

Everything I REALLY Know about Music, I Learned at Church

by

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Introduction

Thank, you Brother Cook, for this special opportunity to share some thoughts with fellow musicians of the Church. When Brother Cook invited me to give this keynote, he mentioned the possibility of also sharing some of my experiences with our late brother, Doug Bush. Therefore, I would like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Douglas Earl Bush. Doug was one of my very best friends; we drove all over Europe together sharing favorite places with each other while also working on our research projects. We teased each other that between us, we were all too well acquainted with every pastry and chocolate shop between Amsterdam and Budapest. Doug served a mission in German-speaking Switzerland, and I am of French-speaking Swiss ancestry, so we were both hopelessly in love with all things Swiss. However, he was not acquainted with Swiss chocolate from the French cantons, so that gave me an opportunity to expand his already considerable palette of options. From then on, he always brought back to me from his trips a few delectables made by the company where one of my Jaccard cousins had worked before retiring.

Doug had never been to Hungary where I have been researching their wonderful and highly developed national music education system since 1980. So, my wife Alta and I arranged to meet him one day about 10 years ago at the main train station in Budapest, where he would be arriving from Vienna. We had already warned him about the over-eager (and sometimes aggressive) taxi drivers in case we were late. In what was surely the Lord's perfect timing, Doug stepped out of the station just as we made our first circuit

round the parking lot. I threw his suitcases into the trunk, he climbed into the back seat and we were off on our wild adventure. I noticed that he was carefully holding a cake-sized pastry box by the top strings and instinctively knew that chocolate would soon be involved. Our first stop was the Bulgarian Culture House where we would spend the first night. As soon as we installed Doug in his room, he invited us to sit on the edge of his bed and opened up the box to reveal a Sacher Torte fresh from Vienna. He divvied it up, and we polished it off like the three little pigs.

The next day, as we drove deep into the interior of Hungary, Doug would tell us to stop at what seemed like every other gas station to treat us to a Magnum ice cream bar. We must have eaten at least four apiece that afternoon. Alta and I later reflected that it was his way of thanking us for taking him around Hungary to scout out the possibility of his doing a future organ performance tour there. Alta and Doug both grew up on ranches, she in Arizona and he in Montana, so they understood each other perfectly and I was always the fall guy for their hilarious ranch stories. All it took was the sighting of a single cow to set them off again. We basically ate, laughed and giggled our way through the Hungarian countryside.

However, as many of you know, there was much more to Doug than food, chocolate and his devastating wit (we couldn't sit anywhere near each other in BYU faculty meetings). He also loved people, especially his students. We shared many students and what struck me the most was his acceptance of students with a wide range of abilities; he was as concerned with raising amateurs as well as professionals. I believe Doug never forgot his own humble journey from a less than musical rural atmosphere to the great musician, composer and teacher he became. The rest of my remarks today are

intended to convey that attitude and spirit. It is perhaps the best way I can honor him and pass the baton to you and all those you will edify and teach in your homes, wards and stakes.

Talent Myth

From my vantage point as a teacher of music teachers, I find that “talent” is one of the most misused words in our vocabulary. It seems that almost every person in our national society equates the Savior’s use of “talents” with the ability to perform something. However, in His context, it is clear that He is talking about opportunities for growth. The unprofitable servant was chastized not because he wasn’t capable, but because he did not seize the opportunity to become *more* capable. Understanding the matter of talent this way profoundly changes how we should think about whether or not people are “musical.” For my part, I boldly tell you that *all* of us are born musical; hundreds of my colleagues around the world agree with me. So, it becomes a matter of education, *serious* lifelong education, not haphazard or unsubstantial “tone baths” as one of my early mentors called it.¹

I home teach two wonderful sisters who have a sign prominently displayed for all visitors to see upon entering their humble home. It reads: “Comparison is the thief of joy.” Nothing could apply more perfectly to the world of musicians! The first great truth of music making is that there will *always* be someone who sings or plays better than you. Admit it, get over it, celebrate their accomplishments and enjoy yours. They are not truly artists if they give the slightest hint of disdain toward you, and you are not a true artist if you think you are superior to those of lesser musical prowess. The Zion standard for musicians must surely be one of mutual encouragement and cooperation as we build each

other. The scriptural record teaches us that Zion will be a cooperative rather than a competitive endeavor.

The other great truth of music is that no matter how good we may be now or in the future, we all pale in comparison to the immense mountain we musicians choose to climb, that vast ever-growing body of literature called Music. I have always loved how Belgian-Swiss music psychologist Edgar Willems characterized our dilemma:

**Bad musicians *cannot* hear what they are playing;
Mediocre ones *could* hear it, but they don't listen;
Average musicians hear what they *just* played;
Only good musicians hear what they are *going* to play.²**

In brief, music requires lifelong learning, whether at the professional, amateur or church calling level. It requires developing a careful balance among heart, head, ears and hands, in that order. We too often begin at the wrong end of that journey.

We are not great musicians just because *we* say we are, what I call “The Aïda Complex.” We lived back East for several years and at one point in time, a sister moved into our ward and announced that she was an opera singer. She was what Doug Bush would have called “one spicy meatball.” I happened to know from being on the Stake High Council and having heard her sing in another ward, that *she* thought she was an opera singer. She had the presence, she had the sound, but she did not have the ear. Unfortunately and inexplicably, bishop after bishop called her to be the ward music chairperson, which literally kept her from growing in the ways that other non-musical callings would provide for her. From that position of authority, she made sure that she sang in church once a month. Moreover, she sang opera arias slightly out of tune and loud enough to peel the paint off the walls. After a few months of this, a young child gave voice to what everyone was thinking in a scene that I shall never forget. The sister made

her usual grand entrance from the back row up to the stand, tossing her thick mane of beautiful hair. Just as she started up the aisle, four-year-old Todd caught sight of her, stood up on the pew and loudly cried “Oh, no!” All of the adults immediately stuffed their fists in their mouths and their head between their legs. The whole congregation was a sea of heaving backs trying with all their might to maintain some sense of decorum. She was stunningly oblivious to the scene before her. Would you believe that it all happened again a month later, except that Todd’s mother reached up and grabbed him just as he said “Oh, no!” and when she pulled him down he whacked his forehead on the back of the pew, sounding like a rifle shot? He began to wail, and the tragic comedy of it all once again put the congregation nearly convulsing under their pews. She blithely sang through it all.

I came to understand that this dear misguided and unfortunately enabled sister was suffering from a sort of musical sickness in which her self worth was bound to her own misconception of music. That realization was only the beginning of my own sorrows because I was soon called to be the ward choir director. She came habitually late to rehearsals and insisted on singing with her opera voice. I finally had to do something about it to avoid driving away the rest of the choir members. So after much thought, prayer, and practicing the right tone of voice, I finally mustered up the courage to say, “Sister, would you please be so kind as to use your choir voice.” Her response was, “Oh no, I can’t do that because my voice has been *trained*.” And so while you are here this week to seek “training” in organ playing, please remember that music is something we do *with* people, not *to* them. It should not be an affliction we visit upon those within our spheres of influence.

Now, please be aware that as organists, you play the biggest, potentially loudest instrument on earth. Please do all you can to make sure that the little Todds of the Church will not cry out in anguish, “Oh, no!” when you begin to play. Church service playing, including preludes and postludes, are *not* recitals. One of my favorite local high school choral directors once told me of being on tour with their university choir in a resort town in another country. While they were walking down the main street together looking in the shop windows late at night one of their singers who was notorious for being the resident *diva* (another “spicy meatball”) shouted, “Look, it says GO Diva!” They were stunned to see that she was pointing to a display of *Godiva* chocolates, then stunned again when they realized she really didn’t know! The Church does not need *divas* or *divos* of any sort, but humble musicians who know the true place of music in the sacrament service.

Elder Kevin S. Hamilton of the Seventy indirectly spoke about the true function of music in the sacrament meeting in his October 2013 conference talk: “Each week we have the opportunity to attend a sacrament meeting, where we can renew these covenants by partaking of the bread and water of the sacrament ordinance . . . God’s promise to us in return is His Spirit as a guide and protection.” Continuing on he says, “We renew our covenants, receive an increased measure of the Spirit, and have the additional blessing of being instructed and edified by the Holy Ghost.”³ In other words, all of our playing of prelude music and the accompanying and singing of hymns must help the congregation approach the ordinance of the sacrament in the utmost reverence while also inviting the Spirit to attend.

Nothing could be clearer. Please work with your choristers to agree on *tempi*, staying within the range of beats per minute as indicated in the Hymnal. Please chose prelude and postlude pieces that invite and retain the Spirit rather than displaying your technically virtuosity. To play lyrically, softly and in a subdued, quiet way requires a different kind of virtuosity rooted in your own spirituality. Mastering the art of registration on the particular organ in your chapel goes a long way toward providing spiritually conducive music. If *you* respect the music, then others will also and many of the musical problems we experience in wards will disappear. Take the music seriously, yourselves not so much!

As if the “Aïda Complex” episodes in our ward out East were not enough, the new bishop was also an organist. Up until his arrival, we had enjoyed the soft, reverent music of our three very fine ward organists, any two of whom occasionally played wonderful organ-piano duet hymn arrangements for special musical numbers. But this highly competitive bishop wanted everyone to know that he was a “classically trained” organist and to my horror, dismissed the three from playing the postludes so that he could play them, which he choose to be the great Bach preludes and fugues at full blast. The congregation fled from the chapel and so began the habit of “fellowshipping in the halls” instead of going straight to Sunday School classes. I tried to talk to him about it, but he disdained what he perceived to be the inferior talents of the other three, harking back to what I said at the beginning of this talk. As one who believes in the innate musicality of all mankind, I was greatly saddened by his attitude.

Now Here Comes Something More Than Music

Music is a powerful force pervading the Universe. In the 1970's, the NASA Voyager missions transmitted back to Earth musical sounds seemingly organized like compositions as emitted by the magnetospheres of the planets of our solar system, their moons and their interactions with the solar wind. But music also fills our inner universe, that of our souls. One of my dearest colleagues is a masterful musician, Gabriella Thész, the former director of the world reknown Hungarian Radio Children's Choir who now directs the Children's Choir of the Hungarian National Philharmonic. She once told me in a recorded interview:

Part rehearsals are very intimate. I can sit down and talk to them and I can tell them so many times just little things in comparison to the music. Not only pure intonation, because if their soul is okay, they will be singing much differently. Now, this Bartók piece for example, *Párnás Tancdal*, is philosophical and *here comes something more than music, because this is about life*. The main idea is to *form their personality through their soul [and] their sensitivity, and that means they become different people through music*. So the music helps me talk to them. The music is the instrument I'm using to change them [and] to give ideas [to them] from people like composers. Music doesn't give you words—*music gives you more, it changes the soul*. I teach them how to speak the language of music, and actually, *we form their spirit, their soul, their mind, their whole personality*. It's part of the work, which belongs to the art [of music]. So *art forms people* and we would not be able to live without art.⁴ (edited for clarity and continuity, emphases added)

Find the Balance

As organists, you may be wondering why I keep talking about singers, singing and choirs. Well, it's because singing is how the vast majority of Church members make music during Church services. Your calling is to *accompany* them, but as you already know, you often find yourselves in the position of enlightening and teaching them, an aspect of your calling which will require much tender Christlike nurturing, patience and diplomacy. Albert Lavignac, one of the great musical minds of the Paris Conservatory and Debussy's teacher once wrote: "He/she who is *only* a pianist is not a good pianist." In other words, you must have a multi-dimensional life, because your music can only reflect the richness of your life or the lack thereof. All good organists know that they should also

be able to conduct, to rehearse, and to sing. These are the tools they have through which to help others give public utterance to the Spirit during times of worship.

I also encourage you to have frequent, long and deep talks with yourself about your own life, the musical part of it and all of its other dimensions. President David O. McKay often taught the importance of personal and prayerful meditation. Use these times to check up on whether you are balanced. Are you so consumed by your passion for music that you are telling the Lord and His local Church leaders what callings you should have? Do you have the faith and courage to open yourself up to other callings through which, as in the Parable of Talents, you can seize opportunities to grow in other directions and dimensions? If you can, I promise you that you will become a better musician because you will ultimately have more to express through your musicianship. A great deepening and maturing will take place in your musical expressions because the prime function of music is to express the *life* in Life.

I once saw a wonderful sign on the door of a restaurant in Paris: “Fresh vegetables served according to the rhythm of the seasons.” Meditate on the times and seasons of your life in which music may sometimes be at the forefront and at other times in the background. Live, love, have a life, be well rounded, be an interested and interesting person. This life is the one chance you have to fully experience the delights of mortality in this beautiful creation the Lord has made expressly for us. As Isaiah wrote, “Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.”⁵ Let Him be yours as well, for His purpose is that you “might have joy.”⁶ Alma asks us if we “have felt to sing the song of redeeming love.”⁷ May all of our music making and teaching convey that pure

love melody, first to Deity and then to those we serve. Bach knew this, whose *Solo Dei Gloria* not only adorned his compositions, but also Doug's home.

Conclusion

If I were to ask you to remember only one thing from this talk, it would be that

“Comparison is the thief of joy.” Rejoice in who *you* are and in who *you* are becoming.

Celebrate the fact that God made *you*, that there is just *one* of you that has ever been created, that *you* are unique and wonderful! Greet yourself in the mirror every morning in this way, even make a sign to stick on the mirror if it will help you to remember: “I am loveable, capable and competent, and when today is over, I will have made this world better!” Filling it with music is a great place to start.

Thank you and God bless you!

¹ The late O.M. Hartsell (1919-2005), former Head of Music Education, University of Arizona School of Music.

² Willems, Edgar (1987). *Psychological Foundations of Musical Education-Fourth Edition* (Les Bases Psychologiques de l'Éducation Musicale). Translated by Jerry L. Jaccard, published by Brigham Young University Creative Works. ISBN: 978-0-8425-2827-6. Originally published in French by Éditions «Pro Musica», Bienne, Switzerland, 215 pp.

³ Hamilton, Elder Kevin S. “Continually Holding Fast,” *The Ensign*, November 2013, p. 100.

⁴ Gabriella Thész in conversation with Jerry L. Jaccard, West Hartford CT, August 1993.

⁵ Isaiah 12:2.

⁶ 2 Nephi 2:25.

⁷ Alma 5:26.