

Now Let Us Revise

I asked five diverse scholars to answer the question: What would you change in Mormon musical practice? Here are their replies. —Editor

Brian Jones

“How did that even happen?” he asked me. We were both musicology grad students. He’d heard I was from BYU, was Mormon, and had played in a punk band. He himself loved punk rock and had left the Orthodox Jewish culture of his youth. He couldn’t conceive of a strict religious community like the one in which he’d been raised allowing teenage kids to remain in both the faith and punk culture. He interrogated me about this for a good ten minutes.

I guess the incongruity had never really hit me that hard. Admittedly, my teenage identification as a punk had been modest. I collected a few patches and T-shirts, wore high-top Chuck Taylors, and had a respectably varied punk- and ska-based CD collection. Sure, the radical politics and crassness of punk didn’t jibe with Mormonism writ large. But I’d always been attracted to the “weirder” bits of Mormon history and theology anyway.

Looking back, though, I can see why punk and Mormonism might have resonated in tandem. After all, I’d never found as much inspiration in the black-and-white rightness of Nephi as in the utter bad-assery of Samuel—an outcast who defiantly stood on the wall of a hostile city to scream against the wickedness of an entrenched power structure. Or in the story of Alma, standing on a hilltop outside of town, preaching to the poverty-stricken rejects of a self-righteous society. Clearly, neither punk

nor Mormonism held a monopoly on this peculiar embrace of social marginality, assertive physicality, and moral confidence.

I also think there's a more apt connection between the two sensibilities—one that relates to an aspect of Mormon music through which I've personally found deep conviction. A couple years back, as I was teaching a class on punk and hip-hop aesthetics, I came to a realization: I, for myself, couldn't decide whether punk rock was really about standing out or fitting in. About asserting your own subjectivity as an individual or falling in line with the group. The punk experience for me had always been about a sort of *communitas* with the scene, even if its ideology depended absolutely on a sense of individualistic liberation.

Music in Mormonism works somewhat the same. In an age where recording technologies have made music (often beautifully) objectified, portable, and personal, Mormon worship music finds its space among a collection of congregants sitting in a room, singing in harmony to the sincere-but-ragged accompaniment of an amateur organist and the meandering gestures of a nominal chorister. That's the setting for many of our most profound experiences of introspection and personal sacrament. Even if the core of the ritual is one of individual communion with deity, only the interpersonal fellowship of a corporate body of Saints can enable it.

That's when Mormon music means the most to me. A social, participatory action that enables discovery within the self. Which brings me to the original prompt for this essay: What one thing would I change about music in the Mormon church? I'll admit I find the question difficult to get my head around. Still, one experience distinctly comes to mind.

Soon after I arrived as a missionary in a modest town in northern New Zealand, I met a wonderful middle-aged woman who had just been baptized. One Sunday afternoon, a few weeks after her baptism, my companion and I dropped by her home. As we approached, we could hear muffled pulsing from an overdriven stereo within. We saw her through her front window, singing and dancing and alight with energy. Her feet bounced as if on hot coals, and her hands moved from high above her head to

down below her knees in a constant flittering motion. When she noticed we were there, she turned down the music and greeted us with an embrace, her cheeks still wet with tears. She proudly explained that the music we heard was from her previous Pentecostal church. “As much as I love the Lord and His true Church, I still need those moments of musical praise to keep me close to Him.” Her unfettered act of devotion warmed my heart, even as it made me a little sad that she couldn’t find anything even close to this experience in her new religious home of Mormonism. Her sincere communal praise to God, it seemed, had been relegated to a solitary, mediated reenactment.

So, while I don’t know how I’d want to go about *changing* music in the Mormon Church, I do wish we made room for more diverse modes of religious musical experience. Mormonism’s wholesale rejection of the Christian liturgy should allow musical flexibility in meetings and ritual, but it seems to have gone the opposite way into an atmosphere of narrow prescription. Joseph Smith saw the Church and its doctrines as universal. To me, that universality should afford ways that all sorts of people can gather together, worship, and commune with the divine.



Ellinor Petersen

The religious ideal and practice that I believe is ready for retirement is the notion that brass instruments and percussion have a “less worshipful sound” (the explanation in the handbook as to why we don’t presently enjoy them in our worship services). That’s because worship has very little to do with timbre, and very much to do with the spirit with which an instrument is played. It is as possible to perform music as a singer or a pianist or string player with a “less worshipful sound” than what is desirable in a Church setting, such as in sacrament meeting, if the performer is trying to bring attention to him- or herself, rather than bring glory to God, as it is with a brass instrument or percussion. (Speakers

at Church can also miss the point of a "worshipful sound" by not inviting the Spirit, or trying to be clever instead of bringing people closer to God).

It is also worth noting that we have various references to trumpets in the scriptures: we find trumpets as a sound that will be used in the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:52), that have been used to sanctify a fast and call a solemn assembly (Joel 2:15), and that provided the aural context for revelation—"the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice" (Exodus 19:19). That the prominent sound of trumpets should be incompatible with worship seems utterly false in the light of those scriptures. In fact, trumpets seem to have brought (and will bring) man and God together in remarkable ways.

Trumpets have often been used in times of war, and in 2 Chronicles there is a wonderful recounting of a battle, where the people of Judah looked back and saw that "the battle was before and behind: and they cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets" (13:14), thus signifying that the trumpets were helping them trust the Lord to assist them in the battle. Of course, trumpets were not only used by the covenant people of the Lord, thus showing that the instrument can be sounded with a worshipful intent, but also simply to rally people to combat.

In 2 Samuel 6:15, we read that "David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet," demonstrating how trumpets were associated with some of their holiest acts. In Leviticus 25:9, it is specified that the trumpet would announce the jubilant sound of the Day of Atonement throughout the land. It even appears that to be ready to serve the Lord, it is sometimes required to be able to make a sound through a trumpet (Revelation 8:2, 6, where all the angels are given trumpets, and prepared to sound). The sound of the trumpet has played the role of solemnizing events, bringing attention to holy events, and perhaps only those who can play it will be ready for certain important tasks in the Millennium.

In Psalms 150:3, David encourages us to "praise him with the sound of the trumpet," specifically identifying trumpets as

a proper sound for praising the Lord. And of course, we have Moroni playing his trumpet at the top of most temples. It is time we also hear some trumpets in our worship services.



Aleesa Sutton

It is interesting that the current grassroots advocacy for change in the Mormon Church is, for the most part, not focused on revolutionizing things, but instead restoring practices of former times. This is true whether the subject is a call for greater responsibility and priesthood participation for women or a call to return our focus to Joseph Smith's groundbreaking theological assertions (e.g., Heavenly Mother), including even a broader definition of marriage (see: polygamy). The same call for restoration needs to apply to our music.

Our sacrament meeting music (and that of most other LDS meetings) is all of a particular type and aesthetic: either hymns from our own hymnbook¹ or a very small number of other pieces, i.e. the unofficially sanctioned songs of living Mormon composers like Janice Kapp Perry and Kenneth Cope. As long as the song is slow, piano-based, and extremely emotive, the thinking seems to go that it is okay for church. Because of that sameness, our music fails to reflect the diversity of our membership. A return to a more inclusive musical canon needs to be made. We need, for example, to bring back classical music, once welcome in sacrament meetings, yet now all but forbidden. What is more urgent, though, is to broaden our essential vision of what our contemporary church music could be.

We are, thanks to steady growth in the last decades, a world-wide Church—one in which we say we value inclusion. Since there is room for everyone, as Dieter F. Uchtdorf has assured us,² there must be room for more kinds of music. That includes music written and performed by individuals representing more of the spectrum of human experience—more women, more people

of color and diverse cultures, LGBTQ-identified people, and so forth. Ideally, the church experience is about reaching people spiritually through diverse avenues. Paul reminds us that each part of the body is necessary and has something to contribute. Or in Uchtdorf's words: "The diversity of persons and peoples all around the globe is a strength of this Church."³ Surely that sentiment is applicable to our music and musicians. The church experience is about fulfilling our mandate to seek after anything lovely, of good report or praiseworthy . . . wherever it may be found.

We Mormons tend to have a rather myopic focus on those within our fold, whether we are talking about truth in the written word or in music. In seeking enlightenment, we very often neglect the rich tradition of writers, philosophers, composers, and saints who have lived and enhanced lives in every place and age. Yet no religion, not even Mormonism, can single-handedly capture all truth about God or the lived experience of seeking him. As John Taylor reminds us, "There were men [and women] in those dark ages [and other periods] who could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world."⁴ Surely our Mormon worship could benefit from incorporating more works from these kinds of individuals. Instead of finding comfort in the familiar, content with what we already know, we must open ourselves to more. This can only enhance our own spiritual growth. As Joseph Smith reminds us, "Thy mind, O man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss."⁵ This is as true of our musical experiences as it is of our theology.

I think the state of music in the Mormon Church reflects the state of the religion in general. Each Church hymnbook (there have been at least eight iterations in English thus far) reflects the time in which it was produced, serving the needs of its own generation of Saints.⁶ Some of the music in our current—thirty-five-year-old—hymnal remains inspiring, beautiful, and pertinent. Some of it, however, is similar to various long-standing cultural

practices that have ossified into dogma: assumed to be necessary, but actually irrelevant, unhelpful, and distracting from the task of living ever more Christ-like lives.

This stubborn adherence to long-established tradition does not leave much room for growth or alternative viewpoints. And without that space, as we have already seen, people we love are leaving the Church—in alarming numbers. Not since Kirtland has an exodus occurred like the one we are seeing now.⁷ In particular, we are losing many of the very artists, writers, and musicians who could provide the illuminating and exciting new kinds of music and other art we need. I fear this will continue unless there is more room made for diverse thinking and diverse expression in all aspects of our worship.



Kevin L. Barney

One Sunday about eight years ago, I plopped down in my regular pew for sacrament meeting and opened the program to see who was going to be speaking. At first I felt disoriented: I didn't see any names of speakers. I wondered if I'd forgotten it was a Fast Sunday. But it was the middle of July, so it couldn't be. And as I looked at the program more closely, I realized we were about to hold a musical testimony meeting.

I had heard of those things before, always with a twinge of envy, but never personally experienced one. My testimony is mediated more through music than anything else, so I had always wanted to participate. I plotted a couple of possibilities in case there happened to be a lull, as I didn't want to waste any time just sitting there. The two I came up with were "Be Still My Soul" (which we actually got to sing, as someone else picked it—I love the haunting Sibelius tune) and "Press Forward Saints" (I went to a fireside in Wilmette, Illinois, once and that was the opening song, and it was as if I had heard it for the first time, it was so powerful). But there was no need. It was a little bit slow getting

started, but then there was a rush as people went up to announce their selections and why they were meaningful to them.

Some of the many songs I remember us singing were “Love at Home,” “I Am a Child of God,” “Praise to the Man,” “Oh My Father,” “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” and “How Great Thou Art.” People kept going up to the stand, so the bishop stood up and said that only those already seated on the stand could make selections, and then we would close the meeting (we went about fifteen minutes over as it was). There were then about four people left; one was a brother who had gone up to give the selection of a disabled sister sitting on the back row, who was unable to go up and suggest it personally.

One of those last few people on the stand was a Primary girl, the daughter of our Ghanian Stake Presidency counselor. She very shyly approached the podium, pulled the microphone down so that we could hear her, and tentatively asked whether we could sing “If You Could Hie to Kolob.” And so, of course, we did.

I loved the service and so, being a blogger, I promptly wrote a blog post about the experience.⁸ The post received ninety-five comments. The early comments were mostly from people enthusiastically sharing their own experiences with such meetings. After a while, though, some comments began to suggest that at least some General Authorities did not approve of these kinds of meetings and via leadership training sessions had sought to put a stop to them.

I simply couldn’t imagine what the problem might be. My first guess was that they didn’t want these meetings taking the place of a regular fast and testimony meeting. But since ours had been mid-month, I figured we were good.

But no, some folks indicated they had received specific instruction against these kinds of meetings. One person even posted notes of the instruction that came in an email from their Area Seventy.

This is the email we received. It was sent from Elder [Name Redacted] to the stake presidents who forwarded it to my bishop who forwarded it to the ward council.

Presidents,

During a conference call for Area Seventy and Mission Presidents, Elder Oaks provided instruction that came from the Twelve to the Seventy concerning deviations in Church practices. Would you please help the bishops and branch presidents understand that these practices are not in harmony with Church policy?

Deviations and Innovations:

The Church program as officially outlined is wonderful and adequate. Deviations and innovations are not approved and can become distractions to the program. Some current tendencies are:

- Postlude hymns by choir or congregation following sacrament meeting.
- A choir prelude to sacrament meeting.
- Instruments accompanying the choir. A flute or a violin may be acceptable. Orchestras and large ensembles are not.
- Hymnimonies: (Singing your testimony.) Try not to embarrass people, but discourage this practice.
- Money Dances: (Dancing with the bride or groom to give them money, and similar practices.)

Thank you for your faithful service.

Elder [Name Redacted]

The reference to “Hymnimonies” seemed to be referring to a different practice altogether, of individuals during a regular fast and testimony meeting approaching the podium and singing in lieu of bearing testimony. I had never seen such a thing, but I live in the Midwest and who knows what goes on in the Great Basin? So I figured that musical testimony meetings were fine.

Sometime in the following year, however, I received notes from an Area Seventy training meeting that confirmed that at least some leaders did not approve of musical testimony meetings:

1. Bishoprics should stop having “hymnody” sacrament meetings. This is where one member gets up, tells why they love a certain hymn, the congregation sings that hymn, and then another member gets up and talks about another hymn, etc.
2. The congregation should not be asked to stand during the sacrament meeting rest hymn.

(My contact who passed this intelligence on to me added the following personal aside: “I organized this kind of sacrament meeting twice when I was in the bishopric—the meetings were deeply spiritual, and everyone loved them.”)

I was completely flummoxed as to why high Church leaders would have a problem with these kinds of meetings. I’ve come up with two (admittedly speculative) possibilities.

First, it is quite possible that the reference to “Hymnimonies” from the e-mail quoted above was indeed meant to refer to musical testimony meetings, and someone who didn’t quite understand the concept simply garbled the description. The linguistic form of the neologism is reminiscent of similar words that have been coined in the past to describe less than ideal forms of testimonies, such as “thankimonies” or “travelmonies.” In the comments to my blog post I wrote: “I think part of the reason that I find these testimonies especially meaningful is not just the music, but people don’t feel limited by the normal rote formulae. They tell great, moving stories about the significance these hymns have had for them.” For me the lack of rote formulae (“I know the Church is true,” “I know Joseph Smith/[current president of the Church] is a prophet,” etc.) made these meetings attractive. But perhaps leaders who disapprove of them find that troublesome.

Second, I cannot help but wonder whether it might be the grassroots, non-hierarchical origin of these kinds of meetings that galls certain leaders. These types of meetings were not a correlated program that came down from on high, but rather something that circulated and grew in popularity from the ground up. And it is possible that some leaders are just insecure enough to resent that the idea for these meetings, however spiritually powerful they may be, did not come from them.

Correlation was supposed to promote uniformity of practice in the Church, but the sentiment against musical testimony meetings has not been memorialized in the handbook itself. It remains a part of ad hoc leadership training from certain leaders only. And so we have a situation where there is a patchwork of compliance with the sentiment some leaders have expressed against musical testimony meetings. The one I experienced eight years ago has not been reprised. But I have no idea whether that is due to a leadership directive from above or because my local leaders simply have not thought to plan another one.

And so musical testimony meetings join other issues, such as allowing *only* hymns to be performed at Church (even by choirs and soloists), where the lack of a correlated, formal, written policy has resulted in a patchwork of different practices across the Church, depending on a spin of the roulette wheel as to whom one's Area Seventy's file leaders happen to be.



Brad Kramer

If I could wave a wand and change how Mormons use music for devotional purposes, I would conjure a change that draws deeply from existing patterns of LDS worship (especially in its more performative modes) while pushing into very unfamiliar aesthetic territory.

I take the public testimony as my model for worship here. Bearing testimony carefully balances general, culturally (and even literally) scripted forms with spontaneous particularity. Participants in a very real sense improvise within the constraints of a fairly tight performative model, not unlike jazz or other aleatoric forms. Testimony bearers adhere to standardized patterns of organization and verbiage, yet fill in the not-rigidly-scripted space of performance with highly personalized, situation- and context-specific content. Testimonies are reserved for a designated time and space, yet are not to be planned specifically in

advance. Speakers do not know what they will say, yet have a strong general sense of what they will say and know the specific performative constraints on how they will say what they only vaguely know to say.

It is a community ritual in the sense that it is enacted according to prescribed patterns, patterns to which participants are enculturated and trained through repetitive encounters with similarly constrained performances, but in which they also slowly develop a kind of effortless virtuosity through carefully attentive practice, usually from a very young age. The standards are shared, and occasionally articulated in the form of explicit, formal rules, but mostly they are implicit, sustained only through mutual attention, approval, and intelligibility. Testimony is a genre that forms a textbook example of those potent cultural phenomena that perfectly combine structural constraint with individual agency. We improvise, using the performative raw materials we have slowly mastered through practice, and within the generic and formal restraints and prescriptions that define the genre.

LDS musical devotion is never balanced in this manner. Musical performance-as-worship is more like the Sacrament prayers—with every element meticulously scripted and scrupulously followed in performance—than it is like a borne testimony or a public prayer. This is likely a function of aesthetics rather than ideology or doctrinal imperative. Music is the art form in Mormonism that is perhaps least welcoming to the modernist and post-modernist developments of the past century. Dedicated spaces of LDS worship might have room for a little Kirk Richards or Brian Kershisnik, but the angularity and patterned dissonance of contemporary concert music and New Music run glaringly against the aesthetic grain of Mormon sacred music, grounded so overwhelmingly as it is in the aural and performative sensibilities of the Anglican polyphonic tradition with occasional gestures to American Protestant hymnody.

What I am suggesting is not necessarily that the musical language of sacrament meeting worship be altered to incorporate the soundworlds of Ligeti or Mingus, but rather that new space be created for the purpose of encouraging and cultivating

a music-worship aesthetic grounded in the performative norms and values of testimony: collaboration, practice, formal structure balanced against individual improvisation. I'm thinking less in terms of jazz and more along the lines of the prose scores and highly involved, effervescent, meditative, collaborative, situationally particular, emergent works of, say, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Pauline Oliveros. Where the formal structure might be defined by a kind of script, or might just be the thing that emerges over time, like the quasi-script of the proper testimony. But a form nonetheless, one to which participants are gradually attuned over time, through careful attention and practice, in a context where the structure is filled in with spontaneous, individual and group performances, and where the raw psychic force of collaborative musical performance is channeled into a powerfully focused spiritual experience.

More than anything, I am calling on us to build something new together, to collectively participate in the emergence of a form, an aesthetic, and a power that is at once all new and distinctly, recognizably Mormon.

Notes

1. The 1985 hymnbook has a comparatively paltry selection of music (340 hymns compared to the Baptists with over 650, the United church with over 700, and the United Methodist winning the contest with over 900). While our hymnbook does contain an assortment of music—pioneer songs, simple American hymns, and English tunes courtesy of early converts, to name some—it is also limited compared to the range of other religions' hymnals.

2. D. F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>.

3. Ibid.

4. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England: Franklin D. Richards and Samuel W. Richards, 1851–86; repr. Salt Lake City, 1974), 16:197–98.

5. Letter from Liberty Jail, Missouri, 25 March 1839, in Manuscript History of the Church (Church History Library), C-1, pp. 900–06, 907–12.

6. M. Moody, "Latter-day Saint Hymnbooks, Then and Now," *Ensign* (Sep. 1985): <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1985/09/latter-day-saint-hymnbooks-then-and-now?lang=eng>.

7. P. Henderson and K. Cooks, "Mormons Besieged by the Modern Age," Reuters, Jan. 31, 2012, retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/31/us-mormonchurch-idUSTRE80T1CM20120131>.

8. Kevin Barney, "Musical Testimony Meeting," By Common Consent (Jul. 15, 2007), retrieved from <http://bycommonconsent.com/2007/07/15/musical-testimony-meeting/>. The description of the meeting above is adapted from that blog post.