

JOHN CURWEN: THE MAN WHO TAUGHT THE WORLD TO SING
And why his sol-fa system remains in use (two hundred years after his birth).

An illustrated lecture presented by Dulais Rhys, Ph.D

‘Doh a Deer’ is one of *The Sound of Music*’s most well-known songs, with opening words that also include ‘ray’, ‘me’ etc. We know these music note-names – as **sol-fa** or **sofège** - today, not only because of this song but also thanks to **John Curwen**, an amateur musician who was born in England in 1816 (2016 is his bicentenary).

Though a naturally gifted teacher, Curwen tried – and failed - to teach his class of children a simple song. To find a solution, he researched ‘how to teach singing’ and discovered the methods of music teachers such as John Hullah, Joseph Mainzer and in particular, **Sarah Glover** (1765-1867).

All of these educators taught singing using a similar – but varying – system called **sol-fa**. Curwen then set about amending and combining the best practices of these methods, especially Sarah Glover’s snappily-titled 1835 book: ***Scheme for Rendering Psalmody Congregational***. Curwen also improved her sol-fa singing chart, renamed it a ‘Modulator’, remains in use today and which will be used during this presentation.

Contrary to popular belief, John Curwen did not ‘invent’ sol-fa but his **Tonic Sol-fa Method**, still used today, was the result of extensive and meticulous research into the work of other sol-fa proponents. He then went on to lecture widely and publish many books on sol-fa, how to teach singing as well as other music and educational topics.

At first, Curwen’s new sol-fa method was not universally accepted, especially by some traditionalists and instrumentalists, whose staff (5 line) system of music notation had been in use over many centuries. Eventually, Curwen’s Tonic Sol-fa Method was adopted by government educationalists and led to the formation of the Tonic Sol-fa Society and the opening of a Tonic Sol-fa College in London in 1879.

John Curwen was a dedicated minister, teacher, author, lecturer and publisher whose unwavering commitment to these causes led to over-work that took a toll on his health and his untimely death in 1880, aged 63.

This presentation outlines Curwen’s life, how his Tonic Sol-fa Method evolved and how it is used in a **singing class** - audience participation is non-optional!

Presentation duration: c1 hour

Speaker Fee: \$250

Expenses: a contribution toward travel costs is appreciated.

Thank you for considering my proposal and please contact me for more information.

Sincerely,

Dulais Rhys, Ph.D

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REFERENCES, RECOMMENDATIONS & REVIEWS

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