

The Power of Simple Music

Janice Kapp Perry

Given April 23, 2011 to the American Guild of Organists – Utah Valley Chapter

I grew up loving music. My home was filled with it. My grandpa had me convinced at age 3 that every meadowlark was singing “Jani is a pretty little girl,” and my grandmother often sang sweet little folk songs for me. My own parents played in a dance band for 30 years—wonderful, toe-tapping music that everyone loved. Mother wrote and produced musicals for our church and community and taught her children to play the piano and enjoy singing. Music always felt good to me! When Dad came in from his farm work each day, he sat back in his easy chair and asked Mother to play for him. As she played her swing music from the dance band, or hymns, I had a peaceful feeling that all was well.

I’m thankful to belong to a church that values music and understands its power. I am inspired by the Hymnbook and the Children’s Songbook—works of true art and inspiration. They are almost as scripture to me and I deeply appreciate the writers who have given expression to the spiritual emotions of church members.

Regarding my assignment here today, I’d like to speak about the power of simple music in our lives and worship.

A few years ago a speaker at the Church Music Workshop, Minnie Hodapp, said: “I’m not in rebellion against the fine musicians. But as we admire orchids and roses, we also love sunflowers, asters and wayside offerings.”

I appreciate and respect great composers and their works and have been generously exposed to them through my years in BYU choruses, bands, and orchestras and in my five years as a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Nevertheless, today I just want to offer one sincere voice in praise of simplicity and the idea that sometimes, in music, “less can be more.”

President Kimball once said, “The message from and about Jesus Christ is so crucial to mankind that it was and is essential for that message to be kept exceedingly simple.”

Elder Packer offers this strong statement:

“Some of our most gifted people struggle to produce a work of art, hoping it will be described by the world as a masterpiece! Monumental! Epic! When in truth the simple ‘I am a child of God’ has moved and will move more souls to salvation than would such a work were they to succeed (Boyd K. Packer, *The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord*, BYU, 1976, p.585).

The power of music seems to defy description. We know that the words, the melodies, and the rhythm combine to affect us profoundly, but how? We may never be able to answer that question satisfactorily, but perhaps Brigham Young told us all we need to know when he said: “The Lord, Himself, gave us the capacity to enjoy musical sounds.” Elder Packer adds: “We are able to feel and learn very quickly through music . . . some spiritual things that we would otherwise learn very slowly.” (p.577)

I had my formal training in music at BYU in the late 1950’s. Then during the next twenty years I used that training only in our home with our own children, and in church callings. As I was approaching 40 our bishop asked me to write original music for a ward roadshow and I soon found that I loved writing and wanted to continue. I gave serious thought

to what kind of music I wanted to write. I realized that very simple music had moved me most through my life—such songs as *I Am a Child of God*, and *When He Comes Again*—music that looks so simple on the page, but is so profound in its meaning. I set my heart on adding to this simple music and have found the task very fulfilling.

I remember a specific night in 1976 when I composed my first gospel song. I knelt by the piano bench and offered a humble, direct prayer for guidance in my writing and then listened some time for the answer. The phrase “I’ll Follow Jesus” came into my mind and I loved the simple directness of that declaration. I wrote the first verse and chorus and a simple piano accompaniment, then I played and sang it over and over, finding unexpected joy in setting my testimony to music. I’m not sure any song since that first one has ever caused such a unique stirring inside of me.

I’ll follow Jesus, I love His ways
I want to be a child of His thru all my days
And though I slip and fall, I’ll rise again
I’ll follow Jesus and be true to Him.

Well, as the saying goes, “the rest is history.” In the ensuing twenty years I have written some twelve hundred songs, and my joy in writing simple gospel songs has only increased.

Recently during a two month period I decided to note any experience I heard of, or had myself, where someone was touched by hymns and children's songs of the church. I was surprised at how abundant these experiences were during that short period of time. Time will only permit the mention of a few experiences:

ONE

I call my brother Jack weekly, and one day he said, “Don’t you love the hymns!” Then he related the following experience: Two years ago he had gone fishing in the High Uintahs with a friend who had been inactive in the church for years. As they sat in absolute silence by a lake with their lines cast in, the inactive friend said, “I ought to do better in the church . . . I remember one hymn from my childhood—something about earth being accountable for Joseph Smith’s death.” Jack said, “Do you mean ‘Praise to the Man’?”

“Yes, that’s it—do you know it?”

“Yes, I do. I know all four verses.”

“Will you sing it for me?”

Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah
 Jesus anointed that prophet and seer
 Blessed to open the last dispensation
 Kings shall extol him and nations revere.

Then he listened as Jack sang all four verses.

As the song ended, the friend turned his face away with tears in his eyes. Jack said, “The best part is that it’s all true.”

“Yes, it probably is,” replied his friend. They didn’t see each other for 2 years but their reunion was a joyful one as the friend had come back into full activity after the fishing trip. In that setting, and at the right time, the hymn had great power.

TWO

In 1998 my husband and I enjoyed a three week European Tour with the Tabernacle

Choir which performed some great music literature in the finest opera halls in Europe. Still, I always felt we saved the best for last when we sang *I Am a Child of God* as an encore. The non-member tenor soloist who traveled with the choir was overheard to say one evening that he felt we reached the audience in a special way when we sang this simple song in their language—he saw it in their countenances and felt it in their response.

During our final concert in Lisbon, my husband stood in the highest balcony observing the concert. He noticed a girl and her grandmother enjoying the concert but during the encore, as *I Am a Child of God* was sung in their Portuguese tongue, they hugged each other and wept openly.

THREE

I often think about my Tabernacle choir experience and all the wonderful music we have performed. I looked back in my journal at two favorite experiences where the music was simple but the emotion profound:

Toward the end of President Hunter's life when he was failing quickly, the Choir stayed after one rehearsal to record a song to cheer him. I was so moved by the hymn in this circumstance that I had difficulty singing:

We ever pray for thee, our prophet dear
That God will give to thee comfort and cheer
As the advancing years furrow thy brow
Still may the light within shine bright as now

Another heart touching day with the choir came after a broadcast of glorious Christmas music. A little girl came up to the choir loft with her mother, brought to Salt Lake City by

the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Her wish was to hear the Tabernacle Choir before she died. Many choir members choked back tears as we sang for her that simple profound Christmas hymn, “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.”

FOUR

In the *Ensign* was the gripping story of a young boy who slipped 30 feet into the crevasse of a Canadian glacier where his body was precariously wedged against the ice with icy rushing water below. The mother went for help as the distraught father tried desperately to comfort his son who was screaming hysterically. The father yelled down for the boy to pray and sing his favorite song and Heavenly Father would help him get out safely. The boy prayed aloud and then began to sing at the top of his voice the words to “I Am a child of God.” By the time help arrived 1 1/2 hours later he had whispered his final prayer and a faint “I am a child of God.” Unseen angels seemed to place his frozen hands around the rope and he was pulled to safety more dead than alive. Through time he has fully recovered and was called to serve a mission in Canada, close to the glacier.

FIVE

One final personal experience affected me deeply. As background, let me say that many years ago I was involved in a minor car accident while stopped at a red light. A car turning toward me misjudged and crashed into my driver-side door, smashing the window. Right at the moment of impact here is what played in my mind: “When you hear the crash, think of Jones Paint and Glass!” Later, I felt quite appalled that such a frivolous thought came

to me in a moment of crisis. I began to realize how important it is to set the gospel to music so that something more meaningful could come to our minds in the different circumstances of our lives.

Well, now jump ahead with me several years, just a few days after the choir returned from Europe. My husband and I were traveling north at the mouth of Provo Canyon, and he was beginning to turn left while adjusting his visor and did not see a car coming toward us out of the canyon at high speed. I cried out, but it was too late and we hit nearly head on and then we had a second impact against a cement wall. Miraculously, neither my husband or the other driver were seriously injured, though both cars were badly mangled. The airbag had seriously injured my neck and by the time I was carefully transported to the hospital my neck was terribly swollen from internal bleeding and chemical burns from the airbag and was very painful. Before they could proceed with treatment they needed a CAT scan to see if my neck was fractured, a test that would require me to lie flat and absolutely still for 30 minutes. That seemed impossible to me at the time.

I was unable to swallow, was in great pain, and was on the edge of panic about not being able to breathe. I searched my mind and heart for something to hold onto for strength, and in my moment of utter need four lines from one of my own songs came to my mind and I sang them over and over silently in my mind for the duration of the test:

Pray, He is there, speak, He is listening
You are His child, His love now surrounds you
He hears your prayer, He loves the children
Of such is the kingdom, the kingdom of heaven

There is power in the simple truths of the gospel when combined with appealing melodies. My neck was not fractured and through subsequent surgery and recovery at the hospital and later at home I felt further comfort from listening to recorded gospel music.

I appreciate those who have paid the price in preparation and personal worthiness that they might be instruments in the Lord's hands in creating meaningful music for the church and the world. Our goal as writers and composers should be to someday be able to say as Jesus once did: "Not I, but the Father that dwelleth within me—He doeth the works." Elder Packer reminds us that "Inspiration can come to those whose talents are barely adequate and their contribution will be felt for generations." That statement has given me great hope and encouragement through the years of my writing.

Years ago, when I had written my first batch of songs I sent them to the Church Music Office hopefully. Brother Michael Moody, our Church Music Chairman, kindly advised me to use my music to "brighten my own little corner of the world." I took his advice to heart and wrote many songs for my ward and stake: *I Love to See the Temple, I'm Trying to Be Like Jesus, Love is Spoken Here, The Helaman Son, A Child's Prayer*—and if they had *only* been used in my ward or even just in my home I would have found that very fulfilling.

I have often been asked if inspiration comes in one big flash and I would have to answer "no," although one particular experience seemed that way at first.

Just before the printing of the Children's Songbook I awakened suddenly from a short nap in my studio with a very strong impression that "there should be a song in the new book that would teach young children the full name of the Church!" I reminded myself that the deadline for submitting songs was past and went back to sleep. But I awakened again

thinking, “the first line of the song needs to state the full name of the Church.” I wrote it down, kept dozing and awakening and adding to the lyrics until I had two full verses written over an hour’s time. It actually felt like an inspired idea so I sent it to the Music Committee. I received a call saying they were interested but wanted to work with me on a few lyric changes. Over a few days or a week the song was reduced to just one verse and in the end the only line that was kept in its entirety from my first “inspired” version was the first line: “I belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints!” Well, at least the *idea* to have such a song was inspired!

I am so thankful for music, and that the Lord gave us the capacity to enjoy musical sounds.

I will feel completely fulfilled in my writing endeavors if in a time of temptation some child should have come to his mind the words “I’m trying to be like Jesus”; or in times of teen-age trials a young woman is comforted by the phrase “I walk by faith”; or if, in times of family contention, the words “love is spoken here” can help restore peace.

Our First Presidency in the preface to the hymnbook urge us to “use hymns and children’s songs to invite the spirit of the Lord into our congregations, our homes, and our personal lives.”

It is stated in the Children’s Songbook: “You will remember more easily what you have learned when you sing about it. The melody of a song helps you remember the words and also brings the *feeling* of the song to your heart.”

The very fact that you are here at this conference indicates that you have a strong desire to use your musical gifts to build the kingdom and I pray for his blessing upon you in that endeavor.

I would like to echo the words of Brother Newell Dayley speaking to a group of musicians in 1985:

Music will not fulfill its sacred purposes until those who exercise musical gifts are endowed with power from on high, until they are fully able to receive spiritual guidance so that they can act in their office and calling with complete justification. . . .

It is worthy to desire musical excellence. We should do all in our power to increase our gifts that we might receive even more. We should hold to high standards. But, more importantly, we should be sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and do that which we are “constrained” to do. . . .

I testify with all the sincerity of my heart that God’s power can be felt in the plain and simple hymns and anthems of the church. The musicians of the church have a special mission and stewardship to cause this power to be manifest in the hearts of each member of the church. I pray that you will be blessed in your efforts to do so.