

Consider Music

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Jeremy B. King

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Brigham Young University

Good morning and welcome to the campus of Brigham Young University, it's a pleasure for me to meet with you for a few minutes this morning. As I stand here, I suppose that I am surrounded by a group of very talented musicians. I don't think I exaggerate by saying that I am not musically gifted. I wonder what I can say or offer this group that might be worthwhile for you to hear. I hope I can share my appreciation for what you do to brighten the lives of those who hear the music you create. I've come to learn that understanding another human being, and seeing things from another's perspective is a very difficult thing to do. Perhaps in the next few minutes I can give you a glimpse of what music means to me, and so many like me who, although we don't create beautiful music, find deep spiritual meaning and significance in listening to the music created and played by others.

I don't think of myself as a victim, but there are at least two things that seem out to get me: (1) horses and (2) musical instruments. There's no need to tell you about the half a dozen ill-fated horse experiences. But I will mention the handful of attempts I've made to learn a musical instrument, all of which have ended badly.

Let me give a little background. Playing a musical instrument was always a goal of mine. As a middle-school -aged youth I thought the coolest instrument of all was the bagpipes. Perhaps all of you organ players are thinking I at least had the "pipes" part correct. I imagined myself playing the bagpipes at the front of parades, school assemblies, and maybe the occasional funeral in Scotland. But it wasn't to be. For one thing, I grew up in a small town with a small school. We had a band, but we didn't have an orchestra...no strings...we just had brass, woodwind and percussion...certainly no bagpipes. Even now, after moving away from a small town I don't see bagpipes around. What section would a bagpipe be a part of anyway? Maybe we should add an "awesome" section? Since I couldn't even find a store that sold bagpipes in Payette, Idaho, I decided to settle for the clarinet. I didn't last long with the clarinet before I switched to the much flashier trombone. It was with my trusty trombone in hand that I received my first and only "F" in an academic subject. That F might as well have stood for "Final" because I gave up on playing an instrument for good. I don't suppose many of you can empathize with me on this point...after all, who flunks out of band? Perhaps I lacked the patience, or just didn't practice enough. In the end, though, I think it came down to talent and effort, and I felt both were lacking in my case.

Although I've never mastered an instrument, or found myself to be a musician, let me share with you a quality concerning music that I do have. That is the quality of loving and appreciating beautiful music. I am currently serving as a Bishop for my church

(Latter Day Saint). As a leader in my congregation I am often presiding in meetings I attend. During my time as Bishop I've actively encouraged music as a form of worship and renewal. Recently, it's come to my attention that I have a reputation for being "pro-music". I laughed a little bit when I was told that for the first time. Honestly it's hard for me to imagine someone who is not pro-music...To me being against music would be like being against friendship or light.....although there is a lot of noise out in the world masquerading as music. I think what is meant in this case by being pro-music is a proactive desire to include music and more music in our worship services.. Since the meetings are under my direction, I have the chance to influence a bit of what goes on out there.

Thanks to some gifted musicians, who are willing to share their talents, we've had some really great music. We've enjoyed vocal solos, organ solos, duets, beautiful choir pieces, and lots and lots of congregational hymns accompanied by the organ. On, Easter Sunday this year we closed our meeting by singing two hymns in medley fashion. The organ sounded out with power and passion, and it seemed to me that the earth itself was joining in the song.

We often begin and end our meetings with music because of the tone it sets. Just last month one member of my congregation was so touched by the prelude music she approached me and expressed her appreciation for the beautiful music, "I really needed that" she said. Almost without fail following a special musical number the speaker who follows will say something like, "we should just end the meeting now" or "I wish they could just keep singing." It is my firm belief that music touches us in ways that nothing else can. The same person who can sit through a sermon completely unmoved will be brought to tears by music. In my congregation we have many, many, little children and new born infants. When things line up just right, we really create quite a ruckus, you know, things get really loud. I am so grateful when the music portion of the program comes, not only does it drown out some of that noise, it actually calms down the children. I've witnessed this first hand with my little daughter. Children often stop playing or crying and look towards the source of the music. What a wonderful testimony that is about the power of music to touch our soul. Even from the earliest ages of our life our spirits understand music and feel its influence.

We live in a world of clutter and noise. We live in a world of distraction. There is a counterfeit to virtually everything that is good and noble. Music is no exception. So much of what claims to be music is nothing more than noise, and in some cases is quite spiritually destructive. Sometimes we underestimate the effect of good music. Likewise, we may not recognize how harmful bad music can be. In this "the age of information" with virtually every book and song at our fingertips, we need ambassadors who promote and create and perform the very best of music. I believe this group qualifies as part of that group. I expect all of you promote music that edifies and enlarges the soul, music that brings a measure of peace, or strengthens us in our convictions.

Consider the power of music. Is it any wonder that parents sing their children lullaby's before they go to bed? After a bad dream parents may even sing themselves a lullaby. When an unclean thought enters our mind, we may use music to drive it away. In the dark corners of my life, I have found music to be a light that pierces through the darkness and reminds me of a better place. We are all wanderers in a strange land, far from home. And although we are far from our heavenly home, we are privileged to speak one of the languages of Heaven, that of sacred music.

I need music. I need music to soothe my soul and calm my children. I need those who are willing to create good music, or who perform music created by others. Of all the arts, music is so re-creatable. The great works of the masters can be performed today just as they were hundreds of years ago. Those who perform these great pieces actually create them for me, and I feel as if I am hearing Bach or Mozart or sacred hymns for the first time.

I wonder if there are any here who don't feel appreciated. Perhaps you practice and prepare and then feel like no one is listening. Perhaps you feel like some aren't paying attention, or worse yet, there may be some who speak and interrupt you. I know there are times when I've spoken in church when I wonder if anyone at all is paying attention. I believe that many are listening, and that even those who aren't paying reverent attention benefit from the atmosphere you create. I mentioned earlier the example of prelude music. Even with beautiful prelude music there are some who continue to make noise or distraction. But it is much better than it otherwise would be. Have you ever been guilty of playing the wrong note? There may be the occasional person who scoffs because the wrong note was played, but there are always some who mock. I suppose there are times when efforts go unnoticed and unappreciated. There is great value in persevering even when it goes unnoticed.

When I was in high school I was fascinated by dog sledding. I read books and watched documentaries about the sport. I planned to one day compete in the 1,000 mile Iditarod dog sled race in Alaska. Even though I didn't have a dog, I decided to charter a club. After doing some paperwork, I was the inaugural member of the Payette High School Dog Sledding Club. Anyone could join, but people with dogs were preferred. People with larger dogs, especially Malamutes and Huskies were preferred even more. I made plans to construct my own dog sled and started training (and by training I mean I jogged and got in better physical shape). I coerced a couple of my friends into joining. As I recall, one of them owned a Chihuahua, and the other owned two black labs. The Chihuahua was so small that his whole body would fit through just one of the holes in a dog sled harness, so Bo (the Chihuahua was named Bo) was mostly a symbolic member of the team. The other two dogs, black labs (one of which was named Bear) were big enough, but my friends dad wouldn't let us use them for practice. No one with suitable dogs ever joined that dog sledding club. Since we didn't have any dogs the sled never got built. I laugh at it now; my poor little club, my dog-sledding club, had neither dogs nor sleds. Wouldn't that be like an organ solo without an organ? To my knowledge no one has ever attempted to re-charter the club after that first year. By almost every measure available

to humankind that dog sledding club was a failure. Since we had no funding, we didn't even have a "going out of business " party.

I mention this story for a reason. (I figured you'd be getting bored of me by this point in my talk and I needed a good funny story to wake you up). But let me draw a point from this..... I doubt the dog-sledding club ever did anything for my friends, but it was good for me. In my attempt to create something good, I became a better person. I learned and studied and genuinely enjoyed the experience (with the exception of not finding any suitable dogs). You'd have to be a pretty poor musician to fail as miserably in your musical pursuits as I did in my dog-sledding pursuits, but you'd still be a better person for having made the effort? Some efforts don't yield the results we expect, but there is great value in persevering even when it goes unnoticed. By the way, I am no longer assembling a dog sled team, so please don't offer me your stray dogs to me after the meeting.

A powerful story is told of music finding a foothold in the hearts of men even during a time of war. During the winter of 1914, about 100,000 World War I troops were involved in an unofficial ceasefire. It began, by German soldiers putting up some candles and Christmas decorations around their trenches. The soldiers continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols. The British responded by singing carols of their own. The two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to one another and more singing. Soon thereafter there were excursions across no-man's land, where small gifts were exchanged. The truce also allowed for a period of peace so recently fallen soldiers could be brought back behind their lines for burial. In many sectors the truce lasted through Christmas night and in some places until New Years Day. What an unlikely "Silent Night" that must have been.

I realize we are in the very heat of summer now, but when I think about what music means to me I can't help but make another reference to Christmas music. I love Christmas music. I find it to be joyful and uplifting. One of my best memories as a youth is that of riding on a trailer full of hay along the dark and empty streets in my hometown and singing Christmas Carols. People would come out of their homes as we passed by and listen to the songs. One of those carols, and one of my favorites is "I heard the Bells on Christmas Day". It says in part, "In despair, I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said, for Hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth goodwill to men.....then pealed the bells more loud and deep, "God is not dead nor doth he sleep, the wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth goodwill to men." May we be like those bells, ringing out, for all to hear who will hear.

Never in the history of the world has music been more important because of its unique ability to reach the hearts of us all and touch us for good. I am anxiously looking forward to the upcoming Christmas season. As a congregation we are planning to go Christmas caroling. We will sing together out in the streets of Provo. We'll stop by the homes of the elderly, the sick, or the downtrodden. I know the power beautiful music has to "lift the hands that hang down". And there are so many hands that hang down.

We are a better people and a better world because of music and those who share their musical talents with us. I know I am in a group of musically talented people today. Many of you have served for years in different capacities relating to music, and the organ. Please keep preparing, and serving and sharing your gift with me and others like me. We need you.

I know that many of you are involved in the music for religious congregations. I'd like to suggest how music may become a more important and appreciated part of your meetings: Break out of the routine. Sometimes when we do the same things again and again, in the same order, we get into a routine. Routines can be good, there is great power of consistency that comes from establishing a pattern, but routine often leads to complacency and lead us to take something for granted. Some of the things we've done in my congregation to break out of our routine include mixing up the order and frequency of musical selections. We may have one intermediate hymn or a choir selection, or one of each. When we sing a song we sing all verses, not just the main verses printed next to the music but the additional verses listed at the end, we don't cut our songs short for expediency. Even when we are running late, we sing the entire hymn. We have a variety of music and use a good mix of old favorites and new pieces. We ask many to participate. Our youth and children sing. Some of our meetings consist almost exclusively of music such as our Easter Sunday or Christmas program. Perhaps one of the best things we've done to break the routine was to have two closing hymns on Easter Sunday. Doesn't that say, "We aren't just singing to close the meeting because that is what we do...we are singing because music belongs here....it's Easter...let's worship the Lord in song."

We've talked today about the great power music has to edify and enlarge our souls. We recognize that so much music, especially sacred music, has great power to strengthen us spiritually and fortify our convictions. As a non-musician who admittedly doesn't understand how much effort it must take, "thank you for your efforts". I'm grateful to you for developing your talents and for your willingness to share your talent. I hope you have a wonderful conference. I'm sure you'll be edified and enlarged by the things you hear and learn over the next several days. May you take that edification and share it in whatever capacity you can. Let us find hope through music. Like us be like those wonderful Christmas bells that go "Ring, Ring, Singing, on their way....A voice, a chime, a chant sublime of Peace on Earth, good will to men."