

# THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE REORGANIZED CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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Sharing the love of music as the common heritage of Mormonism throughout the world, the Reorganization has experienced a steady growth in the use and development of music by its membership. Congregational singing has always been an integral and important part of the Saints' worship, so much so that the church has long cherished the image of being "a singing people."

Beginning in 1861 with the publication in Cincinnati of *The Hymnbook*, edited by Emma Smith, a continuous effort has been made to keep the church's hymnody up-to-date by its reflection and expression of spiritual and cultural growth. This has resulted in the publication of no fewer than six hymnbooks plus a youth hymnal, children's hymnals, a series of camp and fellowship songbooks, several national hymnals and the present official *Hymnal*, published in 1956. The first of a series of supplements to *The Hymnal* appeared in 1974 and the second in 1975. The Supplements are for the purpose of field testing "hymns and spiritual songs" and include a variety of congregational music to be used in different settings in the life of the church. The variety of these supplemental hymns recognizes that the Saints reflect many different tastes and hold somewhat different religious concepts. The Preface to the First Supplement states, "Within this rich variety, unity can be achieved by showing diversity of need and cultural background. As the Saints share in this pluralism of musical and poetic ministry, each may find his or her own spiritual awareness enlarged and enriched." The series of Supplements will eventually lead to the publication of a new official hymnal or hymnals.

The quite indiscriminate use of reputedly poorly played instrumental music in the early years of the Reorganization resulted in a revelation of 1887, which states:

. . . nevertheless, let the organ and the stringed instrument, and the instrument of brass be silent when the Saints assemble for prayer and testimony, that the feelings of the tender and sad may not be intruded upon (D & C 119; Reorganized edition).

A capella congregational singing is still a strong tradition in the Reorganization, the uniqueness and quality of which has attracted the attention of a number of non-RLDS writers and musicians.

The desire to use "Restoration" hymns, written by members of the church has always been a stimulus to improve the church's hymnody with original texts and music. As each succeeding hymnal committee has sought those hymns and tunes which best express the spiritual and cultural progress of the church, such grassroots efforts have been hard put to meet the challenge, especially when matched against the great number of hymns from the Christian church of the last two centuries. Presently, and in common with many religious organizations, the church welcomes the contributions of good hymn and hymn tune writers who have the spiritual insight and developed skills of poetry and music to match the needs of our day. Perhaps too much writing is being drained off by the commercial-religious-



Auditorium chorus and orchestra, RLDS World Headquarters

entertainment field and other non-religious, but more profitable, avenues of publication. Nevertheless, and despite its small numerical size, the RLDS Church has in the past nurtured several excellent hymnists whose contributions have been a source of strength and inspiration, constantly challenging and stimulating the current grassroots effort. Conversely, however, there is an increase in the number of composers of non-congregational music within the church. A few have had their works published by recognized music publishers, but all face the problem of producing anthems and other works set to "Restoration" texts, there being a very small market outside the church for such specific texts. Getting quality music materials published and dispersed throughout the church is fraught with financial and other risks, but the development of cheaper and faster methods is opening new and encouraging possibilities.

The distinction of having the first choir in the Reorganization goes to the St. Louis Branch, which organized their choral group in 1864. A choir sang at the Plano, Illinois Conference in April, 1871, and one was organized soon after the Saints returned to Independence in the late 1800's. As missions moved to branch status, the desire to enrich worship with the aid of special choral music resulted in the organization and growth of the General Choir Movement. By 1916 this had grown to the point where the Stone Church Choir of Independence, Missouri, augmented by singers from the community, performed Handel's *Messiah* in what was to become the first annual presentation of that work. This chorus shortly became known as the Independence Messiah Choir, and its yearly performance was eventually to be presented on a nationwide radio network. For the past several years, the annual performance of the 250-voice Messiah Choir, accompanied by an orchestra of 30 professional musicians, largely from the Kansas City Philharmonic, and using professional soloists (both RLDS and others) has been performed and taped in November and broadcast on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. The 1974 performance was heard over 1750 stations throughout the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the South Pacific and the West Indies.

With the appointment of Franklyn S. Weddle as the first full-time director of the church's Music Department in 1944, choral music took on a new emphasis. Such successive specialized groups as the Radio Choir and the Auditorium Chorale

provided an impetus to good choral singing and its place in worship through radio broadcasts, recordings, and personal appearances. This program is continued by the Auditorium Chorus, an 80-voice choir which forms the core of the Messiah Choir as well as presenting other choral works, programs, and special services, including some of the services at the biennial World Conference. The Chorus is under the direction of Harold Neal, who since 1969 has been the Director of the Music Department and the conductor of the Messiah Choir and the Auditorium Symphony Orchestra.

The progress of choral music on the local level has been neither steady nor even. The development of near-professional choirs in many high schools and colleges has often resulted in a decline of interest and participation in the smaller church choirs. In a day when demands on time and energies are almost overwhelming, the small choir often has to exist on less than an hour's practice a week, as compared with the three or four weekly rehearsals of college choirs and almost daily rehearsals of public school groups. Nevertheless, the choir movement has not declined to the degree predicted, and in some areas of the church there is an actual increase in the number of choristers giving regular and devoted service to the church. This can be accounted for in part at least by the fact that there has been a de-emphasis on the concert style performance as opposed to a more directly functional performance in the evolution of the corporate worship experience. Other factors such as training and involvement in the ministerial experience and the rich fellowship derived from this more fundamental devotional approach, account for the resurgence of choral activity in some areas. Many members of these small choirs from throughout the world represent their groups in the mass chorus which sings for most of the services of the biennial World Conference.

In the realm of classical music, perhaps the best known RLDS contribution is the weekly broadcast of the Auditorium Organ Program played by Dr. John Obetz on the 109-rank Aeolian-Skinner organ installed in the Auditorium in 1959. Reaching the listening public through 190 prime stations throughout the nation, the program has received praiseworthy critical reviews and represents the church on a cultural level presently unobtainable by any other means.

In addition to this weekly organ broadcast program, a staff of organists performs daily half-hour recitals for visitors to the Auditorium during the summer and on Sundays during the winter. The Music Department also sponsors a series of four or five organ recitals by world-renowned organists during the year. At the biennial World Conferences, daily organ recitals were presented on the Stone Church pipe organ from 1948 to 1958, and have been continued on the Auditorium Organ since 1960.

This emphasis on quality pipe organ construction and playing has stimulated an interest in small church pipe organs and a growing number of local congregations are installing such instruments as an aid to their worship. This has, in turn, stimulated a number of young musicians to study the organ seriously. Strangely enough, because of the RLDS tradition of donating such services, the church has not yet been able to take full advantage of this development. The present situation finds the church with two types of organists. There are many who have studied the piano somewhat, and of necessity, transferred to the organ, but seldom have any particular desire to improve their level of accomplishment. A newer group, inspired by the Headquarters organ program, consists of many who have worked or are presently working on advanced degrees in organ performance and church music.

Unfortunately, these musicians find little professional outlet in the church. Some secure college positions and thus are able to continue their service as time permits; others marry but continue to improve their skills and also serve on a non-professional basis; some become high school music teachers and are also used on a volunteer basis. It is perhaps inevitable that the church will continue to see many of its fine young organists make their contribution in other parts of the Lord's vineyard.

Non-keyboard instrumental music has played an important part in the life of the church since Kirtland and Nauvoo days. Violins, sleigh bells, tambourines, horns, trumpets, trombones, drums, oboes and cornets were used with differing and sometimes indifferent skills during the early years of the Reorganization. In the 1920's the general Sunday School orchestra was in full swing. A special edition of *Autumn Leaves*, dated April, 1921, contains pictures and accounts of no less than five Sunday school orchestras, two district and reunion orchestras and one extended family orchestra in England, numbering 45 members. The edition did not include one organized in 1926, which served in London, Ontario, Canada, until the Second World War dispersed its members into the armed services. Many of these musicians were brought together to accompany the Oratorio, "The Course of Time," composed by the Australian musician-composer-patriarch John T. Gresty and performed at the Centennial services in the Auditorium in 1930. The present Walnut Park Congregational Sunday School Orchestra in Independence, Missouri, boasts a 61-year history of continued service.

In 1944, a number of former Sunday school musicians were auditioned to form the Independence Little Symphony, which eventually became the Independence Symphony Orchestra, co-sponsored by the church and the community. Its repertoire consisted of the standard concert and symphonic works and featured soloists were from many parts of the country. The orchestra was discontinued in 1968 due to economic pressures of maintaining what was by then a sizeable budget. In 1969 the Auditorium Symphony Orchestra was organized on a voluntary basis. The orchestra consists of some 60 community musicians, mostly church members, and others from the metropolitan Kansas City area, plus a select number of high school students. It plays four concerts a year, including a concert at the biennial Conference.

Evidence of the importance of music in the life of the Reorganized Church is the fact that among the first offerings in 1895 of the newly-founded Graceland College at Lamoni, Iowa, were courses in the theory, history, and performance of music and the organization of a choral group. The College continues to feature music as one of its most important offerings, not only as a four-year course for future music teachers, but as electives for students in all disciplines. Graceland's two choral groups, the Concert and Chapel Choirs, and its band and orchestra have grown in quality and size over the years and make regular biannual tours throughout the church as well as providing a cultural milieu of unusual richness found in relatively few liberal arts colleges of similar size and location.

The general level of the appreciation of "quality" music and its importance in the spiritual and temporal life of the Saints is still very much on a par with that of the general population in all areas of the World Church rather than on the higher level hoped for by the church's leaders. Nevertheless, members are responding in increasing numbers to the ferment of choral, vocal and instrumental activity built on the ever deepening and enriching seedbed of its congregational music.