

A Song Worth Singing

Mormonism and Music: A History by Michael Hicks (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xii, 243 pp., \$24.95.

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ANYONE WHO HAS WORKED WITH Mormon music has likely experienced the frustration of being unable to learn much about its past—such things as composers, performers, and institutional policy and practice. Collections of folk music, histories, and hymnals contain tantalizing hints of stories to be told, but until now, no one has attempted to draw all of the information together into a coherent narrative. Michael Hicks has produced an impressive study and in the process has shown Mormon musical history to be as fascinating and as instructive as any story in our past.

Hicks devotes half his book to the nineteenth century, when interactions between sacred and secular, and between the individual and the institution, were less strictly defined; and half to the twentieth century, when the Church has become more bureaucratic, and administration has become more centralized. Hicks's narrative identifies three recurring themes: "the will to progress versus the will to conserve, the need to borrow from outsiders versus the need for self-reliance, and the love of the aesthetic versus the love of utility" (p. x). These themes, played out repeatedly in all phases of the Mormon drama, underlie virtually every episode of music-making over the century and a half Hicks explores, from the early community enthusiasms for band music and home-composed songs to the latest at-

tempts at creating a hymnbook and a policy for music in worship.

Hicks's chronicle is immensely readable, well documented, and thorough. The notes alone would keep any reader busy following interesting side paths, and the index is complete and useful. The narrative itself sparkles with fascinating anecdotes, like the story of Levi Hancock's fife music causing Joseph Smith's dog to attack his own foot soldiers, fomenting a feud between the soldiers' commander and the Prophet (p. 55); and little-known facts, like the time someone set the Joseph Smith story to the tune of "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds," causing the First Presidency to speak against the mingling of sacred and secular styles (p. 140).

More important, however, is the perspective we gain from Hicks's descriptions of changes in Church personnel and policy, differences of opinion, and musical trends, and their effects on Mormon music decade by decade. From the Church's earliest days, the Saints have been interested in creating uniquely Mormon music, music that originates with them and expresses their values. The music they have created has ranged in style from the most esoteric academic to popular or sectarian. Likewise, Church leaders have set standards on appropriateness, ranging from allowing band music in worship services in the mid-nineteenth century to having the Tabernacle Choir sing more popular music in the mid-twentieth century.

Hicks closes with a timely discussion of the way the Church has treated musics of other cultures as it has spread worldwide. The current music committee should take note of the numerous times, documented here, when the academic and