

CHORAL MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

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Church music is that music which serves a worshipful purpose in a religious meeting. The Random House Dictionary defines worship as "reverent honor or regard paid to God or a sacred personage. . . ." In Psalms we are told, "Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (29: 2). And in 2 Nephi we read that we should worship not only the Father, but the Son as well:

Believe in Christ, and deny Him not; and Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before Him, and worship Him with all your might, mind and strength, and your whole soul; and if ye do this ye shall in nowise be cast out. (25: 16, 19)

If we can accept these ideas, it follows that the music associated with worship, in order to fulfill its reason for being, must enhance such feelings if already present in the worshiper, or, if not, to help create them. Conversely, a piece of music which of itself seems to relate to circumstances not associated with worship, or which could more effectively be used as a love song or an inclusion in an operetta should probably be avoided for use in a worship service. (There are, of course, other functions for music besides that of worship in various of the Church-related meetings, but the main thrust of this statement has to do with that type of music to be used in meetings primarily associated with worship, or that segment of other meetings in which a worshipful atmosphere is desired.)

Texts which are poorly conceived, in which the language is not lofty and eloquent, cannot be expected to elicit a worshipful response. Although there are cases in which master composers have clothed ordinary texts in music so glorious that they have been lifted far above their usual possibilities, as a rule, text and music must be equally fine if they are to enhance the worship experience.

Music plays a significant role in the worship service. The members of the congregation cannot easily ignore it—they are usually involved in it either as listeners or participants. Because of this involvement, they have definite reactions to it: they may feel themselves ennobled by it, they may tolerate it as a habitual if not particularly rewarding part of the service, or they may experience boredom or even antagonism because of its inappropriateness or carelessness of performance. Every effort should be made to ensure that church music will ennoble and lift the worshipper; anything less is unacceptable.

In the music sung by the choir the congregation is tacitly involved because the choir is a representative group from the congregation charged with the responsibility of defining and expressing particular musical and verbal ideas for the congregation. Likewise, the vocal soloist leads the listeners to whatever the potential of the song may be, whether it be musical doggerel with a "sacred" text or a sublime

utterance like "Make Thou Clean, My Heart, from Sin" from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Performers must assume responsibility for the highest degree of excellence of which they are capable, not only insofar as the presentation itself is concerned but also with regard to the selection of the material. The God who is the center of our attention deserves the best we have to offer.

If we are to have a significant choral tradition in the Church we must develop our own musical expression as well as take advantage of the great Christian choral tradition. Composers within the Church should be encouraged to express themselves, so long as their expression is disciplined by adequate musical understanding and training. If we are to develop a genuine musical heritage the desire of members to contribute to the body of indigenous music must include musical background and training sufficient to guarantee the necessary quality. Composers of music for the Church should have a background in music theory and practice equivalent to at least two years' study in a reputable college music department. This study should include both melodic and harmonic writing, musical form, and background in music practice from the Renaissance through the twentieth century. The texts employed by these composers must be doctrinally sound, and should be taken from the scriptures, addresses or writings of Church authorities, or, if from other sources, be of genuine literary merit. Such standards will not guarantee suitability, since it is possible to observe all the rules of harmony and musical structure, select a worthwhile text, and still produce a sterile result, but they are at least a starting point.

The number of capable LDS composers seems to be increasing. Their work will find artistic expression in more and more church-related performances with the coming years. With the further development of the Church Music Department, together with its various corollaries, it is hoped that many worthy compositions by competent LDS composers will soon be used in our church services.

Although it is desirable to use material by competent LDS composers when available, limiting our musical experience to this still relatively small number of compositions and neglecting the vast treasury of great church music of the past five hundred years would be manifestly unwise and would greatly narrow the possibilities for uplifting experiences through music. We must overcome the popular misconception that any piece of music written by a "famous" composer is automatically stuffy, uninteresting to any but the highly-trained, or too difficult for practical use. The fact is that the great composers have written music which is beautiful to the untrained ear and simple enough for the most representative choir or congregation to master. Because of the skill of these composers, their compositions are likely to avoid the awkwardness and tiresome characteristics of less-gifted writers, shown by difficult voice-leading, poor word-setting, too widely-spaced voicing, unrealistic ranges or tessituras (that is, the area in which the majority of the notes for a part lie), dynamics which are too demanding, unimaginative or trite harmonic and rhythmic settings, and lack of good formal design.

In choosing a piece of vocal or choral music, the first consideration should be the text. If it is inadequate, there is little reason to look further, unless, as pointed out earlier, the work under consideration is by a composer whose fame may make the piece worth investigating. (For example, because of the pressures of time, Bach sometimes was forced to use inadequate texts.) The text must, of course, agree with Church doctrine and, as indicated earlier, have genuine literary merit. There is, by the way, a great need for good choral writing which deals with the Restoration.

Serious church musicians should examine a considerable volume of music each year in order to make wise selections as well as to refine their own musical tastes. Many publishing houses are glad to supply examination copies for this purpose, but requests should be as specific as possible. In addition to such source materials, the Stake Music Libraries and the Church Music Department music lists should be used extensively in making selections. In many areas of the Church, choral reading sessions are being held on a somewhat regular basis to acquaint church musicians with suitable repertoire.

In choosing music, a primary consideration should be the composer's imaginative and meaningful use of musical materials. Mere show and bombast and empty reiteration of musical clichés do not constitute musical or spiritual values. An alert church musician looks for such things as effective use of minor or other musical modes, interesting modulations, refreshing melodic and harmonic devices, and logical musical structure.

One of the most objectionable characteristics found in a great deal of so-called "sacred" music is sentimentality. The mawkish, over-ripe harmonies frequently encountered in music dealing with worship belie the sturdy, vigorous, straightforward honesty of the Gospel itself, just as does much Church-related art. The poverty of invention and the operetta-like mannerisms of composers who rely on sentimentality seem all too often to be geared to salability rather than to sincere musical and spiritual values. Nor does the inclusion of a text having some reference to Deity automatically make an otherwise "popular" composition "sacred." (In his excellent article in the *Ensign* for April, 1973, Alexander Schreiner refers to this danger for those who desire to write hymns. Aspiring church-musicians are urged to read that article in its entirety.) Over-use of dominant or diminished seventh chords, excessive chromaticism, etc., give music a sentimental flavor unsuitable for sacred purposes. A good method for determining harmonic appropriateness is to cover the text, and while playing the work ask oneself dispassionately if the music might better be used as a love song. Such music brings to mind the Savior's stern confrontation of the Pharisees and scribes:

Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, The people honoureth me with their lips but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. (Mark 7: 6, 7)

Sentimental church music is a carry-over from the latter part of the nineteenth century—the so-called "Romantic" period in the arts—when its most maudlin characteristics found acceptance in the churches, and it has taken refuge there since.

Many of the "gospel-songs" heard on evangelical radio programs, frequently utilizing piano and electronic organ in simultaneous accompaniment, are typical of the kind of "worship" music which seems to deny Deity the dignity and respect they deserve. The argument for this type of church music is that it is the kind to which "everyone relates," but experience has shown that quality in music, as in a good suit, wears best. Continually appealing to the lowest common denominator of musical taste among church-goers is unfair to those who have good taste, and to those who do not it denies the necessary and desirable opportunity for edification.

It should be remembered, however, that music need not be esoteric, complex, or difficult in order to be "good." The view that the more dissonant, unpleasant, or avant-garde a work, the better the music is nothing but musical snobbery. A good

Church composer is able to create imaginative and well-crafted music while respecting the limitations of amateur performers—and listeners.

The performing forces should also be considered. The notion that the only suitable material for a choir is for four or more parts is entirely erroneous. While it is true that four-part writing is the norm for the choral organization, there is much excellent material available for SAB (soprano, alto and bass or baritone), SSAB (two soprano parts, alto, and bass or baritone), two-part male and women's voices, and unison. It is also well to recognize that many works conceived for a large choir cannot be effectively performed by a small choir. Nor should works with extensively divided parts (as SSAATTBB) be attempted by most ward choirs. It is much more impressive and effective to do a simple work well than to perform a too-difficult work unsuccessfully. This does not mean that the group should not be challenged, however. The potential within the choir should be determined and developed to the fullest.

Choir directors should examine the overall effectiveness of the work before settling for an arrangement, and this includes choral settings of solo pieces as well. Many choral pieces written for one medium, such as SATB, are not nearly as effective, say, for women's voices, because of the need for reconstructing the chords and the differences in tonal concept from the original.

Church musicians should not shy away from the unfamiliar if examination indicates the work has merit. Too often the pendulum swings in the direction of the "tried and true" rather than toward material which may have an unfamiliar though not necessarily difficult ring. The exposure of a choir and congregation to such a little masterpiece as, for instance, "The Seven Words of Christ on the Cross" by Heinrich Schutz, a short cantata for the Easter season which is well within the capabilities of most ward choirs, is enough to allay all further doubts about "unfamiliar" music. There are countless equally exemplary works which are readily available.

Just as it is to be expected that our sacrament services contain doctrinal sermons which lift us toward God, so should it be expected that our music reinforce such experiences. It is inconsistent that an inspiring sermon should be preceded or followed by music which is trite and banal. The obligation is as great for the one as for the other.

Moreover, music in the Church should never be self-subsisting; to be effective it must be closely associated with the rest of the service, and it follows that Church musicians are therefore involved in serving, not in being served. Musical selection and performance should be such that the highest possibilities of the service may be realized; music should be more carefully selected and as well prepared as a thoughtfully and prayerfully prepared sermon. Musical messages should coincide with the theme of the meeting or sermon, necessitating that selections be made after that theme is established.

Music in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is on an exciting threshold; its obligation is great, but the rewards not only for those directly involved in it but for the entire membership are manifold. The God whom we worship deserves nothing less than our best efforts—in serving Him and in praising His name.