

On the Pursuit of Excellence

An Address Given by Andrew E. Unsworth at the 2007 BYU Organ Workshop

It is an honor to be asked to speak today and to participate in this workshop. I've been privileged to teach several times during this week, and I've always come away renewed in my love of the gospel and church music and feeling grateful to be numbered among you as a laborer in the Kingdom.

As I've considered what I might talk about, my thoughts have settled on a comment President Boyd K. Packer gave in his April 2007 General Conference address. Some of his remarks are related to issues in church music with which I struggled for a number of years. I am directing my thoughts today towards LDS organists, especially those who currently play for the sacrament meetings of their wards, but the issues I'll address exist to varying degrees in many denominations.

President Packer explained how, having recently been called as a General Authority and feeling somewhat inadequate and in need of spiritual strength, he entered the back of the Salt Lake Tabernacle to listen to Primary Conference. He described the music he heard and the feelings it brought to him. He also recounted the approach the organist took to the accompaniment of the choir: "As the children sang quietly, the organist, who understood that excellence does not call attention to itself, did not play a solo while they sang. He skillfully, almost invisibly blended the young voices into a melody of inspiration, of revelation."¹

I want to focus my remarks on our pursuit of excellence as organists. How do we manifest musical excellence and not call attention to ourselves? How can we strive to

¹ Boyd K. Packer, "The Spirit of the Tabernacle," *Ensign* (May 2007): 26.

improve our musical skills and still approach our service playing with humility? And, how can we improve our efforts to invite the Holy Spirit through music and facilitate revelation?

In many respects, it may seem counterintuitive that one might be able to be excellent and not draw attention to oneself. Doesn't excellence by definition stand out from the ordinary? And, if the ideal performance is one that doesn't draw undue attention to itself, why do we bother spending all of this time and money to improve our skills on the organ?

First, we have to remember that there is a distinct difference between excellence and mere "flashiness." While true greatness on the organ can be manifested in a technical exhibition, an awareness of one's performance context is important. I do not doubt that most of you would agree that playing complicated interludes and accompaniments to hymns and virtuosic preludes and postludes is not generally appropriate for sacrament meetings. At the same time, I imagine that many of you would be disappointed if you attended an organ concert by a famous performer and heard only pieces played out of an organ method book.

We also need to remember that incompetence draws attention to itself as much as or more than flashiness does. We have all experienced church meetings in which an organist or pianist struggled to make it through a sacrament meeting with his or her dignity intact—and maybe sometimes that someone was us. Since we belong to a church with a lay ministry, where organists are called to their positions regardless of their previous experience, such situations are bound to happen. And this is not an issue unique to the LDS Church or the twenty-first century. We can all doubtless identify with the comments of Nathaniel Gould, a nineteenth-century American musical commentator, describing the state of organ playing in the 1830s and 40s:

When the rapid introduction of organs took place, it was not so difficult to procure the organs as to provide competent organists. It was represented by those who were interested that any one might, in a short time, qualify himself to play plain psalmody; consequently, young ladies and gentlemen, old men and maidens, made the attempt.

But it was found not to be the work of a day, or a month, to learn to manage an organ so as to satisfy singers or hearers. Some one, perhaps, would attempt, with little experience in execution, time or harmony, the singers and organist hobbling along in sweet confusion. Complaints are made; the organist is mortified, if not provoked; stays away from church, – no organist.²

I lived in a ward for a time where the pianist in priesthood meeting really struggled to get through hymns. This good brother was teaching himself to play the piano, but he hadn't yet mastered the concepts of rhythm and meter—he'd add a beat here or take a beat away there. One Sunday, the brethren in the ward close to the piano were struggling to figure out where the beat lay, while the brethren on the other side of the room continued to plow ahead, singing the hymn in time. The result was utter chaos. Ultimately, the hymn disintegrated as the priesthood body burst into gales of laughter, and the hymn had to be attempted again. While mistakes and the occasional disaster are inevitable when human beings are making music, and although I'm sure many of the men present at this meeting enjoyed having a good laugh, one person's ego was deflated, and the purpose of music in the meeting was defeated.

The problem that President Packer has doubtless experienced and that he implies in his comments is that some organists don't understand that when playing in an LDS church service, one should strive to draw the attention of the congregation towards the spiritual purpose of the meeting and away from oneself. Those who haven't figured this out yet exhibit a certain type of spiritual and artistic immaturity: as they gain skills they want to use them, and they may do so without much discrimination. This has been an issue for quite some time. John Sullivan Dwight, a venerable nineteenth-century American musical commentator, reported on a church service witnessed in New York City in 1865:

² Nathaniel D. Gould, *Church Music in America* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 180.

[The organist] commenced to play the Old Hundred. At first, majestic as it should be, but soon his left hand began to get unruly among the bass notes, then the right cut up a few monkey shines in the treble; left threw in a large assortment of quavers; right led off with a grand flourish and a few dozen variations; left struggled mournfully to keep up, but soon gave up dead beat, and after that went back to first principles, and hammered away religiously at Old Hundred in spite of the antics of its fellow; right struck up a march--marched into a quick step--quick step into a gallop; left still kept at Old Hundred; right put in all sorts of fancy extras, to entice the left from its sense of propriety; left still unmoved; right put in a few bars of a popular waltz; left wavers a little; right strikes left still unmoved; right put in a few bars of a popular waltz; left wavers a little; right strikes up a favorite polka; left evidently yielding; right dashes into a jig; left now fairly deserts his colors and goes over to the enemy, and both commence an animated hornpipe, leaving poor Old Hundred to take care of itself. At length with a crash, a squeak, a rush, a roar, a rumble, and an expiring groan, the overture concluded and the service began.³

On another occasion, Dwight printed some observations on an organ postlude:

You may easily imagine how the closing voluntary in most cases is performed: the organist sometimes draws out every stop in his organ, and quite forgetting the *place* where he is playing, and only thinking of displaying the dexterity of his fingers, performs overtures, grand marches, etc.; and it has sometimes really seemed to me as though he aimed to drown the impression made by a solemn sermon, or as though he wished to express his joy that the sermon was ended.⁴

As a young man, I often used my postludes in church as a platform for testing new repertoire and displaying my technique. I remember one Sunday, playing the Widor toccata or some other flashy piece, and hearing later from a friend that an older sister in the ward sat in the back during my postlude shaking her head in dismay. At the time, my reaction was to scoff: “Ignoramus! What does she know about great music!” Another occasion, on Pentecost Sunday, I was playing the postlude to a Church Educational System fireside. Since it was Pentecost and I was feeling rather proud of my new-found knowledge of the liturgical year, I decided to play the variations from Duruflé’s *Veni Creator*. As I began the final toccata, a well-meaning usher came up to me and asked me to play more quietly—that people were having a hard time talking. I was incensed at the usher’s lack of respect towards

³ *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 25 (22 July 1865): 72.

⁴ “Church Music,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 1 (18 September 1852): 189.

a beautiful piece, but more particularly at her disregard of my preparation for the occasion and my technical capability.

Now, with a few more years of experience under my belt, I am embarrassed about my former approach to church music. What changed my attitude? For one, I got older, and hopefully wiser. Also, I had numerous experiences with church music outside of my own tradition, and these helped me better understand the historical context of LDS church music.

As an undergraduate at BYU, I served for two years as the Organ Scholar at the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City. During graduate school, I also worked for several years as an organist and choir director at Lutheran and Baptist churches. After I received my degree, I returned to Salt Lake and spent five more years at the Cathedral of the Madeleine, serving this time as the Organist and Assistant Director of Music. Through these experiences, I gained an appreciation for other Christian denominations, their good works, sincere and beautiful worship, and rich artistic traditions. One of the wonderful parts about these church jobs, especially my position at the Madeleine, was to be able to perform some of the world's finest sacred choral and organ music in the setting for which it was written. I found that experiencing this great religious art in its original context heightened my understanding of and appreciation for the composers and the situations in which they labored. After several years of living within the rhythm of the liturgical year, I acquired a sense of the function of much of this music, and it now it seems a little strange to me to sit and listen to a Mass or other sacred compositions in a secular, concert setting.

Most American Protestant churches in the first half of the nineteenth century had an ambivalent relationship with the pipe organ. Except in the largest cities, elaborate church music and especially pipe organs were uncommon—they were seen generally as “papist” (a serious insult back in those days). Instead, most church music was congregational and

humble, and when organs finally became more widespread in American churches, congregations and musical commentators were quite conservative in the types of organ literature they deemed appropriate for use in divine service. A reporter from Philadelphia wrote in 1863:

Among the masters of composition a style of organ playing is recognized, called the free style; we mean that free style which has never been recognized as any part of church music. Compositions of this class are written for the organ exhibition or the concert. They have no place in church. They are light, sportive and showy. They will never predispose the mind to devotion. They were never intended to do this.⁵

Eugene Thayer, a well-known nineteenth-century American organist and pedagogue, went so far as to prescribe what composers' compositions should not be played in services: "[I]t must be remembered that neither Bach nor Handel left us any organ music suitable for the introduction of church service, as most musicians of our day understand it."⁶ Nineteenth-century Americans were also well-aware how inappropriate music can destroy the spirit of a worship service:

Light minds are pleased with trifles, and such persons forget the service they are engaged in. The true style of organ music is that which casts noble hints into the soul, not the merely pretty style, which affects no part of the head but the ear, and touches not the heart.

A celebrated writer of a century and a half ago, says of certain organists who introduced irreligious music into their voluntaries: "These fingering gentlemen should be informed that they ought to suit their airs to the place and business; and that the musician is obliged to keep to the text as much as the preacher. For want of this, I have found by experience a great deal of mischief; for, when the preacher has often, with great piety and art enough, handled his subject, and I have found in myself, and in the rest of the pew, good thoughts and dispositions, they have been all in a moment dissipated by a jig from the organ-loft."⁷

Out of this context sprang our early LDS musical practice: it did not include organ music at all in the beginning, and the great choral and organ works do not belong to it. I'm

⁵ "How They Play the Organ in Church," *The Monthly Choir and Organ Journal* 1 (May 1863): 97-98.

⁶ Eugene Thayer, "Service Preludes," *The Organist's Quarterly Journal and Review* 1 (July 1874): 3.

⁷ James Hewins, *Hints Concerning Church Music* (Boston: A. Williams & Co., 1857), 33.

not saying, as Thayer did, that one can't play Bach or Handel in church; in my opinion, however, if we play "classical" or art music from outside our own tradition in sacrament meeting, we must be aware that we are bringing in a foreign element, and we should do so with the utmost care. How do we decide when it is appropriate to do so? This is where we need to use our keenest spiritual sensitivity and best communication skills. We should talk to our priesthood leaders and ascertain their vision for music in worship service. Even if the minds of our leaders are so consumed by other matters that music is the least of their worries, we should, in my opinion, do all in our power to retain or regain their trust—to insure that music never becomes a concern for them.

So if the organ repertoire I am learning is generally not appropriate for use in a sacrament meeting, why should I bother practicing it? Well, it's great art, and great art uplifts and edifies, often regardless of the context in which it is experienced. Some of my most powerful spiritual experiences through music have occurred in the solitude of a practice room. But the natural man can be lazy, and I often need more motivation than that. I have learned that nothing gets me to the practice room or church as frequently as knowledge that I'll be playing a piece in public in the near future. I strongly encourage you to cultivate performance opportunities in contexts in addition to sacrament meeting. Arrange for a ward or stake hymnsing, give a solo or group recital, get involved with your local AGO chapter. You'll find that great music is even more satisfying when performed in the appropriate context.

Sometimes problems arise when our hearts are right, but our intentions are misunderstood, and even here, the blame can often be placed squarely on our own shoulders. As we grow in ability, our congregations grow with us, becoming accustomed to more registral variety, varied harmonies, and generally more skilful playing. Problems may

arise if, say, one is called to be an organist in a ward where one has never served before. If I were to show up in an unfamiliar congregation, and give every hymn “the treatment” (in the words of Gerre Hancock), altering harmony, adding non-harmonic tones, and including elaborate interludes, even if it were a festive occasion and my intentions were pure, my hymn playing would doubtless be interpreted as a prideful display, and it would be distracting to the congregation. To avoid being misunderstood when one is new to a congregation, it would be wise to exercise extreme restraint in one’s playing at first, and, after consultation with one’s bishop, gradually introduce the congregation to some of the hymn playing techniques you’ll learn about this week.

Of course, we should seek after anything that is lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy. But when we seek to gratify our pride or vain ambition through our performance in sacrament meeting, we lose the spirit, and we are no longer playing for the right reasons. Can you not imagine the pleasure that the Lord must take in organists who create an atmosphere conducive to revelation through their humble service? And can you not imagine the pleasure (and, yes, revelations) that such organists receive as they approach their performance in sacrament meeting in this manner, combining technical proficiency, modesty, and meekness. I know many of you have already experienced this.

I’m not arguing for a dumbing-down of LDS church music. Instead, I’m acknowledging that all great music has a place, and for historical and cultural reasons, we must choose with special care what music we play in church services and how we approach our hymn playing. I recognize how difficult it is to retain motivation to practice and strive for excellence when mediocrity is tolerated in and even celebrated by popular culture. Your presence here today demonstrates a desire to rise above the mire, and for this I admire and applaud you.

I want to draw your thoughts to a day a month or so in the future. The glow with which you will leave this workshop will have departed by then. You may be somewhat discouraged at lack of progress or practice time, or you may feel unappreciated. Practicing the organ can be a lonely, solitary affair, and most of us have to go to a cold, dark church to rehearse (there's a reason why organists tend to be such strange people). In spite of your efforts to improve the quality of music in your ward, people may continue to talk through your preludes and postludes, and doubtless few will appreciate your subtleties of registration, articulation, and smooth legato. But please know that your efforts in the service of the Lord are important and they are noticed. They are important because they demonstrate your commitment to the Lord and your desire to serve Him to the best of your ability. And regardless of how you may feel at times, your efforts are noticed—and not just by the angels. I have had the experience on multiple occasions, as I'm sure many of you have had, that even the most unmusical ward member will be aware from the first Sunday you play that something is different, even if all you do is play the hymns straight through as written with good legato, well-articulated repeated notes, and appropriate registration. And what is not excellent about that? Is there any shame in playing well, even if you are playing something simple? Success in any venture demands our best efforts, especially when we venture to serve the Lord.

To conclude, I'd like to return to President Packer's conference talk. President Packer described the spiritual experience he had at Primary Conference as the organist played and the choir sang as a "defining moment . . . [that] fixed deeply and permanently in my soul that which I most needed to sustain me in the years to follow."⁸ If we strive to perfect our organ technique and to approach our performance in sacrament meeting

⁸ Packer, 26.

remembering, as President Packer said, that music “cannot be separated from the voice of the Lord, the quiet, still voice of the Spirit,” your ward members will remember how they felt and the testimony they gained as they sang the hymns of Zion to your accompaniment. And most importantly, the giver of all gifts will make you a “ruler over many things,” as you enter into the joy of our Lord.