

## Book Review

ERIK W. GOLDSTROM

Michael Hicks. *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography* (University of Illinois Press, 2015; ISBN-13: 978-0252039089), \$29.95 (\$22.19 Amazon), 248 pp.

*You haven't come to convert us to your religion with words, but with singing....*  
- The Lord Provost of Glasgow

As a child, I remember my parents lying in bed on Sunday morning listening to *Music and the Spoken Word*, the Mormon Tabernacle Broadcast from Salt Lake City, before we ourselves headed out to church. To this day, I have no idea why this was part of their routine; they were not particularly religious and certainly had no leanings toward the LDS. If I had to venture a guess, it probably would be that this broadcast, in addition to being a quiet way to start the day, spoke to my parents about culture—a specifically American culture. To them it was an authentic representation of American values distilled across the airwaves, a purveyor of what was right and good about the country.

This idea (or more specifically, the creation of this imagery) is the trajectory of *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography*, by author Michael Hicks. Mr. Hicks is no stranger to the topic; he is Professor of Music at Brigham Young University and the author of *Mormonism and Music: A History* (University of Illinois Press, 1989). He is also an active composer and performer and has published monographs on both Henry Cowell and Christian Wolff.

It is the cultural interface of the choir with American society that drives this book, and Hicks deftly unfolds how this group of musical, religious outcasts eventually garnered

the moniker of “America’s Choir,” bestowed upon them by a then-president Ronald Reagan. This journey shows the inevitable conflicts that arose between notions of art and mission, aesthetics and utility, choir leadership and church leadership—cracking open, even if for just a quick moment, some of the deep secrecy that surrounds this unquestionably iconic group.

But a tale of any choir is necessarily a tale of its leaders and so Hicks begins at the beginning. Bucking the “American Protestant” trend of anti-choir, anti-musical literacy (p. 4), the Mormon leadership (Joseph Smith) made arrangements for the establishment of a singing school as early as 1836, ostensibly to support the temple then being built in Ohio. It began modestly enough with just the singing of a few hymns. The singing school idea followed the Mormons in their flight to Nauvoo, Ill. (where a music department was quickly founded at the newly created University of Nauvoo) and again to Salt Lake City, where the real foundation of the choir took hold. Surprisingly, the building blocks came from across the Atlantic; the bulk of the early choir consisted of a large number of Welsh “convert-singers.” (p. 16) The choral tradition is huge in Wales and this infusion of musical energy no doubt intensified and realigned the culture of the nascent Temple Choir. Equally surprising, the choir’s early conductors were all British: James Smithies, C.J. Thomas, and George Careless. This period saw great growth in the choir and the first of their hallmarks, a complete *Messiah* performance in 1875. In an era when bigger was definitely better, the Tabernacle Choir still stood out as gargantuan. Near the turn of the century, the choir rolls stood at 550. (p. 37)

The Tabernacle Choir was about to enter the national stage. In 1893, under their director Evan Stephens, they were invited to participate in a national *eisteddfod* held at the Chicago Columbian Exposition, a high-stakes “sing off” organized by the immigrant Welsh community. To everyone’s surprise, the Tabernacle Choir came in second place, beating the “old-school, ultra-Welsh singers of the Cymmrodorion.” (p. 42) This event

propelled the choir into the national spotlight and also enshrined their place (or rather, their function) in the Mormon hierarchy. A letter from the First Presidency states that the choir’s success would “unstop the ears of thousands now deaf to the truth, soften their stony hearts, and inspire precious souls with a love for that which is divine. Thus removing prejudice dispelling ignorance and shedding forth the precious light of heaven to tens of thousands who have been, and are still, misled concerning us [sic].” (p. 45)

Yet, with national prominence came conflict over the ultimate goal of the Tabernacle Choir. Were they to be, as the Presidency made clear in his letter from 1895, a primarily missionary venture or (as Stephens and the majority of the choir believed) an artistic one? As the choir grew in skill and stature, guest artists began appearing with them. John Philip Sousa, Nellie Melba, and Ignace Paderewski were a few of those whose talents were backed by the Tabernacle Choir. (p. 49) More and more, the Tabernacle Choir began to look like a “show” choir rather than a musical expression of the Mormon faith. Repertoire choice became contentious with frequent confrontations between the musical and ecclesiastical sectors. To this day, it is clear that tension remains between the artistic and missionary wings of the choir machine.

The choir’s first successful recording occurred in 1910, but it was radio that secured their lasting place in the spotlight. NBC launched a weekly, thirty-minute show with organ and choir music in 1929 that featured the Tabernacle Choir, now under the direction of Stephens’ successor, Anthony Lund. This broadcast reached a large, national audience and received good press. LDS leaders quickly realized the value this broadcast had in presenting a positive Mormon image to the nation. In 1932, the program moved to CBS and was broadcast on Sunday morning. It was expanded to one hour in 1933, but then pulled back to 30 minutes in 1936. This event in the choir’s life, perhaps more than any other, firmly established its career as a national voice. As Hicks notes, “The Mormons, in this at least, had

become the putative spokespeople for mainstream U.S. Christendom in music.” (p. 73)

Mid-century was a culmination in many ways for the Tabernacle Choir. Accolades turned into awards: a Peabody in 1944 and a Grammy in 1959 for their recording of the *Messiah* with Eugene Ormandy. This recording may perhaps be the most important in their legacy; in addition to its Grammy, it went Gold in 1963 and was inducted into the National Recording Registry in 2004. Now too, the choir’s presence as an American institution began to solidify, frequently appearing at state occasions. The Tabernacle Choir was invited to sing at the White House for Eisenhower (1958), and was featured at the inaugurations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon (1968 and 1972). And lest we forget, it was at Reagan’s first inauguration where it was anointed “America’s Choir.”

During this particularly fertile period, the choir had undergone a succession of conductors. Lund had died suddenly in 1935 and was followed by Spencer Cornwall, who directed them for the next twenty-two years. Under his command, the choir would journey through their first international tour, several movie soundtracks, a presidential funeral, and a contract with the largest record company in the world. (p. 84). Staged pageants began to appear under his direction, direct precursors to the glamorous productions now televised from Salt Lake City every December on local PBS stations. In the fight between mission and art, Cornwall’s reign was clearly arts inspired. Choral literature became more “highbrow,” with Bach as the ideal aesthetic. Countering the resistance to his musical elitism, Cornwall stated that he was “discouraged with the attitude choir members are taking on better music, especially Bach—it shows lack of training or capacity.” (p. 105) Cornwall’s days were numbered; his ambitious repertoire and downplaying of the choir’s proselytizing role ensured his demise. (p. 110)

Richard Condie was next in line, though originally only under a temporary status. His was to be a two-year term, while Newell Wright, the Presidency’s choice, was doing graduate

work at USC. However, the tumultuous success of the Tabernacle Choir recordings under Condie’s “temporary” direction (*The Lord’s Prayer* and *Battle Hymn of the Republic*) secured his position and he would remain on the podium until 1973. Under Condie, the choir repertoire moved unabashedly toward the popular and secular realms. The spate of recordings (five Christmas albums alone) and television appearances, while no doubt advancing the public face of LDS (and resulting in the makeover of the Tabernacle as a media and visitor center), also made them prone to fulfilling consumer expectations. Once again, the First Presidency shared concerns about the missionary aspect of the Tabernacle Choir. Conditions were “less than desirable,” with the radio program full of “love songs, popular songs, Broadway numbers, and spirituals.” (p. 136) As a consequence, Condie was released at the end of 1973, succeeded by Jay Welch who was forced to resign six months later. Jerold Ottley stepped into the fray and remained there for twenty-five years.

Under Ottley, choir regulations were tightened. More importantly, the choir’s vision was refocused to be mission-centered. As the First Presidency wrote, “...the choir’s main purpose was to be a tool to help spread the Gospel and build good will.” Hicks continues, “Musical excellence, when achieved, was only a tool of that tool”. (p. 142) Yet despite its realigned objective, the Tabernacle Choir was clearly a soft-sell media outlet (p. 147). They issued an album of Walt Disney tunes and sang backup for John Denver. They had become a paradigm of American choral sound, but that sound, no matter how much it longed for missionary status, was clearly a capitalist machine.

Not surprisingly, the later into our own time Hicks moves, the tighter the doors close on the Tabernacle Choir inner workings. Once Ottley retires in 1999 and is succeeded, first by Craig Jessop and then Mack Wilberg, the choir machine resets itself once again. Familiar patterns play themselves out. The church hierarchy desires more “cultured” converts into the LDS fold and this motivates the rigorous performing schedule of the choir. In

many ways, the Tabernacle Choir has not diverged greatly from that vision first set forth after their triumphant second place showing at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. At that time, the First Presidency saw the propaganda machine that the Tabernacle Choir could be. Ensuing decades of marketing have made that vision not only larger, but also profitable. “America’s Choir” has become a spectacle unto itself.

Michael Hicks has written a compelling history of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Far more than a mere chronology of directors and their sound, Hicks has been successful in showing the determination of the organization to ingratiate itself into the American psyche. While the historical information is well presented and highly engaging, it is the story of the choir’s intersection with American society and culture, and Hicks’ ability to bring out these nuances, that make this book a brilliant read. **RECOMMENDED.**

---



---

## Choral Music Reviews

---

JASON OVERALL

Ian Brentnall. *God be with you till we meet again*, SATB, org. (Banks Music Publications, ECS 579, 2014), 7 pp., \$2.95.

An atmospheric chordal motif in the organ sets a meditative tone for this benediction. Trebles enter first, singing a melody that gently rises and falls in waves over the static chords in the accompaniment. The tenors and basses join in the second phrase, starting in unison with the melody; then, as the melody deviates from the opening phrase, basses and altos provide