

JOHN CURWEN AND THE TONIC SOL-FA MOVEMENT.



FEW persons have done more in their day to popularise the spread of good music than John Curwen, the parent of Tonic Sol-fa. His method and notation have now become the means of teaching many thousands to sing who otherwise would never have learned to use their voices in an intelligent manner, and though

meeting with constant opposition from staunch upholders of the Staff Notation, the system continues to gain ground, and claims as its friends not a few of the leading lights of the older method.

The story of Mr. Curwen's life is inseparably connected with the growth and spread of the Tonic Sol-fa movement. One of the sons, John Spencer Curwen, on whom now devolves the leadership, has collected some interesting materials bearing on the life and work of his father. As the compiler himself remarks, the memorials are necessarily imperfect and fragmentary. Mr. Curwen was during his whole life so occupied with the work of his choice, that he found no time for letter-writing or the keeping of journals which might have afforded more ample materials for an exhaustive biography. Sufficient, however, has been made available for presenting a clear and comprehensive view of the life and work of one who did so much for the cause of popular music, and who happily lived to see his efforts crowned with success.

John Curwen was born at Heckmondwike in Yorkshire, on November 14, 1816. When he was only six years of age his mother died, and the father with his two sons removed to Cottingham, near Hull, shortly afterwards leaving for London. Here he remained only four years, having been appointed pastor of a chapel at Frome, in Somerset. After attending school at Frome, John Curwen entered college, being then in his seventeenth year. His fellow-students at this time speak of him as a kind, free and cordial companion—hard-working and systematic in all his movements. His student life lasted six years, and at its close he was appointed assistant minister at the Independent chapel, Basingstoke, at the very low salary of fifty pounds a year. It was while labouring here that he became engaged to Fanny Vanner, who, however, died of consumption before the engagement had long continued. Her death was preceded by that of her sister Nelly, of whom John Curwen wrote a charming and touching memoir—his first attempt at authorship.

In 1841 Curwen removed to Stowmarket, where he

filled the office of co-pastor at an Independent chapel, giving occasional public lectures on Sunday school methods and plans. Up to this time he had manifested no great interest in what afterwards became the work of his life, but having a great favour for children, and knowing the power of singing, he now began to exert himself in order to make it more effective in his Sunday school.

It was in his search for a system of notation that would prove easy and comprehensive to the minds of children that Mr. Curwen was introduced to Miss Glover. This lady kept a small school at Norwich, and had been teaching her pupils to sing by a method of her own, founded on the use of a primitive modulator on which were printed the syllables of the scale. Judging from the results produced by Miss Glover, Mr. Curwen decided to adopt her method, and giving up his charge at Stowmarket, and removing to Reading, where his father was located, he spent much time in modifying and improving the newly discovered notation. He made experiments with various classes of children, and even at this early stage what have since remained the chief principles of the method were developed and found successful.

Accepting a call to a chapel at Plaistow in 1844, Mr. Curwen continued his labours for the propagation of the Tonic Sol-fa system. He did not address himself to artistic coteries or to the musical profession, but to the clergy, day-school and Sunday-school teachers, temperance and mission workers. He showed that he was in possession of a simple method which almost any one could teach, and encouraged those who were desirous of cultivating singing to learn the system, not only with a view of improving themselves, but also that they might begin teaching others. Shortly after his settlement at Plaistow, Mr. Curwen compiled the "People's Service of Song," and about the same time wrote for "Cassell's Popular Educator" a series of papers on the Sol-fa system, which have enjoyed an enormous circulation.

As the result of much over-work Mr. Curwen's health showed signs of giving way, and in 1856, obtaining leave of absence from his congregation, he went to Germany, where he remained for seven months. On his return, much improved, he occupied himself between the elaboration of a system of harmony for Sol-fa students, and the building of a new church. The first step he took in the teaching of harmony was to gather together a small number of students at Plaistow in 1857, and give them a course of instructions. Mr. Curwen's first work on the subject was issued in 1861, and immediately after he commenced "correspondence classes" for teaching harmony. This plan for reaching distant students proved very successful, and has since been largely adopted by various institutions.

The year 1863 was in many respects an important one in the history of the movement. Mr. Curwen at this time resolved not to countenance by his support

or notice any concerts in which the singers had not taken some certificate of competency. Hitherto a slight knowledge of the Staff Notation had been compulsory on every pupil taking a Sol-fa certificate, but now the test was made optional. It has remained so ever since, but it is a noteworthy fact that two-thirds of all the certificated students have passed it. At this time also Mr. Curwen became his own printer by setting up a small printing office at Plaistow. The printing of his notation with its unusual signs had caused endless trouble to the printers, and he felt that it would be advantageous to have immediate control of the printers and educate them to his own work. It may be interesting to note that the first attempt to represent classical music in the letter notation was made in the issue of Romberg's difficult music to Schiller's "Song of the Bell."

In 1864, finding that he could no longer do justice to his congregation and the Tonic Sol-fa movement, Mr. Curwen resigned his charge at Plaistow and devoted his whole time to the propagation of the system. In 1866, Mr. Euing of Glasgow founded a music lectureship in the Andersonian University there, and invited Mr. Curwen to undertake it. This he did, and for three months of the winter 1866-67 he resided in Glasgow, giving two lectures weekly. In 1867 the Tonic Sol-fa Association Choir, under Mr. Proudman, brought joy to the hearts of the leaders of the movement by carrying off the prize in a choral competition at Paris.

Mr. Curwen now occupied himself closely with literary work. The new "Standard Course," "How to Observe Harmony," and "Musical Statics" followed each other, and were soon in the hands of all sol-faists. In 1874 he was presented by his friends with a life-size portrait of himself and a sum of £200. The money, with characteristic generosity, he devoted to the establishment of two scholarships in the Tonic Sol-fa College. After this his literary time was spent on the "Teacher's Manual," one of the most valuable and exhaustive works which ever came from his pen. Mr. Curwen had meantime taken on himself the responsibility and work of the foundation of a College for the training of Sol-fa teachers. After much labour and

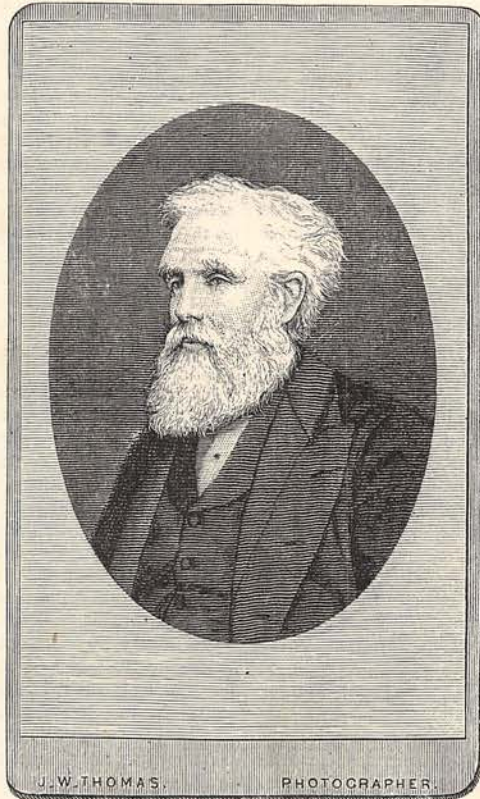
patient lecturing in aid of the funds, the College was established, and on the strength of a few scholarships began its first term of study for teachers in 1876. A suitable building was, however, still required for properly conducting the work of the College, and Mr. Curwen continued to make appeals for money to this end, offering £1,000 himself if £2,000 more could be raised. In 1879 a bazaar, which realised a large sum, was held in London, and in the same year the building of the College was commenced, Mr. Curwen

laying the foundation-stone. It was ultimately opened amid much rejoicing, by the late Earl of Kintore, and every year students from all parts of the country eagerly avail themselves of the classes held within its walls. The year 1880 brought great grief to Mr. Curwen by the death of his wife. Yet he struggled bravely against himself, seeking the companionship of friends as the best means of escape from preying thoughts. But as in life the affectionate couple were always near each other, so "in death they were not divided." Mr. Curwen, although apparently in good spirits, continued to grow feebler, and on May 26th, 1880, he died peacefully in the house of a friend at Manchester.

Thus ended the life of one of the most pious of England's great men. "Not for an age, but for all time" was the life-work of John Curwen. His was a noble

cause producing noble results, and the good which he did "lives after him" in a very emphatic sense indeed. The deeply religious character of the man is made doubly apparent in the many letters to his family and friends which find a place in the "Memorials" by his son. In the midst of all his public work in connection with the movement, he never seems to have lost sight of the fact that this world is not all, and that a better is in store. What a noble example this is for those who fear that the claims of true religion cannot be satisfied while a great national work is being done! Mr. Curwen's work was a great one, but he had at last completed nearly all the tasks he had set himself. "The plough was in the last furrow when the night came down upon him and he went home."

JAMES C. HADDEN.



JOHN CURWEN.