

The Brick Church Hymnal: Extracts from an Autobiography

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New York, 1988–90: DIY

In 1988 I completed my bachelor's degree in music composition at BYU and moved to New York where I began a graduate program in ethnomusicology. I became disillusioned with the state of classical composition as I knew it at the time and felt that, although I wanted to continue to pursue my lifelong dream of being a composer, I would realize that dream more fully by enriching my musical study with music I had not yet encountered from other cultures. New York had the advantage of an underground jazz scene about which I knew as much as one could learn in those days from hanging out in the imports sections of record stores and reading esoteric music 'zines.

I arrived in New York and took up residence in a tiny windowless apartment owned by the university that was literally in Times Square. This was the pre-Disneyfication, red light version of said Square. After a year of 1,000-page a week (by such authors as Malinowski and Levi-Strauss) seminars, I realized that there was little room in this rigorous and demanding discipline for a person with my artistic aspirations. I was also unsuccessful in getting gigs, or in hooking up with similar-minded musicians. So, after getting married, I dropped out and worked for the next year as a bike messenger and a temp word processor while my wife completed her undergraduate degree. In one long-term temp

job, I found I had a lot of time with little to do but look busy at my computer. This was long before the internet or computers with graphical interfaces, so I had to come up with something to keep my fingers and eyes busy. I began doing things like designing staff paper, writing poetry, and typing, formatting, and printing the writings of others. I realized that in an office with computers, printers, photocopiers, and binding machines, I had everything needed to produce, even to publish, collections of writing and/or musical notation. All the infrastructure associated with publishing for centuries seemed to melt away. One heard about “desktop publishing” quite a bit in those days. It all seems so quaint now, but it appeared to me that we were on the cusp of a new DIY era. In recorded music, cassettes had eclipsed records owing to their relative cheapness, and portability (both of the media and their playing devices). It was easy to produce homemade cassettes and with a dual cassette deck, one could cheaply “mass” produce a cassette “release” on a small scale.

Nevertheless, the first cassette release of my own avant-garde jazz music garnered little interest and did not allow me to penetrate the downtown music scene. My wife, Lara Candland, was writing fascinating minimalist poems and stories, many of which were accepted for publication by Gordon Lish of *The Quarterly*. This pioneering journal shut down before it was able to put out the bulk of what Lish had accepted of her work. She continued to submit her work elsewhere, but had less success being taken seriously by other, more aesthetically timid journals.

I had also been going through my father’s (C. Thomas Asplund) unpublished and published poetry, typing it, and archiving it in computer files. He published poetry in *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, but had pieces rejected by them. I was fascinated and a little perturbed by the very detailed rejection letters that betrayed a lack of openness to work that challenged hardened aesthetic and genre definitions and assumptions. Lara’s rejection letters, though much shorter, contained similar messages: “We liked your work, but weren’t sure how it fits in,” or other words that seemed to say, “We’re not sure this is poetry,” etc. I had

certainly experienced the same with my own music in trying to share it with others. It seemed that getting published or getting gigs required creating the “right” stuff, stuff that fulfilled certain orthodoxies. Moreover, it seemed that the only non-official Mormon periodicals were scholarly and somewhat dissident in nature, while I had little interest in intellectual resistance but a great deal of interest in artistic expression that was radical in form and texture. I began to realize that I was part of a scattered group of marginalized Mormon artists—marginalized within the Mormon learned and artistic groupings because of geography and because of the orthodoxy of the oppressed, and within the larger secular community because of our identification with a weird religious minority. I also realized that most of the artists that I admired through history were similarly out of the mainstream. In fact, the history western music is mostly that of composers who had great influence over generations that followed, but who were out of the mainstream of their own time. Moreover, many of these artists practiced what we now call DIY. Two of my favorite poets, Blake and Whitman, are good examples.

During this time of searching and discovery, our Manhattan ward had a kind of crafts expo, where members set up booths or tables to show off things they did or made. I decided to “desktop publish” a prospectus of a new Mormon arts periodical called *The Brick Church* and drum up subscriptions at the expo. We got about twenty subscribers and ended up producing and distributing two issues of the journal, the first being a 'zine containing poetry and fiction, the second a cassette of eclectic independent music. The first issue was prefaced by something of a manifesto for Mormon DIY art that cited the home production movement during Brigham Young's administration and recent technological advances that, among other things, suggested a path for a more vibrant Mormon artistic flowering that did not seek legitimacy or precedent from the mainstream.

In my New York sojourn, I also encountered Michael Hicks's excellent *Mormonism and Music*,¹ which introduced me to Boyd K. Packer's talk at a 1976 BYU fireside that spoke directly to LDS

composers. The talk was, and continues to be, controversial among LDS musicians and artists in that it chides them for various reasons, including the age-old sin of bringing too much artifice into the liturgy. I particularly remember Hicks citing Mormon composer Merrill Bradshaw, saying that the talk “chopped the philosophical feet out from under me,” because Bradshaw saw his role as a composer to bring together the musical discoveries of all ages in the same way that the dispensation of the fullness of times was bringing together spiritual truths from all of human history. I found Packer’s talk as troubling as anyone, but I was also strangely inspired by certain statements such as “the greatest hymns and anthems of the Restoration are yet to be composed.” Also, “If I had my way there would be many new hymns with lyrics near scriptural in their power, bonded to music that would inspire people to worship.” And, after saying that inasmuch as the most impactful works of Mormon art, such as the sublime panels of C. C. A. Christensen and “I Am a Child of God” were created by artistic outsiders, he expected that precedent to continue. However, “the ideal, of course, is for one with a gift to train and develop it to the highest possibility, including a sense of spiritual propriety. No artist in the Church who desires unselfishly to extend our heritage need sacrifice his career or an avocation, nor need he neglect his gift as only a hobby. He can meet the world and ‘best’ it, and not be the loser. In the end, what appears to be such sacrifice will have been but a test.”²

This felt like a worthy challenge for a Mormon composer. I had experienced “composition” as it existed in my world to that point as the writing of esoteric, intricate scores to be played often poorly by oft-grudging technicians if they were played at all. A composer seemed to be judged by the extent to which his or her music embedded some kind of inscrutable cohesiveness within gratuitously incoherent or unappealing musical textures. This may seem unkind or disloyal to a discipline and a group of people that I love. I have since come to a much better appreciation of the scene and its aesthetic ethics. Nonetheless, the atonal hegemony within the American academy was still pretty strong at that time.

Packer's implicit challenge interested me in its directness and boldness. Could one simultaneously utilize *and* transcend conservatory training to produce pieces of music that had both the transformative musical power of the modernist music I was trained in and loved and the brevity, simplicity, and appeal of the great hymns of the restoration?

San Francisco/Oakland, 1990–93: Composer's Books

In 1990 we moved to the Bay Area where we began masters' degrees at Mills College, long a bastion of experimental music. Seminars were quite different. The emphasis was on giving students space to develop their own (sometimes very unusual) artistic voice. Often classes required virtually no outside work. During one such a class, the great Alvin Curran told us about a project he worked on during a period when he was not receiving commissions. He decided he would keep a book of compositions, that he would add a new composition each week. The pieces would be mostly flexible in their potential realization and rather simple, certainly not requiring virtuoso performers. The pieces were written principally to fulfill a work regimen and to fill a book, rather than for specific performances. Performances would occur later for which he could easily adapt pieces from the book. I also encountered Cardew's *The Great Learning* and other similar self-collected anthologies by Zorn, Billings, Braxton, Ashley, and Wolff.

Each of these composers created a book or books of compositions without specific performances in mind. The audacity and faith of these acts of creation were very inspiring to me. They provided a model for me to approach the challenges given by Packer and Kimball.³ I began composing hymns as an artistic and spiritual practice, rather than for specific academic assignments or performance opportunities. This gave me the freedom to write whatever I wanted or felt inspired to write. While in California, I continued to temp whenever I had free days, to make whatever money I could. After my coursework was done, I spent an entire year working as a secretary, squeezing in composing and rehearsing at odd hours when I wasn't working or commuting.

Seattle, 1993–1999: The Brick Church Hymnal

We then moved to Seattle where I began doctoral study at the University of Washington. After initially registering with a temp agency in Seattle, I began to feel that any more secretarial work would adversely affect my longer-term goals. I felt inspired to make a vow that inasmuch as I wrote a hymn each week, I would be delivered from the necessity of secretarial work. Lara and I were blessed for eight years with stipends and (non-secretarial) employment sufficient to sustain us until I obtained a full-time, permanent teaching job, after which I felt inspired to discontinue my vow and to write hymns only as inspiration came.

This has been my practice now for fifteen years. I have organized and self-published hymns I've written since 1990 in four volumes. Among my composer colleagues I was one of the last to adopt notation software. This is illustrated in these volumes. Volume 1 was released in 1994, volume 2 in 1998, both of which contain only handwritten notation. Volume 3 was completed in 2005 and reflects my gradual adoption of notation software as it contains a mix of handwritten and engraved hymns. Volume 4, completed in 2014, contains only engraved scores. I invoked our earlier publication, *The Brick Church*, in naming my first and subsequent *Brick Church Hymnals*. I'm currently two hymns into volume 5. Each volume is quite different and the nature of the hymns has changed with time. During the first two volumes, I was very interested in resetting hymn texts from forsaken and forgotten LDS sources, including the Emma Smith Hymnal. As I ran out of these, I began setting more scriptural texts and writing textless hymns. Volumes 3 and 4 contain considerably more songs for accompanied solo voice than 1 and 2, which contain mainly four-part choral textures. The collections contain some oddities such as songs that I heard in dreams, but that bear little resemblance to any music that I would compose, and items that are more like spiritual exercises than pieces of music. This issue of *Dialogue* includes samples of my settings of texts from the first Mormon hymnal compiled by Emma Smith. PDFs of all four volumes are freely available at:

<https://cfaccloud.byu.edu/index.php/s/5c709b2bb7fe3bbd6869ac5520e3ab62>

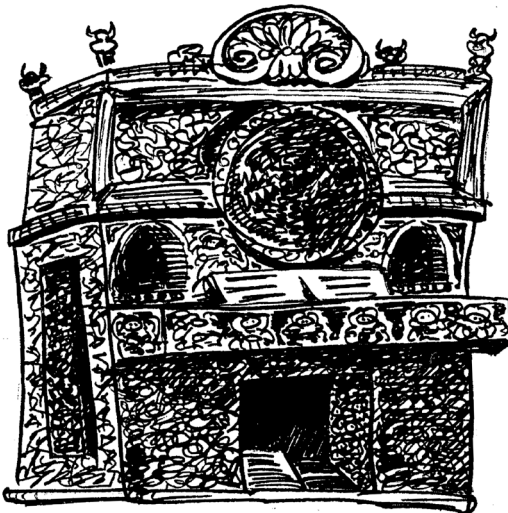
<https://cfaccloud.byu.edu/index.php/s/78275b4e02a0b781d7ec44084cc3each>

<https://cfaccloud.byu.edu/index.php/s/4b3a55690585d62691132b766b6eacb0>

<https://cfaccloud.byu.edu/index.php/s/0fe524acdd20361f7c6453539a96e632>

Notes

1. Michael Hicks, *Mormonism and Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
2. Boyd K. Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," Feb. 1, 1976, available at https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer_arts-spirit-lord/.
3. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* (July 1977): <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1977/07/the-gospel-vision-of-the-arts?lang=eng>.



Redeemer of Israel

Text: W. W. Phelps
Music: Christian Asplund

1. Re-dee-mer of Is-rael Our
 2. We Know He Is Co-ming To
 3. How Long We Have Wan-dered As
 4. As Chil-dren of Zion Good

3 On-Ga-stran-Ti-ly ther gers In dings For De-His Sin, light, Sheep On And And Whom Lead For A To The Al-

6 Bles-Zi-Des-rea-sing on sert dy We In For Ap-Call, Loves Thee! Our For Our Sha-Why Foes Noit, dow In Have And By The Re-Bie

9 Day Val-joined Just, And ley When For Our OF Our The Dil-Death Sor-King-lar Should rows dom By They They've Is Night, Weep Seen, Ours. Our Or But The

(Redeemer of Israel) - 2

12

Kings
In-
Is-
Hour

Our
The
rael
of

De-
Lone
Will
Re-

li-
Wil-
Short-
demp-

ver-
der-
ly-
tian

Our
ness
Be
Is

All.
Rove?
Free.
Near.

CTA 7 July 1994

Empty musical staff lines.

Empty musical staff lines.

Empty musical staff lines.

Empty musical staff lines.

Empty musical staff lines.

Empty musical staff lines.

Redeemer of Israel

Text: W. W. Phelps
Music: Christian T. Asplund

(♩ = c. 105)

1. Re-
2. We
3. How
4. As
5. Re-
6. He

dee-
Know
Long
Child
store,
Lakes!

mer
He
We
dren
My,
And

Of
Is
Have
Of
Dear
Ten

Is-
Co-
Wan-
Zi-
Sa-
Thou-

rael,
ming
dered
on,
vior,
sands

Our
To
As
Good
The
of

On-
Ga-
stran-
Ti-
An-

ly De-
ther His
-gers In
dins For
of Thy
gals Re-

light,
Sheep
Sin,
Us.
Face;
jace;

On
And
The
Tny
And

Whom
Lead
Cried
To-
Sul-
My-

For
Them
In
kens
cheer-
ri

A
To
The
Al-
read-
y

Bles-
Zi-
Des-
read-
Com-
Wait

-sing
-ent
-ant
-fort
For

We
In
For
Ap-
Im-
His

Call,
Love;
Thee
Pear-
parts;
Word;

Our
For
Our
Fear
And
He

Sha-
ving
Kiss
Not,
Let
Speaks

How
Im
Have
And
The
And

By
The
Re-
Be
The
Sweet
E-

Day
Fall-
joiced
Just,
Long-
ter-

And
Our
ley
When
Our
For
The
ing
ni-

OF
Our
The
The
The
Filled

Our
By
shall
rows
dom
Hol-
With

Night
Weep
Seems
Ours.
Place
Voice;

Our
Or
But
The
Bring
Re-

King
In
is-
Hour
Hope
e-

Our
The
rael
OF
To
choes

De-
lone
Will
Re-
My
The

I
Will-
short-
demp-
De-
Praise

ever-
der-
ly
tion
so-
late

Our
ness
Be
is
late
OF
The

All!
Rave?
Free.
Near
Heart.
Lord.

Awake! O Ye People, the Savior Is Coming

Words: William W. Phelps

Music: Christian Asplund

ff 1. A- wake! O Ye Peo- ple, The Sa- vior Is Co- ming; He'll
2. To- day Will Son Pass And That Un- known To mor- row May
3. Be Rea- dy, To The Na- tions In Sea- son Is Gi- ven, Pre-
4. A

5

sud- den-ly Come To His Tem- ples, We Hear; Re-
Leave Ma- ny Souls In A More Dread- ful state Than
Bring A- gain Zi- on, The Pro- phets De- clare; Re-
pare, O Pre- Pare For The King- dom's New Birth, To

9

pentance Is Nee- ded Of All That Are Li- ving, To
Came By The Flood Or That Fell On Go- mo- rah- yea,
pent OF Your Sins, And Have Faith In Re- demption, To
Call The E- lect From The Four Winds OF Hea- ven; For

13

Gain Them A Lot OF In- he- ri- tance Near.
Wee- ping And Wai- ling When Grief Is Too Late.
Gain You A Lot OF In- he- ri- tance There.
Je- sus Is Co- ming To Reign U- pon Earth. #2

Before The Earth From Chaos Sprung

Text: Sacred Hymns (LDS 1835)

Music: Christian Asplund

1. Be-fore The Earth From Chaos Sprung, Or Mor-ning
 2. Those Ho-ly Men Mi-nute-ly Told, What Fu-ture
 3. He Pro-phet-sied Of This Our Day, That God Would
 4. He Like-wise Did Foretell The Name, That Should Be
 5. Ac-cord-ing To His Ho-ly Plan, The Lord Has
 6. The Keys Which Peter Did Re-ceive, To Re-ar A
 7. Then None Need To His Neighbor Say, Know That The

Stars To-ge-ther Je-ho-vah
 A- ges Would Un- told, Scenes God Had
 Un- to Is-ra-el Say, The Go-spel
 Gi- ven To The Same, His And His
 Now Raised Up The Man, His Lat-ter
 King- dom God To Please, Have Once More
 Lord, This Is The Way, For All Shall

Saw What Would Take Place In All The
 Pun- posed Should Take Place, Down To The
 Light You Now Shall See, And From Your
 Fa- ther's Should A- gree, And Both Like
 Day Work To Be- gin, To Ga-ther
 Been Con-ferred On Man, To Bring A-
 Know Him Who Shall Stand, Both Old And

(Before The Earth) - 2

7

Vast Ex-tent Of Space.
 Last Of A-dam's Race.
 Bon-dage Be Set Free.
 His Should Jo-seph Be.
 Scat-tered Is-rael In.
 -bout Je-ho-vah's Plan.
 Young In All The Land.
 be

9

He Spoke; This World To Order Came,
 But We Will Pass Those Ancients By,
 He Said God Would Raise Up A Seer,
 This Seer Like Moses Should Ob-tain,
 This Seer Shall Be E-steemed High,
 The Key Of Knowledge Long Since Lost,
 Now Let The Saints Both Far And Near,
 And Men He Made Lord Of The Same,
 Who Spoke And Wrote By Pro-phet-cy,
 The Hearts Of Ja-cob's Sons To Cheers,
 The Word Of God For Man A-gain;
 By Joseph's Remnants By And By,
 Has Virtue Still As At The First,
 And Scattered Israel, When They Hear

11

Great Things To Them He Did Make Known,
 Un-til We Came To Him Of Old,
 And Gather Them A-gain In Bonds,
 A Spokesman God Would Him Prepare,
 He Is The Man Who's Called To Raise,
 To Bring To Light Things Of Great Worth,
 This News, Re-joice In Is-rael's God,
 Which Should Take Place In Days To Come.
 E'en Jo-seph Whom His Brethren Sold.
 In Latter Days U-pen Their Lands.
 His Word When Written To De-clare.
 And Lead Christ's Church In These Last Days.
 And Thus With Knowledge Fill The Earth.
 And Sing, And Praise His Name A-loud.

What Fair One Is This?

From 1835 LDS Collection
(Emma Smith, ed.)

Christian Asplund
Norman, OK: January 2001

Steady and peaceful

Voice

1. What fair one is this, from the wil - der - ness tra - veling, -
2. There is a sweet sound in the go - spel of hea - ven, And
3. A bles - sing, a bles - sing, the Sa - vior is co - ming, As
4. The name of Je - ho - va is wor - thy of prai - ing, and

Piano

Voice

Loo - king for Christ, the be - lo - ved of her heart? O, this
peo - ple are joy - ful when they un - der - stand. The
pro - phets and pil - grims of old have de - clared; And
so is the sa - vior an ex - cel - lent theme; The

Pno

Voice

2 What Fair One Is This?

10

Voice

Pno

De-
To
And

13

Voice

Pno

Which with ev - ery I - dol is wil - ling to part. While men in con -
- ter - mined by good - ness, to reach the blessed land. Old for - mal pro -
come to the feast for the righ - teous pre - pared. In the de - sert are
call on all na - tions to come to the same: These el - ders go

ppp

17

Voice

Pno

ten - tion are con - stant - ly how - ling And
- fes - sors are cry - ing "de - lu - sion," And
foun - tains con - tin - ual - ly spring - ing, The
forth and the go - spel are prea - ching, and

What Fair One Is This?

3

21

Voice

Ba - by - lon's bells are con - tin - ual - ly tol - ling. As though all the craft
 high - min - ded hy - po - crits say "'tis con - fu - sion," while grace is poured out in
 hea - ven - ly mu - sic of Zi - on is ring - ing; the saints all their tithes and their
 all that will hear them they free - ly are tea - ching, and thus is the vi - sion of

Pno

mp

L.H.

24

Voice

of her mer - chants was fai - ling,
 bles - sed ef - fu - sion,
 of - fe - rings are bring - ing;
 Da - niel ful - fil - ling;

Pno

mf dim. *mp dim.*

27

Voice

And Je - sus was co - ming to reign on the earth.
 And saints are re - joi - cing to see priest - craft fall.
 They thus prove the Lord and His bles - sing re - ceive.
 The stone of the moun - tain will soon fill the earth.

Pno

p dim. *pp*

rit.