transcription of complete lyrics for “Touch Not the Cup” with John Curwen’s emphases	88

List of illustrations

ix

Ex 3.1	Tonic Sol-fa hand signals in Malagasy from James Richardson's <i>Lesona Tsotsotra Amy Ny Hira</i> (Antananarivo, Madagascar: London Missionary Society, 1877)	150
Ex 3.2	Transcription of "Ao Ny Lanitra Tsara Tokoa" from James Richardson and C. T. Price's <i>Tiona Ela Sy Vao</i> (Antananarivo, Madagascar: London Missionary Society, 1879)	152
Ex 4.1	Program of a Marylebone and Paddington WSPU "at home," January 24, 1912	188
Ex 4.2	Transcription of the <i>Bazaar Souvenir Programme</i> , NUWSS, December 5–7, 1912 (Women's Library, 2/ASL OS8/8)	190
Ex 4.3	Transcription of the table of contents of <i>Women's Suffrage Songs</i> (London Society for Women's Suffrage, [n.d.])	192
Ex 4.4	"The Coming Day," <i>Women's Suffrage Songs</i> (London Society for Women's Suffrage, [n.d.], p. 16)	193
Ex 4.5	A suffrage Christmas card from 1910. Museum of London Collection; used with permission	195
Ex 4.6	Teresa del Riego's "The Awakening" (London: Enoch and Sons, [1910]), chorus, mm. 1–8	198
Ex 4.7	Ethel Smyth's "March of the Women" in Tonic Sol-fa and staff notation (London: Women's Press, [1911], 7VJH/1/1/06, The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University. © Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden – Leipzig)	203
Ex 5.1	William Gush, <i>Portrait of John Curwen</i> (1857); by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London	209

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works and organizations:

BMS	British Missionary Society
CLMS	<i>Chronicle of the London Missionary Society</i>
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CWML	Church World Mission League
FFMA	Friends' Foreign Mission Association
LMS	London Missionary Society
MCL	Manchester Central Library
MMC	<i>Missionary Magazine and Chronicle</i>
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
PTS	Preston Temperance Society
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies, London, UK
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

A note on the Curwen Press: During the Victorian era, the publishing company run by John Curwen and John Spencer Curwen was variously known as the Tonic Sol-fa Agency, the Tonic Sol-fa Press, John Curwen and Sons, and the Curwen Press. The names frequently overlapped by many years. Throughout the text, I will use the Curwen Press to stand for all the manifestations of this publishing entity; when referring specifically to the Curwens' published materials in the footnotes, I will use the name under which it was published.

The primary journal of the Tonic Sol-fa movement, as it existed from 1851 to 1929, was called by three different names. The first was the *Tonic Sol-fa Reporter* (1851–89), which at times included both a section of text (contemporarily called “letterpress” by the publishers) and a small selection of music (“music press”) in Tonic Sol-fa notation. Depending on the

List of abbreviations

xi

year, this selection might have been split into two or three parts sent out to novice, intermediate, and advanced singers. This was followed by the *Musical Herald* (1889–1920), which included a separate section of music in either Tonic Sol-fa or staff notation. This journal became the *Musical News and Herald* (1920–7, an amalgamation of the *Musical Herald* with the independent *Musical News*, a journal that existed from 1880 to 1920 on its own, as a record of London concerts); the journal was renamed a final time as the *Musical News* (1927–9). In the last two incarnations, the journal printed no additional music. The interested scholar can track a complete collection of the letterpress by visiting the various libraries listed in the Appendix.

Furthermore, the Curwen Press's numbering system for its journals was erratic. This is not surprising, since the format of the *Reporter* changed so often in the period under consideration. Issues in a series of *Reporters* from the middle of the 1860s to the beginning of the 1870s do not include volume numbers or series numbers, and when the series numbers were reinstituted later, they were noncontiguous and inconsistent. The music press from the *Reporter* had a numbering system that frequently differed from that of the letterpress. In the study that follows, when the letterpress or music press side of the journal is cited, only month and year will be given (e.g., January 1857). For those years when the *Reporter* was published twice monthly (January 1870–September 1876), the full date will be given to identify the specific issue (e.g., September 15, 1873). Unless the footnote states “mp” for “music press,” the reader should assume that the citation is from the letterpress side of the issue.

Preface

In February 1883, Major-General Brown, a British soldier on furlough in England, described to a large audience his experiences while living in India for four decades. Such a lecture was typical intellectual fodder for the middle class of the day. It provided a momentary glimpse of an exotic land through the eyes of a respectable and respected figure and would be considered an entertainment that was both rational and edifying. It fulfilled most of the expectations of the audience: he described a life of difficult but rewarding work for queen and country. He propounded a combination of British technology and spirituality as a way to win over the colonized people, which, combined with a philanthropic attitude typical of the time (based less on skill than on the desire to volunteer to aid others), created the justification for continued colonization:

Major-General Brown said that he felt somewhat strange in England, having spent 40 years of his life in India. Perhaps he had better give them a bit of autobiography. Although he had played the cornet from boyhood, it was not until 52 years of age that he began to learn to sing (laughter). At that time, when he could not sing in the least, he was asked by the present Bishop of Rangoon to train his church choir at Madras (laughter). He knew really nothing of the subject, but got some Sol-fa books, and studied them. In his bungalow he learnt in a morning what he taught to his class of girls in the afternoon. That choir of little native girls was very successful under its Tonic Sol-fa teaching. He remembered one little coloured girl singing “With verdure clad” at a public day in a manner which drew forth the highest praise from the organist of the cathedral at Madras. The General sang a piece of Hindostani lullaby, which was very quaint. He said he would close by relating a curious coincidence. Some years ago, before he knew anything of Tonic Sol-fa, he was the guest of the Rajah of Vizianagram, the Indian prince who had erected the drinking fountain in Edgware Road. The Rajah asked him to teach him some European music, that he might play it on his guitar. The air that he was most anxious to learn was “Wait for the wagon” (laughter). How did he (General Brown) go to work? He took the Indian names Say, Ray, Gah, Mah, Pah, Doh, Nee, which corresponded with our Sol-fa syllables, Doh, Ray, Me &c., and pasted them on to

the keys of the piano. Then he wrote the tune out in syllables, and the Rajah was at once able to pick out the notes on the piano himself. Years after he read that Miss Glover's earliest attempt at music teaching was exactly similar to his own (cheers).¹

According to his own celebratory narrative, through a type of musical notation called Tonic Sol-fa, Brown stretched the welcoming hand of British civilization and Christianity to the indigenous people under his care and in his association: a group of native girls who were to be formed into a church choir, and a local political leader famous as well in Great Britain for his philanthropic work. He did so by cleverly using a British notation system that granted him such easy and efficient access to music that, even though he was not a singer himself, he soon became so pedagogically strong that local professional musicians praised his pupils. His obvious enthusiasm for the system was due to the fact that he had adapted it to translate non-Western notational ideas into Western ones, thus allowing an indigenous musician to learn Western music. Tonic Sol-fa, then, bore the imprimatur of the British Empire: its ease of use would lead to the spread of Western religion and culture, further leading to the civilization of the world.

Implicit as well in Brown's description are two beliefs: that Tonic Sol-fa sight-singing notation could manage taste, and that musical taste was subject to ranking. Brown's rajah holds some elements of Western culture dear: he plays a guitar, has access to a piano, and has heard the popular song "Wait for the Wagon." The song, an American paean to true love successfully tested through toil, had as its core theme expansion to the western frontier. It was written in 1851 by R. Bishop Buckley and George Knauff, and originally popularized by Buckley's Minstrels. The rajah – a status equivalent to that of a member of the British aristocracy – was interested in what both Brown and the middle-class audience (who laughed) considered a musical trifle. The girl (likely poor, as her status was not identified by Brown), on the other hand, once taught via Tonic Sol-fa, sang to the praise of a professional musician a selection from Franz Joseph Haydn's still-popular oratorio *The Creation*. For the supporters of Tonic Sol-fa, the ranking of taste was obvious: through the method, the girl had reached the apex of British art music. To Brown's audience, the rajah had frittered his time away with an enervating piece of music, while the girl had "improved" herself morally by singing an acknowledged masterpiece with religious words.

¹ *Tonic Sol-fa Reporter* (hereafter *Reporter*), February 1883, pp. 25–6.

Preface

xv

Of course, this is a testimonial by just one person; well respected or not, his view is only a small part of the history of the period in general and the history of British music in particular. Yet his story, at least according to the editors of the Tonic Sol-fa movement's major magazine, the *Tonic Sol-fa Reporter* (in later incarnations called the *Musical Herald* and the *Musical News and Herald*), was typical of stories told throughout Great Britain, its empire, and beyond to individuals living abroad and evangelizing British technology, religion, or culture. It was a story, often repeated, of the great potential of the musical notation, which was always praised within the pages of this organ and usually described with positive words such as "efficient" and "revolutionary," but most frequently "moral." Borrowing the old belief that music was itself a moral force, its proponents disseminated Tonic Sol-fa notation as part of a carefully crafted plan to improve people's lives with a particularly British slant: to make such individuals morally upright, turn them into practicing Christians (preferably Protestant ones), and guide them to becoming efficient workers. Aimed predominantly at the working and middle classes, the power of Tonic Sol-fa, in the belief of its adherents, would change the world because it aided the teaching of vocal music, becoming the "People's Music" or "Music for the Million" – bringing the fruits of culture and civilization to a wider swath of society while at the same time raising that swath of society to a higher moral plane, as it had Brown's little girl.

As the religious historian Susan Thorne notes, by the middle of the nineteenth century, "the 'missionary spirit' was widely regarded, by friends and foes alike, as the 'characteristic feature' of the religious piety that was in turn the characteristic of the English middle class."² Being part of a middle-class Dissenting Christian family, the father-and-son team of John Curwen (1816–80) and John Spencer Curwen (1847–1916), who successfully led the Tonic Sol-fa movement in Great Britain from 1840 until 1916, both embodied that missionary spirit to the letter.³ It was generally their Dissenting missionary zeal that caused them to promote a system that was certainly efficient musical pedagogy, but more importantly a way to spread a specific set of Victorian moral principles and to support moral reform movements. Moreover, the Curwens' attempts to use music to reform society mirror the history of philanthropy during the same period. In the early 1840s, when John Curwen began his

² Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 55.

³ To avoid confusion, I will refer to the elder Curwen as "John Curwen" and the younger as "Spencer Curwen" throughout the text.

Tonic Sol-fa dissemination campaign, moral philanthropy was largely paternalistic in nature. Members of the middle classes embraced and promoted reform movements as a way of “elevating” the working classes. The moral reform organizations John Curwen first supported, including temperance, evangelical missionaries, the antislavery movement, and Ragged Schools, all began with a paternalistic attitude, though both the temperance and the missionary movements became increasingly populist throughout the nineteenth century. Spencer Curwen’s reforms during his time as titular head of the Tonic Sol-fa movement (from the death of his father in 1880 until his own death in 1916), much more collectivist in nature, were reflected in the concerns of British women’s suffrage – powered more by mass demonstrations than individual, evangelizing home visits. Spencer Curwen’s reforms emphasized the progressive nature of Tonic Sol-fa via the social equality it brought to its singers, particularly working-class ones, grounding the sight-singing notation in the idea that improving the quality of the music sung would lead to great strides in both moral improvement and social equality. However, Spencer Curwen’s own charitable undertakings were not necessarily current ones; he continued to actively support temperance (even after it ceased to be politically viable in the mid 1890s) and missionaries, largely ignoring suffrage and similar contemporary collectivist movements.

Tonic Sol-fa will thus be a lens through which we will study the links between music and the moral philanthropy of the age. The lives and beliefs of the Curwens will be our guide. In individual case studies, we will examine three of the great reform movements of the Victorian era: two that the Curwens supported, temperance and missionary work, and one that they did not, women’s suffrage. These investigations will reveal aspects of the contemporary view of the power of music, the place of philanthropy in society, and the responsibilities of society to make such music and philanthropy possible. This book, then, is not a history of Tonic Sol-fa, though throughout each chapter relevant aspects of Tonic Sol-fa’s history will intermingle with the histories of these reform movements. Nor will this volume comprise a detailed study of Tonic Sol-fa’s evolution as a pedagogical method; that has been accomplished by Bernarr Rainbow, Derek Hyde, Peggy Bennett, and Sarah Kaufman; the debt of any individual working in Tonic Sol-fa to these four scholars is so obvious that it cannot be adequately acknowledged.⁴ Nor will this study resolve

⁴ Studies of the pedagogical history of Tonic Sol-fa originate with Bernarr Rainbow’s *The Land without Music* (London: Novello, 1967) and continue in his “The Rise of Popular Music Education

Preface

xvii

once and for all the question of the sight-singing method's impact on the music of the Victorian era. That is a project that cannot yet be completed, even though the field of British music studies has grown greatly in the last few decades.⁵ The work thus far completed is extraordinarily significant in that it both analyzes the place of music within British society from historical, literary, and theological viewpoints and compares the accepted traditions of indigenous composers and musicians with those imported from other countries. This is, still, however, very much a "top down" approach that looks at elite composers and elite institutions. Tonic Sol-fa, like other contemporary musical movements in Victorian Britain, was caught between borrowing from elite music (genres such as the oratorio and cantata) and democratizing this music by teaching it, thus making it accessible to an audience possibly in the millions. A great deal more work needs to be done on such "borderline" topics, including sight-singing, the competitive music festival movement, music halls, and brass bands – to name but a few – before broader musical conclusions can be drawn.

Instead, this book will locate the artifact of Tonic Sol-fa within the world of Victorian Britain and show how the sight-singing method was both talisman and dictator of contemporary moral philanthropy. Tonic Sol-fa came about and gained popularity because of a series of cultural and historical accidents: the rise and expansion of Nonconformism and evangelical Christianity in the nineteenth century, a distrust of centralized government intervention bordering on the pathological, and the rise

in Nineteenth-Century England," in *The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 17–42 and his *John Curwen: A Short Critical Biography* (Sevenoaks: Novello, 1980). A general history of the Curwen Press is Herbert Simon's *Song and Words: A History of the Curwen Press* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973). Studies of the origin of Tonic Sol-fa include Derek Hyde's *New Found Voices: Women in Nineteenth-Century English Music*, 3rd ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), esp. chap. 3; Peggy Bennett's "Sarah Glover: A Forgotten Pioneer in Music Education," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 32 (1984), 49–65; and Sarah Kaufman's "John Curwen and the Impact of Tonic Sol-fa on the Choral Movement in England" (M.Phil. thesis, Leeds University, 2003). In two essays, Grant Olwage has also discussed Tonic Sol-fa as both an aid and a detriment to South African indigenous music. See his "John Knox Bokwe, Colonial Composer: Tales of Race and Music" (in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 131, no. 1 [2006], 1–37) and "Scriptions of the Choral: The History of Black South African Choralism" (in the *South African Journal of Musicology*, vol. 22 (2002), 29–45).

⁵ Signs of the growth of interest in nineteenth-century British music studies are legion and include the highly successful biennial Conference of Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain (inaugurated in 1997), the formation of the North American British Music Studies Association (2003), the Ashgate Press "Music in Nineteenth Century Britain" series (edited by Bennett Zon; begun 1999), the Boydell & Brewer "Music in Britain, 1600–1900" series (edited by Rachel Cowgill and Peter Holman), and the publication of numerous essays and books on the "long" nineteenth century in Britain.

of cheap information dissemination. The first two points will be elaborated throughout this study; for the last, we can preface the discussion by noting that between 1800 and 1900, the Tonic Sol-fa journals edited by the Curwens were only a few of the estimated 125,000 new periodical titles the British released. While many of these disappeared after a few issues, a significant number remain in print today. Furthermore, book prices fell from an average of sixteen shillings in 1828 to eight shillings four pence by 1853.⁶ Aided by the great strides in transportation and communication, and the growing importance and economic power of the leisure industry, cheaper music books led to an explosion in musical literacy. The dissemination of Tonic Sol-fa among a wide segment of British society was the direct result of these technological and social advances. Using these tenets as a basis, this study will be wholly interdisciplinary and inexorably intertwined with the cultural history of the era. It will follow some of the most important political battles of the age but will also illuminate many of the social issues of the time: increasing civil and religious liberties in Great Britain; the growth of a patriotic and imperial society; the pursuit of an ideal of the home and domesticity; and the great threat to Protestant Christian, sacred, and moral ideals from the growing secular, technological society.

Running throughout the study is the thread of Victorian philanthropy: how to make the individual into a better person while maintaining the code of the dominant society. Since society changed radically during this period, the nature of Tonic Sol-fa's philanthropy changed with it. But always at the core of the Curwens' Tonic Sol-fa propagation were the linked beliefs in the moral perfection of evangelical Christianity, the beneficial power of music, the universality of the sight-singing system, and the potential of working- and middle-class individuals to remain good, or, if not already good, to be rescued from moral turpitude. These tenets, though, occasionally conflict with each other, and John Curwen and Spencer Curwen subscribed to them differently. John Curwen focused his belief on the reform of the individual, even at the expense of the music itself. While he did attempt to bring the oratorios of Handel, Mendelssohn, Haydn, and Beethoven to the poorer classes of society, the bulk of the music he published and forwarded through Tonic Sol-fa was simplistic moralizing pabulum with lyrics that were either patriotic or naturalistic, but always Christian. Singing such music, John Curwen believed, would create the

⁶ F. David Roberts, *The Social Conscience of the Early Victorians* (Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 325.

Preface

xix

desire within the individual to become a better Christian, and a better citizen. A newly revitalized Protestant Christian community would follow the creation of an army of such sight singers. In this way, he reflects the antigovernment, paternalistic, and pro-volunteer charity ideal of his time. Spencer Curwen had a much stronger belief in the power of the community, and, as charity moved into a realm of state-sponsored social service in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, he began to ground Tonic Sol-fa less in the individual's morality and more in a collectivist aesthetic ideal. The power of music to do good – and an evangelical Protestant good at that – remained at the core of the movement for both men. But each was a product of his time.

To show this transformation, and the strong links both Curwens tried to forge between music and moral reform, the book is divided into four chapters, each of which will consider the intersection of music and moral philanthropy throughout the period in question (1840–1916) in a particular context. The first serves as a broad introduction to the world of Tonic Sol-fa and provides the basic necessary background to what follows. It begins with a rudimentary guide to the sight-singing method; continues with an appreciation of the intersecting biographies of the inventor of the system, Sarah Glover, and its great propagators, the Curwens; goes on to review the ideas behind the development of Victorian philanthropy, including the “Dissenting Conscience” of the age; and ends with a broad investigation of the Curwens’ desire to manage the tastes of the working classes through music (a cultural moral philanthropy) and their belief in the power of music.

The second, third, and fourth chapters relate Tonic Sol-fa to three other contemporary movements. Chapter 2 focuses on the links between Tonic Sol-fa and the Victorian temperance movement, demonstrating how the Curwens used the machinery of the Tonic Sol-fa organization to aid a proposed national policy of abstinence from alcohol, believing that it would lead to the creation of a more efficient worker, a more egalitarian society, and a more strongly defined family unit. The changing nature of the temperance movement, from a paternalistic one to one dominated by working-class voices, also suited the ideals of both Curwens; at times they claimed to be the nation's largest publisher of temperance music. However, while the temperance movement did appreciate the aid given by Tonic Sol-fa, the notation was never as central to drinking reform as the Curwens wished and advertised it to be.

Chapter 3 investigates the much stronger link between Tonic Sol-fa and foreign evangelical missions. Focusing on mission fields in Madagascar,

this chapter analyzes how missionaries used the notation as a way to control indigenous Christians by instilling within them a particularly British sense of devotion and deportment, consequently limiting more individualistic musical expression. It shows how the Dissenting Protestants who evangelized in Madagascar used the Curwens' notational system to promote the imperialist message of "Christianity and Civilization" so prevalent at the time.

Both of these chapters consider moral philanthropic movements that the Curwens publicized, championed, and supported directly – either through publication subventions or direct fundraising. In chapter 4, we consider women's suffrage, which called upon Tonic Sol-fa as well as an arsenal of other musical and artistic methods. Studying the impact of Tonic Sol-fa on the women's suffrage movement will allow a contrasting exploration of a movement that the Curwens and their Tonic Sol-fa organizations did not support because of suspicion that it would sabotage the idealized domesticity espoused by the notation's supporters – but a movement that successfully used music in general and Tonic Sol-fa in particular to its own ends – the suffragette movement. This last study will be especially valuable, as it will both provide a counterpoint to the Curwens' often grandiose claims for Tonic Sol-fa's influence and demonstrate that the power of this sight-singing method grew beyond the Curwens' limited imagination and paternal morality.

An epilogue examines the decline of Tonic Sol-fa's influence – parallel to the decline in influence of the volunteer moral reform movements and philanthropic organizations – that occurred after Spencer Curwen's death in 1916.

The main means of dissemination for the Curwen Press were their journals: the *Reporter*, the *Musical Herald*, and the *Musical News and Herald*. Through these, the Curwens positioned Tonic Sol-fa as a method "employed by almost all philanthropic societies,"⁷ publishing method books and music for missionaries, temperance workers, children's educational movements, and the like. Frequent testimonials by moral reformers, as will be shown in chapter 1, described first how valuable music in general was to their movement (either as a propaganda tool or as a character-correcting exercise), and second the extreme necessity of presenting music to the people through the easiest, most efficient, and most natural method – Tonic Sol-fa. However, it is clear that one cannot always trust the veracity of items in these magazines – the Curwens, after all, had a

⁷ *Reporter*, June 15, 1876, pp. 189–90.

Preface

xxi

specific moral agenda to further through their publication. Their growing business in Tonic Sol-fa and later staff-notation publishing meant that their philosophical positions, as well as their composers, editions, and concerts, had to be portrayed as both important and successful, even when this required bending the truth. Kaufman is undoubtedly correct when she refers to the *Reporter* as “propaganda.”⁸ Most of the time, the veracity of the claims themselves is not as important as the fact that the Curwens made them. Still, the hyperbolic nature of the writing has necessitated a great deal of cross-referencing with sources deriving from the reform movements themselves: first their periodicals (including *Common Cause* for British women’s suffrage, the *British Temperance Advocate* for temperance, and the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* for foreign missions), and then the numerous primary materials in the archives each movement. These will, hopefully, cut the polemics down to size.

For the most part, this study examines music of a much more ephemeral nature than the usual musicological or music-theoretical monograph. Choral music of the nineteenth century is often regarded as a stepchild of the more “important” instrumental and operatic traditions, partly because of its association with amateur performers, partly because of its foregrounding of melody at the expense of motivic development. Yet choral music was the most important musical medium for the great majority of the populations of both English- and German-speaking countries. In nineteenth-century Britain, oratorios and secular cantatas had far greater currency than symphonies, and choral societies provided many individuals with their first taste of democratic organization. The widely perceived “improving” nature of choral music was disseminated to the widest possible audience. At the end of the nineteenth century, this caused a backlash in taste against choral music (explored in detail in chapter 1), which was aided by early sound reproduction technology, as the recording of massed voices was initially much more difficult to master than the recording of solo voices or most instruments. The tastes of the turn of the last century are with us today.

Consequently, this study, limited as it is, is an attempt to illuminate parts of this sociological and historiographical darkness. Its light is joined by others, to be sure – among them Karen Ahlquist’s recently completed *Chorus and Community* and a number of theses and dissertations, including Sarah Kaufman’s “John Curwen and the Impact of Tonic Sol-fa

⁸ Kaufman, “John Curwen and the Impact of Tonic Sol-fa,” chap. 3.

on the Choral Movement in England.”⁹ All show that popular choral music in general and Tonic Sol-fa in particular are rich fields, deserving a great deal more investigation. Therefore I make no apology that this study largely ignores the acknowledged vocal giants of the age, and that I will spend a great deal more time discussing the context of ephemeral music than the aesthetics of masterpieces. The great growth of a working- and middle-class audience, which solidified the canon into its present instrumental-dominated state, was not initially driven by the appreciation of symphonies, string quartets, or even instrumental sonatas. In the Anglophone world, the mass audience which initially made art music popular (and later created the infrastructure that allowed “popular” music to overcome it in terms of societal acceptance and importance) was reared on ephemeral music, and educated through the Curwens’ Tonic Sol-fa and a handful of similar methods. The philanthropic movements examined here clarify these social transformations: when using music as an aid to publicity, fundraising, and the like, they did not immediately reach for the instrumental or operatic masterworks for support and aid. Instead, they relied on the people to sing what the Curwens continually called the “People’s Music”: simple choral works that, according to the slogan of the Curwen Press, were “Easy, Cheap and True.”

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⁹ Karen Ahlquist, ed., *Chorus and Community* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Kaufman, “John Curwen and the Impact of Tonic Sol-fa.”

Preface

xxiii

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