

## CHAPTER I

*Dissenters, philanthropists, and the world  
of Tonic Sol-fa*

And as we have not yet arrived at the time in our history, when, like Alexander the Great, we shall have to sit down and weep because there are no more fresh fields to conquer, I think we may safely go on in the old paths, and look favorably on all efforts to increase our band of teachers. There are tens of thousands in our Ragged Schools, Orphan Asylums, and similar institutions, to whom a few lessons would be a great blessing. Such places appeal to our missionary spirit, and not a few of us can look back upon happy hours spent in instructing those who were unable to make any other return than the thanks clearly discernable in bright eyes and cheerful faces. Think of the work to be done in the improvement of singing in Sunday Schools, Bands of Hope, Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, Good Templar societies, Congregational Psalmody, to say nothing of public evening classes at many large houses of business where classes might be organized for the benefit of the employees.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation above typifies the great enthusiasm Tonic Sol-faists evoked in their quest to make Great Britain a more Christian and musical place. Classical allusions aside, it boasts of the great accomplishments of the sight-singing method due to the enthusiastic “missionary spirit” of Tonic Sol-fa adherents. Yet William Dobson does not concentrate on the great musical accomplishments already made apparent by the systematic promotion of the movement by 1874 – twenty-one years after the establishment of a regularly issued journal for the method, and three decades since John Curwen took up the cause of increasing musical literacy in Great Britain. Instead, the focus of this passage is the moral reform associations that Tonic Sol-fa was at that point aiding – the tens of thousands being taught the method in Ragged Schools and orphanages – and the fertile fields yet to be exploited: “Sunday Schools, Bands of Hope, Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, Good Templar societies” – every one of them a field of “rational recreation,” and every one a paternalistic organization for “reform by distraction.” Only after

<sup>1</sup> William Dobson, “Tonic Sol-fa Propagation,” *Reporter*, May 1, 1874, p. 138.

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cycling through this list of hoped-for reform via women, children, and temperance workers does Dobson mention sacred music – congregational psalmody.

To understand Tonic Sol-fa in the Victorian era is to explore the great moral philanthropic movements of the age. Tonic Sol-fa became a force propagated by the few in hope of the reform of the many. This reformation, at times, looked to music to aid the great moral causes of the day, both as a sort of propaganda – musical entertainment to attract membership and donations for moral reform organizations – and as a moral end in itself. When used in the correct fashion, Tonic Sol-faists believed, music would greatly aid the moral improvement of men, women, and children; the mid-century conviction that proper lyrics and proper music sung in a proper fashion would create and sustain a highly moral individual was sometimes questioned, but never discarded. For John Curwen, Spencer Curwen, and Tonic Sol-fa's other propagators, music was only a means to a moral end. Proper music would help create a sober, hard-working Protestant Christian society of rugged and thrifty individuals. Two years after the death of John Curwen, Spencer Curwen lauded the moral force of the movement in no uncertain terms, in the process baldly admitting that music was of secondary importance to this moral mission:

The Tonic Sol-fa movement touched almost all efforts for the elevation of mankind. By simplifying musical notation, the art in its domestic and religious aspects entered thousands of homes which had before been without music. Thus the method was the indirect means of aiding worship, temperance, and culture, of holding young men and women among good influences, of reforming character, of spreading Christianity. The artistic aspect of the work done by the Tonic Sol-fa method is indeed less prominent than its moral and religious influence.<sup>2</sup>

In every effort undertaken by John Curwen, Spencer Curwen, and Tonic Sol-fa's many enthusiastic followers, the improvement of the individual – and consequently society as a whole – was paramount. The mission was particularly well suited to the times, as many believed in music's power, and the Curwens could emphasize this popular conviction in their magazines:

I believe in music as I believe in pictures for the masses. It draws people together; oils the wheels of the social system, and very much facilitates the intercourse between a pastor and his flock... I am convinced that the influence

<sup>2</sup> John Spencer Curwen, *Memorials of John Curwen* (London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1882), pp. 73–4.

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of music over the poor is quite angelic. Music is the handmaid of religion and the mother of sympathy. The hymns and hymn-tunes taken home by the children from church and chapel are blessed outlets of feeling, and full of religious instruction – they humanise households all through the land... Teach the people to sing, and you will make them happy; teach them to listen to sweet sounds, and you will go far to render them harmless to themselves, if not a blessing to their fellows.<sup>3</sup>

The passage, printed in the *Reporter*, though not written by either of the Curwens, testifies to music's perceived power in the eyes of the sight-singing practitioners. The claims are many: first, that the movement was one for the “masses” – the working- and middle-class individuals of Victorian society; second, that music helped make the people better Protestant Christians (since it would spur them to attend “church and chapel” – a common phrase of the time referencing members of the Church of England [Anglicans, who attended churches] and the Dissenting Protestant sects [Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Quakers, Unitarians, etc., who attended chapels]); and third, that as an “oil,” it was paternalistic to the core, teaching members of the working and middle classes independence, but also showing them their place within the rigidly hierarchical class system that continued to solidify throughout the nineteenth century. As such, the influence of music would both “render” the working and lower middle classes “harmless to themselves” and lead them to work for the betterment of others. Tonic Sol-fa gave people the tools to learn music for improvement and distraction and strongly encouraged them to do so through methods considered proper and decorous, especially by the Dissenting evangelical founders of the movement.

In this book, we will explore how the Curwens positioned Tonic Sol-fa in the moral discourse of the era. They left no moral question untouched; at various times, the Curwens prescribed Tonic Sol-fa as a palliative for poverty, slavery, prostitution, alcoholism, and excess of all kinds; as a means of improving children's education; and as an aid to evangelization, missionary work, and the culture of domesticity. They always considered music a simple solution to highly complex problems. For example, briefly consider the plight of children in the mid nineteenth century. When John Curwen began publishing the *Reporter* regularly in 1853, there was no unified system of children's education in Great Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Hugh Reginald Haweis, “Music for the Masses,” *Reporter*, September 1884, p. 345; quoted from Haweis's *My Musical Life* (London: W. H. Allen, 1884), p. 118.

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Schools existed but were organized along strictly “voluntary” lines by a specific educational institution for wealthy Church of England families (such as the elite “public” schools Eton and Charterhouse); by church parishes; and by Dissenting chapels or individuals catering predominately to the growing middle classes, but occasionally including working-class children for the sake of charity. Such institutions could not, because of their limited resources, consider the educational needs of the children in the growing urban areas, especially orphans and the children of the working poor. Yet during the nineteenth century, there was a growing belief that education was necessary on two fronts: first as a way of creating a more skilled workforce, and second as a way of instilling culture in and improving the character and morals of the individuals being educated.<sup>4</sup> At this time, however, government-sponsored education was considered to be impossible; any tax-based program was highly suspect, as the mid-century Victorians believed centralized government to be little less than corrupt tyranny.<sup>5</sup>

Ragged Schools – charity schools created on a strictly voluntary basis that relied for funding on the benevolence of local individuals – were one mid-century answer to this problem.<sup>6</sup> Between 1841 and 1870, hundreds of such schools were founded, principally in Britain’s industrialized cities. These schools were organized predominantly by local Dissenting evangelicals, whose imprimatur was consequently present in all aspects of their operation. The schools were simple: reading, writing, and basic

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, *The Social Conscience of the Early Victorians*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Religious beliefs further complicated this issue. Dissenters particularly suspected that grants from a centralized government would favor Church of England sponsored programs or even require strict adherence to Church of England doctrine. Such opposition meant that the establishment of centralized education in Great Britain did not occur until 1870; it was not fully funded by the state until 1902. See Richard Helmstadter, “The Nonconformist Conscience,” in *The Conscience of the Victorian State*, ed. Peter Marsh (Syracuse University Press, 1979), p. 170.

<sup>6</sup> The literature on Ragged Schools is varied and piecemeal; history of education scholars made inroads in the 1960s and 1970s, but there remains a great deal of work to be done. The standard essays are H. W. Schupf’s “Education for the Neglected: Ragged Schools in Nineteenth-Century England,” *History of Education Quarterly* 12 (1972), 162–83, and Claire Seymour’s *Ragged Schools, Ragged Children* (London: Ragged School Museum Trust, 1995); additional specialized studies include T. S. Ridge’s *Dr. Bernardo and the Copperfield Road Ragged Schools* (London: Ragged School Museum Trust, 1993) and Kathleen Heasman’s *Evangelicals in Action: An Appraisal of Their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), chap. 5. In addition, there is one thesis-length study on the movement: D. H. Webster’s “The Ragged School Movement and the Education of the Poor in the Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D. thesis, Leicester University, 1973). These works merely begin to scratch the surface, especially since the archives of the national Ragged School Union remain largely intact, with a complete set of the movement’s periodicals, at the Shaftesbury Society. The historical discussion that follows here is drawn from all these sources.

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arithmetic were the focus of the subjects taught. Reading centered on learning passages from the Bible, so that the children would learn “to read the word of God and to understand its simple truths” in the hope of fostering the “civilization and conversion of an entire segment of the urban poor.”<sup>7</sup> The schools were also segregated by religion. Because they used an English translation of the Bible as their principal text and often concentrated on it so much as to take all available class time, Catholics did not feel welcome in them. Children attended when they were able, depending to a large extent on their work schedules. By 1869, there were 195 schools offering classes for poor children during the day, 209 that offered classes in the evenings, and 272 Sunday schools.<sup>8</sup> That year, there were perhaps 30,000 students in Ragged Schools in London alone.

John Curwen, an evangelical Dissenter and a person highly interested in the education of children, singled out the Ragged Schools early in his promotion of Tonic Sol-fa as a potential market for the notation. The first regular issue of the *Reporter* made mention of the method’s use in London’s Ragged Schools; between 1853 and 1863, frequent announcements of Tonic Sol-fa classes for Ragged School children and their teachers appeared in the magazine, as well as notices of concerts given by Tonic Sol-fa singers to aid the funding of Ragged Schools.<sup>9</sup>

In 1864, John Curwen moved from such passive reporting of Tonic Sol-fa philanthropy into active fundraising. In January, he placed a notice in the *Reporter* soliciting funds to help him provide Tonic Sol-fa music to Ragged Schools.<sup>10</sup> He suggested that all adult Tonic Sol-fa singers’ classes start “penny subscriptions” (where each member of a class would donate a penny to the cause) and published the names of the classes and the individuals who donated any sum toward the Ragged School Music Fund.<sup>11</sup> The amount of money raised was small (less than £9 by the end of September), but contributions came from throughout Great Britain: classes in Hull, Alford, Canterbury, and Bristol as well as many in greater London donated to the cause.

<sup>7</sup> Schupf, “Education for the Neglected,” pp. 162–4.

<sup>8</sup> Seymour, *Ragged Schools*, p. 7. The labor law reform of 1847 allowed children over nine years old to work ten-hour days.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the *Reporter*, 1853, p. 1; October 1855, p. [73] December 1859, p. 181; February 1861, p. 29; July 1863, p. 107; August 1863, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> *Reporter*, January 1864, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> Notices appear monthly in the *Reporter* from May 1864 until the end of the year, and then occasionally until 1873.

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With even this little cash on hand, John Curwen began inviting applications for the distribution of the music to Ragged Schools, in a manner typical of his evangelical tastes:

Mr. Curwen is now open to applications from Ragged Schools, Industrial Schools, Reformatories, Refuges, &c. He can offer “Arranged Reporters, No. 1,” the “Temperance Course,” and Hickson’s “Moral Songs,” complete, for *one penny* each; and “Songs and Tunes, 1st Course,” and “Songs and Tunes, 2nd Course,” for *one half-penny* each. The teacher must be one whom he knows to be competent, or is well recommended to him as such. The teacher must undertake that the books shall be thoroughly used throughout, and not only in favorite tunes. The application must state the number of children in the school who will join the Singing-class.<sup>12</sup>

The music John Curwen offered the schools was simple two-, three-, and four-part songs with words espousing proper deportment. The “Temperance Course” (which will be described in detail in chapter 2) juxtaposed songs decrying the evils of drink with songs extolling the glories of nature. Hixon’s “Moral Songs” were tailored to children and promoted typical evangelical Christian ideals: that children should say their prayers, live cleanly and industriously, and always respect their parents and betters. The “Courses” referred to in the statement were step-by-step instruction methods for Tonic Sol-fa, condensed versions of John Curwen’s *Standard Course of Lessons*. Applicants paid a nominal fee to cover postage and part of the printing costs; the subventions from Tonic Sol-fa classes accounted for the rest. John Curwen and the Tonic Sol-fa Association claimed no profit from the venture.<sup>13</sup>

John Curwen’s action in respect of the Ragged Schools was typical of his approach to any charity or moral reform movement of the Victorian age. Once a problem had been identified and a potential solution offered by evangelical Christians, he sought to put the resources of Tonic Sol-fa and its adherents behind it, doing so because Tonic Sol-fa was both a musical and a moral engine. He did so to the exclusion – implicit or explicit – of conflicting religious groups, in this case Roman Catholics. Ragged Schools are thus a good philanthropic organization to illustrate briefly the typical process of the Curwens and the Tonic Sol-fa movement, but only a starting point. Unlike the social reform movements discussed in the remainder of this book, the problem of children’s education

<sup>12</sup> *Reporter*, May 1864, p. 250. John Curwen repeated the offer with these terms frequently throughout the period; see, for instance the *Reporter*, August 1865, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> *Reporter*, August 1865, p. 117.

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had largely disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century. The 1870 Elementary Education Act provided state funding for education, albeit within the confines of a particularly Victorian compromise: most of the voluntary religious schools could remain in existence and receive state funding to increase the availability of education to all children in the area. Those districts with too few educational institutions were authorized to found school boards to organize children's education. Ragged Schools, predominantly evangelical in organization but not usually affiliated with a specific church or chapel, fell by the wayside and closed. The promotional apparatus and funding John Curwen gave to these institutions were no longer necessary (he stopped collecting for them in 1873), and he focused his energies elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

The problems surrounding temperance, missionary work, and women's suffrage were far more controversial than children's education, and permanent solutions for those problems were not instituted in the nineteenth century. In the case of the temperance movement, some local and national legislative action, including early closing and increased regulation, was taken, but the movement's ultimate purpose – ridding Great Britain of all alcoholic drinks – was never achieved. Similarly, Christianizing the entire world through Protestant evangelism was a political and in some ways a moral failure, bound up as it became with politics and the empire. And while British women were ultimately granted the vote, the strictures of prejudice they fought against, using Tonic Sol-fa as one of their weapons, still exist to a great extent today. But in all three of these cases, as in the Ragged Schools movement, Tonic Sol-fa found a way into the contemporary conversation.

The primary reason for the Curwens' conflation of music and moral reform was their Dissenting beliefs: both were raised in the Congregational Church and held strongly to an evangelical interpretation of Christianity. Charity and reform were central to this belief system. In the remainder of this chapter, we will therefore introduce the major themes of Victorian philanthropy and Dissent, which will inform the discussion of the specific reform movements investigated in the rest of this book. Briefly describing the rise of sight-singing in the middle of the century, we will investigate how both John Curwen and Spencer Curwen justified music as a moral force and related that to the ideal of

<sup>14</sup> The *Reporter* did, however, continue printing regular descriptions of Ragged School Tonic Sol-fa classes, concerts of the Ragged School Union, and biographies of prominent Tonic Sol-fa individuals involved in the Ragged Schools cause. See the *Reporter*, November 15, 1873, p. 343; May 1, 1875, p. 148; June 15, 1876, pp. 189–90; and March 1879, p. 55.



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the “People’s Music” – morally correcting and socially improving. This will require a three-part discussion, in which we will first note the origins of Tonic Sol-fa itself and describe its place in the music of Victorian Britain. Then, building on the history of the movement and the biography of its founders, we will identify the aspect of their characters that drove them to embrace such social reform – what has been called the rise of the so-called Dissenting Conscience, particularly regarding charity and philanthropy. While this “Conscience” evolved greatly between 1840 and 1916, John and Spencer Curwen held certain elements of its philosophical ideal in common. Finally, to show how the Curwens and members of the Tonic Sol-fa movement viewed music as a moral force, we will discuss their attempts to appropriate certain segments of vocal music, including oratorios and cantatas, as a form of edification. As will be seen, Spencer Curwen held much more liberal views on this matter than his father but until his death continued to promulgate the Dissenting belief in the powerful influence of music. For both Curwens, music was an ideal tool with which to promote moral philanthropy, but that promotion needed a great deal of paternalistic guidance.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TONIC SOL-FA

*Tonic Sol-fa Notation*

In the most basic sense, Tonic Sol-fa is simply the conversion of solmization – substituting syllables for note names – from an oral system to a printed system. Example 1.1a, the Bach chorale “Befiehl du deine Wege,” transliterated into “Commit Thy Way, O Weeper,”<sup>15</sup> reveals most of the basic elements of Tonic Sol-fa notation. The score, as in staff notation example 1.1b, is divided into measures. In the case of this song, the four vocal parts each have their line of notation. For the notation, each of the syllables of the normal solfège scale (doh, ray, me, fah, soh, lah, te) is abbreviated to the first letter of the syllable (d, r, m, f, s, l, t). The system was based on “movable doh” – that is, the primary scale of the composition would always be read as beginning (degree 1) with the syllable “doh.” Tonic Sol-fa identified the key of the composition at the beginning (in this case, since the key is D, doh equals D, as indicated by “Key D” in

<sup>15</sup> *Christian Classics Library*, “Paul Gerhardt as a Hymn Writer and His Influence on English Hymnody,” [www.ccel.org/ccel/hewitt/gerhardt.h\\_185.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hewitt/gerhardt.h_185.html) (accessed February 17, 2007). There is a note on “Paul Gerhard” (as the editors of the *Reporter* call him) at the foot of the first page of the hymn (*Reporter*, July 1857, mp, p. 49).



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**"COMMIT THY WAY, O WEEPER."\* KEY D. M. 66.**

[J. S. BACH's Chorales,† No. 80. Words adapted from PAUL GERHARD, by JAMES S. STALLYBRASS.]

TREBLE.	: m	l	: s	f	: m	r	: —	⌢ m	: t
1. {	"Com -	mit	thy	way,"	O	weep	-	er,	The
	To	thine	Al -	migh -	ty	Keep	-	er,	Who
ALTO.	: d	d	: d	d . r	: r . d	d	: t <sub>1</sub>	d	: r
3. {	"Trust	al -	so !"	for	'tis	boot	-	less	To
	Th' Al -	migh -	ty's	arm	is	doubt	-	less	Full
TENOR.	: s	f	: s	l . s	: s	l	: s	s	: se
5. {	"And	He	shall	bring	it"	nigh		thee,	The
	Tho'	now	it	seem	to	fly		thee,	Thou
BASS.	: d	f	: m	l <sub>1</sub> . t <sub>1</sub>	: d	f <sub>1</sub>	: s <sub>1</sub>	d	: t <sub>1</sub>

  

DA CAPO.												
{	d <sup>1</sup>	: d <sup>1</sup>	t . l	: t	l	: —	—	: d <sup>1</sup>	t . l	: s	l	: t
	cares	that	fret	thy	soul, }			2. "Un -	to	the	Lord,"	who
	makes	the	worlds	to	roll; }							
	d . r	: m	m	: — . r	d	: —	—	: m	r . f	: m . r	d	: f
	mur -	mur	and	fore -	bode; }							
strong	to	bear	thy	load. }				4. "In	Him"	hide	all	thy
{	l	: l	l	: ne	l	: —	—	: l . s	f . l	: d <sup>1</sup> . t	l . s	: f . s
	goal	thou	long	hast	sought, }							
	shalt	ere	long	be	brought }							
{	l <sub>1</sub> . t <sub>1</sub>	: d . r	m	: m <sub>1</sub>	l <sub>1</sub>	: —	—	: l <sub>1</sub>	r	: m	f . m	: r

  

{	d <sup>1</sup>	: —	⌢ d <sup>1</sup>	: s	l	: s	f	: f	⌢ m	: —	—	: d <sup>1</sup> f	m . f	: s
	guid	-	eth	The	wind,	and	cloud,	and	sea;			Oh,	doubt	not
	f	: m . r	m	: m	f	: m	m	: r	n <sup>i</sup>	: —	—	: s <sub>1</sub>	s <sub>1</sub>	: s <sub>1</sub>
	sor	-	row,	And	bid	thy	fears	good	night;			He'll	make	a
	l	: s . f	s	: d <sup>1</sup>	d <sup>1</sup>	: f <sub>i</sub>	l	: l	l	: —	—	: l <sub>r</sub>	d	: r
{	glad	-	ness,	From	night	to	clear -	est	day;			Where	doubt,	and
	d	: —	d	: d	f . m	: r . n <sup>i</sup>	r . m	: f . s	l	: —	—	: t <sub>1</sub> t <sub>1</sub>	d	: t <sub>1</sub>

  

{	f	: m	r	: —	⌢ m	: l <sub>1</sub> m	f	: m	r	: s	m	: —	—
	He	pro -	vid	-	eth	A	path	-	way	too	for	thee.	
	l <sub>1</sub> . t <sub>1</sub>	: d	d	: t <sub>1</sub>	d	: f <sub>i</sub> d . t <sub>1</sub>	l <sub>1</sub> . t <sub>1</sub>	: d	d . l <sub>1</sub> : t <sub>1</sub>	d	: —	—	
	glo -	rious	mor -	row	To	crown	thy	head	with	light.			
	d . r	: m . d	l	: s	s	: d s	f	: s	s	: s	s	: —	—
{	fear,	and	sad	-	ness	Shall	all	have	pass'd	a	-	way.	
	l <sub>1</sub>	: s <sub>1</sub>	t <sub>1</sub> u <sub>1</sub>	: s <sub>1</sub>	d <sub>1</sub>	: f <sub>i</sub> d	r	: m . f	s	: s <sub>1</sub>	d	: —	—

Example 1.1a: J. S. Bach, "Commit Thy Way, O Weeper," *Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, July 1857, mp, pp. 49–50

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Soprano      "Com - mit thy way," O weep - er, I he cares that fret thy soul, To thine Al - migh - ty

Alto

Tenor

Bass

6      S.      Keep - er, who makes the worlds to roll      "Un - to the Lord," who guid - eth The

A.

T.

B.

11      S.      wind, and cloud, and sea; Oh, doubt not He pro - vid - eth A path-way too for thee.

A.

T.

B.

Example 1.1b: Staff notation transcription of Bach’s “Commit Thy Way, O Weeper”

the upper right-hand corner). The “fixed doh” system was also used at the time; example 1.2 compares the two systems using a C-major scale and a D-major scale. As both fixed doh and movable doh systems in the nineteenth century were based on C major as the starting point, for the key of C major both are the same: for example, the note E, the third degree of the scale, is represented by the syllable “me” in both. Once we change