

Keynote Address for “Super Saturday: Training for Church Organists”
Utah Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists
Harris Fine Arts Center, Brigham Young University, Provo

Given by Mike Carson
Saturday April 29, 2017

“Then Sings My Soul!”

Every Sunday, in every Latter-day Saint meetinghouse in the world, at least two or three times in each building, an organist sits down and leads congregational singing in multiple hymns.

According to the Statistical Department of the Church, there are 1,445 wards and branches in Utah County alone? Considering that most units have more than one organist, that adds up to a lot of organists in the valley! Thousands, in fact!

The Utah Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and the Department of Organ Studies in the BYU School of Music are committed to help all organists improve their skills.

This is one of the reasons that every April we present “Super Saturday: Training for the Church Organist.” The event helps improve and enhance our service playing skills, and it gives us an opportunity to enjoy social interactions with fellow church musicians.

How did the Utah Valley chapter come to be? In the fall of 1979, a group of 16 local organists gathered for the purpose of forming a local chapter of the American Guild of Organists. A dean and officers were selected, and a petition was sent to National Headquarters in New York City for the official chartering of the chapter. My association with our local chapter enhances my life and gives me opportunities I otherwise would not have had, one of which was a brief bit of bench time on the organs at Temple Square a few years ago.

It is immensely gratifying to associate with you today—you, who have a love for the organ and its repertoire and a passion for providing service as a church organist. It’s immensely gratifying! I also share in your concerns and struggles. I am sympathetic with your problems and the challenges you may face as an organist.

The hymns have always made my soul sing! My worship tradition is in the LDS faith, so my comments will refer to that tradition.

I was touched early in my life with the spirit of the hymns as we sang “Come, Come Ye Saints” at my baptism when I was eight years old. I felt the Spirit confirm to my young heart that the gospel was true.

I believe that many of us have similar experiences with the hymns. Hymns play an essential role in spirituality, revelation, and conversion. Stephen D. Nadauld wrote that sentiment into a charming verse:

If I would teach with power / The doctrine and the plan, / I'd wish for gentle music / To prepare the soul of man. / And then to press forever / These truths upon his mind, / We'd sing the hymns of Zion, / With their messages sublime.

My mother, Eva Carson, served as the Lehi Utah Stake organist for 42 consecutive years, and who knows how many years as ward organist. That's a lot of sacrament meetings, stake conferences, and funerals under the bridge. She was also my first piano teacher. When I was seven years old I begged her through tears to give me piano lessons. One year later I begged her through tears to let me quit. But she gently persisted, and, at age twelve, I was called to be the organist in Mutual, and I've been playing ever since.

Currently, I have the responsibility to write up the agendas for leadership meetings over which the bishop presides. It is also my responsibility to attend all of those meetings. The bishop requested that a hymn be sung to begin each meeting. I got the idea that we should start at the beginning of the hymn book and sing every hymn in order. The ward leaders have enjoyed being introduced to *all* of the hymns. They also asked if I would preface the singing of the hymns with brief historical and spiritual information about each one. They have felt the importance of starting our meetings with hymns and have even insisted that they be sung in their entirety, even when our time is short.

Then sings my soul!

I also currently serve as the ward choir accompanist. The choir president procured with ward funds a case of hymnals to keep in her home for our rehearsals each week. The director likes to use hymns to warm up the choir. Often, at my request, we sing less-familiar hymns, and most often the reaction from the choir members is that they had no idea that such delightful, unfamiliar hymns were even in the book.

Then sings my soul!

We have also instigated "Choir in a Minute" into our sacrament meetings occasionally. About two or three times a year, those in the congregation who desire to participate are invited up to the rostrum to join the ward choir in singing from the hymn book. I like to play the organ for "Choir in a Minute," and we also prepare the choir ahead of time, so that the result of the singing will have the potential of being very powerful. We usually have 50 or 60 people sing with us, including young children and youth. Our priesthood leaders encourage it, and enjoy it, and support it.

Then sings my soul!

The Lord wants us to find joy in gathering together to worship him, and, for us, as musicians, to find full expression in leading people in congregational song. A glorious worship service is described in the Old Testament on the day that the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Solomon's splendid new temple in Jerusalem:

It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were *as one*, to make *one sound* to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick...the house was filled with a cloud...so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of God (II Chronicles 5:13-14, emphasis added).

Next to these verses in the margin of his own bible, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote these words: "Where there is devotional music, God is always at hand with His gracious presence."

For the Easter service in our ward this year, we prepared the ward choir with a third-verse choir descant for the closing hymn, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." The presiding authority invited the congregation to stand with the choir to sing this hymn. There was no visible cloud, but the effect was glorious—indeed a voice "as one" making "one sound," as we sang this exultant hymn together—the choir, the congregation, and the organ!

Then sings my soul!

The hymns we select for sacrament meetings should reflect the character of the meeting and help establish the proper spirit.

The opening hymn is most effective when it addresses the Lord in prayer, praise, or thanksgiving (i.e. "Redeemer of Israel, our only delight, on whom for a blessing we call..."). It can also be a gathering song—a call to worship (i.e. Come, Sing to the Lord; Come, We That Love the Lord). The opening hymn "...may express gratitude for the gospel, joy in being able to gather together, or enthusiasm for the work to be done" (*Hymns*, 1985; pg. 380).

The sacrament hymn prepares our hearts and minds to partake of the sacrament. The preface in our hymnal mentions that the sacrament hymn "...should refer to the sacrament itself or to the sacrifice of the Savior." The standard sacramental hymns are numbers 169 through 197. Use all

of them! It takes approximately six months of weekly meetings to sing all of the sacrament hymns, so, if you are faithful, they each get sung twice in a year.

The sacrament hymn is usually devotional in nature, but sometimes it can be praising, such as “We’ll Sing All Hail to Jesus’ Name” and “I Stand All Amazed”: “Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me!”—with an exclamation point, even in a sacrament hymn!

Several sacramental hymns have more verses printed below the music. Singing these additional verses heightens the worship experience. For example, the hymns “How Great the Wisdom and the Love” and “Behold the Great Redeemer Die” first mention the emblems of the sacrament in the additional verses printed below the music. But, if you choose to sing the additional verses, be sure to play a brief organ interlude to give everyone time to open their hymn books back up!

The closing hymn summarizes, or carries, the message of the meeting “in a capsule,” meaning that the closing hymn may contain a reflection of the theme of the meeting or of the last speaker. A hymn addressed to the Lord can render a powerful focus on the worship experience (i.e. We Have Partaken of Thy Love; Hear Thou Our Hymn, O Lord; Father, Cheer Our Souls Tonight).

“Some of the greatest sermons are preached by the singing of hymns. [They] invite the Spirit of the Lord, create a feeling of reverence, unify us..., and provide a way for us to offer praises to the Lord (*Hymns*, 1985).

Then sings my soul!

I’d like to share a few thoughts on playing organ introductions to the hymn singing. Sometimes having an understanding of what we do routinely helps us be more effective.

As I see it, the hymn introduction serves five basic purposes:

1. Announces the tune
2. Establishes the pitch
3. Launches the tempo
4. Demonstrates the rhythm
5. Suggests the volume, mood, and style of the hymn

The introduction should have a distinct sound. Rather than having an uncertain sound, it can confidently encourage the singing to begin. There's a scripture in the Old Testament that persuasively illustrates this:

Even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a *distinction* in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle...? What is it then...? I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also (1 Corin. 14:7-8, 15, emphasis added).

Once, after a service in which we had sung "The Spirit of God" (like a fire is burning), a woman came to me and expressed her joy in the introduction that I had played for that hymn. She explained that she had felt rather low in spirit and somewhat depressed that morning. When the "distinctive" introduction began she said that she had lifted her head, looked up and smiled, and that it had immediately lifted her spirits and she was able to sing the hymn exuberantly.

Then sings my soul!

Another important musical element in the worship service is the choir. Melvin J. Ballard of the Council of the Twelve Apostles was the first chairman of the Church Music Committee in the early 1920s. (He is not to be confused with his grandson, Elder M. Russell Ballard.) In The Improvement Era of September 1923 Ballard explained that "...the work of the choir is...an exalted and holy work...but cannot be made ideally helpful and thoroughly fruitful...in worship...unless its leaders...fully appreciate its potential." Then he explains the three functions of the choir:

1. To support congregational singing. Still quoting from Ballard: "All singing requires magnetic leadership and inspiration, and the congregation will sing better when the lead is taken by the choir, because these singers form a nucleus...a positive mass of harmony in which every singer in the congregation can find his place with confidence and comfort.... It should include a 'conscious mental effort of the singers'...to transmit to the people...the inner sense and beauty of both hymns and tunes, so that the guidance provided shall not be simply tonal and rhythmical, but intellectual and spiritual...."
2. The second function of the choir is to "supplement the congregation—to help them stretch beyond the simple form of the hymn and to realize a dimension in praise and

prayer not possible by congregational singing alone.” We are left to assume what “supplement the congregation” means. In my mind it means that the choir would provide descants and choir verses to help the congregation “stretch beyond the simple form of the hymn and to realize a new dimension...not possible by congregational singing alone.”

3. The third function of the choir, as taught by Elder Ballard, is as a “substitute” for congregational singing, what we call today in the Church the “special musical selection.” The choir becomes “an inspirer and teacher, aiding the congregation to feel beyond what they alone are capable of singing.... [The choir’s] message is both expressive for them and impressive upon them.”

Now all of this is more easily made possible if the choir members are willing and able to sit in the choir seats for the duration of the meeting. Why do choir members sit with the congregation, anyway? My mother, in all her years of service as a ward and stake organist, wondered the same thing and decided to try it herself:

One day I decided just to sit,
To take a vacation myself,
To give my organ shoes a rest
And leave my books upon the shelf.

So I entered the church with the others
And visited like they all do,
Then I leisurely took a relaxing seat
Down in my favorite pew.

No one was playing the prelude;
They hadn’t missed me, I’ll bet.
And as I looked around, half the choir
Hadn’t even taken their places yet.

I got a little uneasy,
Then like a revelation
I wondered how those who should be up front
Could relax in the congregation.

I sat a little longer,
A wry expression on my face.
I'd have to do my duty
Or I'd be a "basket case."

I heard the Spirit prompt me
To take my place with the choir.
I'd had my little vacation—
Just a quarter of an hour.

Today, I would like to ask a simple question: As a church organist or pianist, what would you like to *be* in the coming months and years? Steer clear of actions and of making lists of things to *do*, and simply list qualities of "being" that you wish to have now and in the future. I did a little self-imposed brainstorming and came up with a few suggestions. Some of the qualities that came to my mind were: being cheerful, non-judgmental, supportive, positive. Being detail-oriented, inspiring, sharing, good-mannered, and having common sense and patience—and being punctual.

Once we decide what we want to "be," we can begin to make decisions about what we want to "do." People all too often forget that it is their own choice how they want to spend the rest of their lives.

Someone said, "I am in competition with no one. I have no desire to play the game of being better than anyone. I am simply trying to *be* better than the person I was yesterday."

We are taught to magnify our callings. This does not mean that we must do better than the person who had previously held the calling. "To magnify our calling is to hold it up in dignity and importance, that the light of heaven may shine through one's performance" (President Thomas S. Monson quoting the Prophet Joseph Smith, "Our Sacred Priesthood Trust," *Ensign*, May 2006, 56).

We need only magnify our own calling, not someone else's.

I'm blessed that my wife, Cheryl, understands that for my soul to sing, it requires me being at the church for many hours to practice and perform. What a joy it was to play the small pipe organ in my ward for 12 years before we moved to Lindon four years ago. When we were deciding whether or not to buy that home in Pleasant Grove, I ordered the agent: "Take me to the church!" He thought I was crazy, but was amazed that it was a pipe organ that sealed the deal!

The Utah Valley chapter of the American Guild of Organists is one of 330 chapters worldwide, led by enthusiastic volunteers. Although our chapter is relatively small and young, its local

efforts help to make a difference in the musical lives of its members and, most especially, to local church organists like all of us here today.

I think about the many things that would be different if the charter members had not met that night in the fall of 1979—38 years ago. Because of them we enjoy a community of friends who share a common cause and purpose; we are encouraged, inspired, and challenged; and we share an outlet for musical growth and improvement.

I hope there will always be joy in our service and fulfillment in our efforts. Whatever talents you possess, share them liberally and joyfully; your gifts of service will return to you tenfold.