
Letter to the Editor

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Sir,

The Kodály Concept and its Pedigree

In response to Dr Rainbow's letter (*BjME*, July 1991) it seems that in the first place, Curwen's handsigns for accidentals – i.e. the raised *f* and *s* and the flattened *t* – are somewhat obscure. There are no illustrations of them in Curwen's 'Manual Signs' from his *Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching Music* (1880) and only a discussion on them, which is not very clear, is given in his *Teacher's Manual of the Tonic Solfa Method* (1875). They do not appear in other contemporary books such as *Mrs Curwen's Pianoforte Method* (1886) or Edward Mills' *The Training College Music Course* (1886), although both these contain Curwen's diatonic handsigns. The authorised text book for the Tonic Sol-fa College's Music Certificate Examinations (Evans & McNaught, 1898) merely carries a description. The Field-Hyde's *The Singing Class Teacher*, published in 1914 – 34 years after Curwen's death – includes what would appear to be the first published illustrations of the raised *f* and flattened *t*, but it is quite clear that that set of diatonic signs are not the same drawings as those in the above-mentioned publications.

On discussing the question with Cecilia Vajda as to who changed the Curwen handsigns in the Kodály Concept she has this to say:-

The use of handsigns in teaching the Concept has the musical aim that even a beginner's response to handsigns should create a phrase instead of a collection of individual sounds, thus the handsigns should indicate legato singing. This aim changed the handsigns of 't' so that, for instance in a 'l-td' motif the twisting of the hand for 't' should be avoided. The flattened 't' = 'ɸt' developed naturally from this new handsign of 't', which subsequently eliminated the old sign for 'f' – being the same. The sharpened 'f = #' version becomes clear and logical in our teaching, and the legato treatment can be maintained even in chromatic motion.

However, since our solid basis is the pentatone, these signs show how the gaps

in the pentatonic scale can disappear, each in either way: 'dd't-l' or 'd'-htl' and 'mf-s' or 'm-#fs'.

These sharpened or flattened notes enrich the children's music vocabulary, not necessarily as chromatic notes but as notes in certain modal tonalities. The Dorian mode can be the 'r' scale but can also be expressed as the 'l' scale with '#f'. The Mixolydian, i.e. the 's' scale, can also be sung as the 'd' scale with 'ht'. The folksongs of various modal characters decide which way they should be expressed – this task is not a theoretical but a musical one. Incidentally, the passage from Curwen's *Teacher's Manual* which Dr Rainbow quoted to illustrate that Curwen 'approved' final notes other than 'd' in modal tonalities is not an approval but merely a statement that such tunes are available in the East. It is strange that, in this context, Curwen made no mention of the wealth of British folk song. As to who changed the handsigns – it was the countless teachers who taught the folk songs.

After the second world war more and more teachers started teaching the Concept using genuine folk music as its basic material. They taught Aeolian folk songs but also composed-songs in which the '#s' leading-note occurred in the minor. (The sharpened 's' = '#s' – also shows clarity and logic in the Hungarian version.)

When solfège teaching was introduced for would-be instrumentalists in the so-called 'Music School Organisation' – a new formation after the war – the above-mentioned techniques started spreading faster. All the changes happened with Kodály's knowledge – he was always available when a teacher wanted to bring a new idea and wanted to discuss it with him.

When my studies started at the Liszt Academy's Department of Education (equal to the Music Department of a British University) I was shown there the Curwen handsigns. After the war, when I did my teaching practice, I found the above-mentioned changes in the work of many teachers, amongst them a nun who taught in a convent school near the Liszt Academy. Kodály highly praised her work and I, personally, learned so much from her. She is still alive while many others, who also introduced changes, have died.

In her forthcoming book, *The Kodály Way to Music*, Volume 2 (for Secondary Education) Cecilia Vajda is devoting space to the changed handsigns and to modal tonalities.

Yours truly,
Gillian Earl