

# Hallelujah!

*Angela G. Wood*

I TOOK MY VIOLIN and my music from the back of the car and listened to my heels tap on the asphalt as I walked across the parking lot. It was an icy December night, the sky so clear I could see thousands of stars. I had come to the Highland Park Ward to play with a small orchestra in a Christmas program. We were all amateurs, to be sure, semi-musicians who would be joined by the congregation singing carols. As I walked up the stairway to the chapel, I remembered our first rehearsal there a few weeks earlier.

The building had been cold and completely quiet that day. I had gone into the deserted foyer and, with my violin tucked under one arm, had needed both hands to pull open the heavy wooden doors to the chapel. I am a small person, but this door is so large and thick, it would be quite a job for anyone to open. In a moment, I realized that the experience of being within was worth all the effort the door required.

The room I entered was like no Mormon chapel I had ever seen. It was much, much older. The walls were of plain white stucco and spaced along them were small, recessed lighted areas. Each area looked like a glowing candle, a small pool of light illuminating the textured walls. The woodwork was the same beautiful dark brown as the large door, but what really captured my attention was the ceiling, which arched on and on, upward, curving to a magnificent apex. Just looking at it made me breathe deeply and filled me with a most unusual feeling of spaciousness, of vastness. It seemed to me that this chapel had room for anything. I noticed my fellow musicians in the distance at the front. Crowded into the small area between the stand and the

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first row of benches, with hardly enough room for the string players to draw a full bow, they arranged their music, tightened their bows, and tuned. I wondered why they were in such a cramped place, when there was so much space up above. Why didn't we all just float up and practice from the ceiling?

Tonight this same chapel would be full. Already a crowd was gathering in the foyer, friends talking beside a Christmas tree that gleamed with white lights. I could hear happiness in their voices, and though I didn't know any of them, I felt their warmth touch me as I passed. I went through the heavy doors and was surprised that the amazement I had originally felt was there for me all over again. I seemed to leave myself below on the floor and join a separate life in the space up above.

But I was an earthly twenty-eight-year-old woman. I found my seat with the orchestra and prepared myself for the program. I put my music in order, applied the rosin to my bow, and quickly played through the most difficult passages of Handel's "Messiah." Other musicians took their places all around me, and the room began to fill with those who had come to join our sing-in. It seemed to me that the room was also being filled with a rare sort of energy, and I wondered if it was because of the anticipation that comes with Christmas. We began with "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful."

I had never before enjoyed playing my violin or singing as I did that night. When we weren't playing, orchestra members joined the congregation in the carols. My stand partner was a man in his fifties, who had always been very gracious to me. This was the first time I had heard him sing, and as we joined in "Silent Night," I sang in only a whisper so that I could hear his beautiful tenor voice. "Silent night, holy night," he sang. "Son of man, love's pure light," and the trio of flutes hummed along.

There was a loveliness about the unfolding of our program that evening. The orchestra played "The Pastoral Symphony," and the congregation joined us for "The Glory of the Lord." Then readers quoted from the Bible Isaiah's prophecy of Christ's coming, the Annunciation to Mary, and the well-known verses in Luke telling of Christ's birth. Then we played and sang again.

Toward the end of the evening, we did an arrangement of "We Three Kings" that cast a spell over me. The only accompaniment was the organ and a mystical clarinet obbligato. An obbligato is a sort of complementary part written for a particular instrument that harmonizes with the melody but is usually pitched above it. The clarinetist was a large man with silvery hair. Haunting notes pealed from his instrument and floated out to enchant us all as we sang:

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume  
Breathes of life, of gathering gloom  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
Sealed in a stone cold tomb.

I had never heard more than the first verse of this carol, and I both sang and listened in wonder at each successive verse that night. As we sang the last, something came over me.

Glorious now behold Him arise,  
King and God and Sacrifice,  
Heaven sings, "Hallelujah!"  
"Hallelujah," earth replies.

Somehow this evening and this magical song opened to me a glimpse of life as I had never seen it before. As I sang along, I felt myself part of an exquisitely beautiful experience. My stand partner and I joined with full voices in singing this carol. We held between us, each grasping one side, a bright red program on which the words had been printed. I looked at him as we sang, and I looked over all the other singing faces in this chapel, all of us singing from identical red programs. I saw so much there: young faces and old faces, faces that were unlined and those that were careworn, faces of men and faces of women, faces that I knew but most that I did not. Our voices were so common, and my violin playing sounded thin and mistaken now, yet how well we performed was somehow unimportant.

It seemed to me that as we sang together of the birth and the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we each left behind our individual selves and became part of something else, part of some great wholeness, and for the first time in my life to that point, I too was part of this "oneness." For a moment, I had a rare glimpse of us all, so needy and so loving.

When I saw this, I stopped singing immediately. I bit my lip and had to remind myself to breathe. I felt like running far away, because what I had seen seemed too much. The program went on and I continued to play and to sing, but I felt somehow changed. We came to the end and finished with the "Hallelujah Chorus." I was already beginning to puzzle over what had happened to me. Hallelujah? I played along, Hallelujah!