

**Keynote Address**  
BYU Organ Workshop 2018  
Brian Mathias, DMA

Good morning, everyone. It's wonderful to look out and see many familiar faces as well as many new ones! This is my ninth year at this workshop, and though my role will be somewhat different this year than in previous years, I consider it a great honor to be here with you. For many years, I have drawn great inspiration from the people that come to this workshop. Your dedication to this marvelous instrument and the sacrifices you make to be here are so admirable and are a great reminder to me of why I love the organ. Before I start into my remarks for today, I want to let you know how much I love and admire the people you'll be learning from this week. The instructors of this workshop are some of my closest friends and I hold them in highest respect. I encourage you to take every opportunity to learn from them this week. They have much to offer, and your lives will be enriched by the time that you spend with them.

Those of you who have been coming to the Organ Workshop for some time are aware that my life has undergone some rather drastic changes since we sat here one year ago listening to Clay Christiansen give the keynote address. At that time, I was an adjunct faculty member here at BYU. The Tabernacle Choir had posted an open position, but had not yet begun reviewing applications. If I look a little older and more haggard than when you saw me last year, it's because I spent the last four months of 2017 practicing and nervously waiting, which culminated in an audition that I never wish to repeat, followed by more nervous waiting, followed by two weeks of *major* secret keeping, followed by four months of teaching at BYU *and* working with the Tabernacle Choir simultaneously, followed by a trip to France with the BYU organ department, followed by moving (*twice!*), followed by the Tabernacle Choir's

Classic Coast Tour in June. I should also mention that my first few months with the Tabernacle Choir included two complete performances of Handel's *Messiah*, April General Conference, and recording a new CD! It has been an eventful year at the Mathias home. After all that, I'm happy to report to you that my children still recognize me and my wife still likes me! As a family, we feel tremendously blessed by the events of the last year. It has been a year full of great challenges and even greater blessings.

In this magnificent whirlwind, I've had to learn many things very quickly. As I have pondered what I might share with you today, I felt it fitting to relate to you some of the things I've learned during these first several months on the job in hopes that some of them might be useful to all of you, wherever you might be in your organ playing.

To provide context for these remarks, I will briefly describe what being a Tabernacle Organist entails. As most of you are probably aware, the Tabernacle Choir has three full-time and two part-time organists. Our most important duty is to accompany the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in General Conference, weekly *Music and the Spoken Word* broadcasts, concerts, and rehearsals. In addition to our work with the choir, we perform daily organ recitals on Temple Square and provide music for various other events on Temple Square as needed. All of this requires a lot of practicing, and that is where we spend a great deal of our time each week.

For many years as an observer of the tabernacle organists, I marveled at the high standard of excellence that has been a part of the Temple Square musical tradition for decades. As a newcomer to this group, I am keenly aware of the burden that is now mine to help uphold that standard. Sadly, I have learned over the last several months that at least *one* of the Tabernacle Organists is very, very human! But I have also learned a great deal by pushing myself harder

than ever before and have been the recipient of much-needed grace in times of need. Today I would like to share with you some of the insights gained from these experiences.

The first lesson might seem obvious, but it is that thorough preparation is essential to a good performance. This is a concept I've believed in and practiced for a long time. However, I've come to appreciate it more deeply in recent months as I have been working to hone my practice habits to a higher degree than ever before. As I'm sure you can imagine, the Tabernacle organ bench is, at times, a *very hot seat*. The pressure of playing—particularly as a soloist—on a live TV broadcast can be immense. I will never forget sitting on the bench during my first broadcast this last March. As the time approached for my solo—the fiery final movement of Charles-Marie Widor's sixth organ symphony—I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a cameraman getting into position just a few feet to my left. In that instant, the reality of what I was about to do struck me in a rather profound and terrifying way! Thankfully, I had been warned by my colleagues about this, and I had some sense of the mental struggle I was about to go through. What we all need during performance, whether it's in a recital, a church meeting, or even a routine practice session, is to remain focused, calm, and confident. You know as well as I do that this is extremely difficult at times, and *that* is where good preparation will save you. In this moment, I was very grateful that I had spent the last few weeks drilling this piece of music in every imaginable way—slowly, in sections, in various combinations of parts, in alternate rhythms, recording myself, playing for others, etc. This preparation gave me a very reliable foundation to fall back on even in moments when I struggled to maintain perfect focus.

This experience also taught me the value of a different kind of preparation. In the weeks leading up to my first day on the bench, my colleagues encouraged me to practice playing through the entire broadcast from start to finish. This is something I wouldn't have thought to

give much attention to, but it proved to be one of the most valuable steps in my preparation. Because most Music and the Spoken Word broadcasts today proceed without any announcement between pieces, we often have a very short amount of time to get prepared to begin the next piece on the program. Immediately after releasing the final chord of the Widor *Final*, I had to jump right into “His Yoke is Easy,” from Handel’s *Messiah* with no time to rearrange the music on the rack. This proved to be a challenging transition, but with plenty of practice, it was perfectly manageable. Playing through the entire broadcast, from “Gently Raise the Sacred Strain” to the iconic “As the Dew from Heaven Distilling,” a few dozen times in the days leading up to that first Sunday morning was a lifesaver, and it’s something I’ve made a consistent habit of since that time. You might consider giving this a try for your next sacrament meeting. Practicing in this way is a great way to circumvent silly errors such as starting on the wrong memory level, hitting the wrong piston, forgetting to turn pages between pieces, etc., and can also help you prepare for the mental transition required to move from one piece to the next. Building these habits in a less pressure-filled situation (when no one is watching you!) has been very helpful to me, and I think many of you may benefit from trying it as well.

The next lesson is that there is never enough time to prepare, so it’s important to use practice time efficiently. As I mentioned earlier, between daily recitals, choir rehearsals, broadcasts, and concerts, we are performing on a nearly daily basis. There is new music to learn and practice every week. I’m sure many of you feel the same way. Whether you’re preparing hymns for sacrament meeting, repertoire pieces for an Independent Study course, or technical exercises for an upcoming lesson, it’s hard to squeeze everything into the time you have available. For this reason, we would all benefit from examining the way we use our practice time. Allow me to offer a few suggestions for this.

First, use goals to structure and plan your practice. I often keep a list of every piece I need to be working on, ordered by priority. At the start of my practicing each day, I look over this list and make a plan for what I want or need to accomplish with each piece and how I will divide my time in order to reach that goal. Of course, it frequently happens that I underestimate the amount of time a particularly tricky passage might take or perhaps manage to make the progress I need on another passage in less time than estimated. Your goals will need to have a little flexibility, especially in the beginning. The important concept here is that goal-oriented practice encourages a mindset in which you are not simply sitting down to practice for an hour—you are sitting down to accomplish a specific goal or set of goals. With this mindset, every minute counts for something. If you've never practiced in this way, I encourage you to try it. You will be surprised how much you can accomplish.

Second, use practice techniques that are efficient. In my roughly twelve years of teaching, I found that the majority of students that came to me had never really been taught practice habits beyond the “sit down and play it a bunch of times” method. If this is your current routine, listen carefully this week, and I'm certain that you'll come away with some helpful strategies and techniques that will help you practice more effectively. Organ playing is a complex task, and trying to play everything at once at full tempo often amounts to “practicing” mistakes that later have to be corrected. It is a well-known fact that the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line. If we apply this rule to our practicing, we might find that learning the right notes with the correct fingering by slowing down, playing hands or feet separately, or working in small sections allows us to take the shortest, most direct path to accomplishing our goal. Many people feel that they don't have time to do this kind of practicing because it takes too long. Personally, I

don't have time to *not* do this kind of practicing. It is the fastest way I know of to learn music, and that's something we can all appreciate and use in our lives.

Looking at this issue from the opposite direction, I would also encourage you to make sure that you're not taking more time than is actually needed to learn something to the point that you can perform it confidently and securely. We all know the feeling of having a hard time putting something down during a practice session. "Just one more time," we tell ourselves. And then another. And another. I'm absolutely in favor of being thorough, but at a certain point, the repetition can become counterproductive and take precious time away from other pieces that might need some attention. Work until you accomplish your goal, and then move on to whatever is next.

Once you have made your preparations, it's time to actually perform, by which I mean to play in any situation where other people are listening, which nearly always influences our thoughts as we play. This could be a sacrament meeting or other worship service, an organ lesson or recital, or something else. The BYU School of Music offers a course in performance psychology taught by Dr. Jon Skidmore. One of the essential concepts he teaches is that at a certain point, you have to say to yourself "my preparation for this performance is complete." At that point, you have to let go and acknowledge that the time for preparing is over and the time for performing has come. Dr. Skidmore then encourages students to adopt a mindset of being "Bold, Confident, and Free" when performing.

When I arrived at the University of Kansas as a new doctoral student, I had established a routine of meticulous, methodical practice and tried to carry that approach over into my performance. Imagine my surprise when during one of my first lessons with Professor James Higdon, I was playing Jehan Alain's *Litanies* when I heard him yell from the back of the recital

hall “Faster!” In this lesson and many subsequent lessons, we discussed how there is a time to be slow and methodical, and there is also a time to *let it rip*. To be clear, I’m not suggesting that we should perform recklessly, too fast, or overly loud. What I mean to say is that performance is not the time to be worrying about making mistakes—that’s what practicing is for. Performing is about making music and sharing something with your listeners that can’t be communicated any other way. Practice diligently when it’s time to practice, and when it’s time to perform, *let it rip!*

The third lesson is that there is tremendous value in asking questions to people who have answers. Between the Tabernacle Choir’s conductors and organists, I work with a small group of some of the most capable, knowledgeable, and talented musicians I have encountered anywhere. This is an incredible privilege, and one I am most grateful for. The combined wisdom and professional experience in this group is mind boggling. In the choir office, there is a closet of shared organ accompaniments. For each piece in the choir’s repertoire, there is a score that is prepared to reduce or eliminate page turns. Each score is also marked with the registrations previously used, manual changes, and various other helpful notations. As a newcomer to the staff, this closet is a goldmine containing decades of battle-tested performance knowledge. Even with this great resource available, I still often have questions about various things. Taking the time to ask my colleagues has provided many opportunities to not only get my questions answered, but to learn lots of other things that I didn’t even know I needed to learn. You will have many opportunities to ask questions this week, and I encourage you to do so. You might worry that your question is a “stupid” question, but in reality, there’s a good chance that someone sitting near you is wondering the same thing! You will rarely have the opportunity to be surrounded by so many experienced organists, so don’t let the week pass without getting answers to your burning questions.

Fourth, never let pride or ego get in the way of making good music. I've just described the incredible depth of talent and accomplishment among the choir staff. What's even more impressive is that they all get along—something that highly accomplished musicians are not always known for! This is so essential to accomplishing the Tabernacle Choir's mission "to bring joy, peace, and healing to its listeners." While there are varied and diverse opinions among the staff on various musical issues, what they uniformly understand is that making good music is more important than being "right." Given that so many of our efforts as organists are directed toward the act of worship, we would all do well to adopt this philosophy. Our congregations, choirs, and we ourselves will be uplifted in a more profound way as a result.

The last lesson is something I've already alluded to: that at some point (and hopefully sooner than later), we must come to accept our own imperfection. Despite our best efforts, at the end of the day, we are human. Have you ever made a mistake in General Conference? I have! If your Sunday morning mistakes are keeping you awake at night, I encourage you to enjoy a peaceful night of sleep *on me*. Of course, I don't intend to make light of this or suggest that we approach our responsibilities casually. I practiced more for April General Conference than almost any event I can remember. However, it is true that despite my best preparations, I didn't play quite as cleanly as I would have liked to. But that's the beautiful thing: when we give our best efforts, we receive the gift of grace from a loving God and his beloved Son, who made an infinite sacrifice in order that we could be strengthened in our weakness, and our imperfections made perfect. Because of this, we can miss a few notes and still make a perfect offering by giving the best of ourselves and accepting his grace where we fall short.

The day before my first Music and the Spoken Word broadcast in March, I went to the Tabernacle to practice in the afternoon. After running through everything several times, I felt that

I had done everything I could do, but I was still struggling to utter the all-important phrase “my preparation for this performance is complete.” Given the magnitude of what I was about to do, I felt that no amount of practicing would be sufficient for me to feel like I had done enough. While sitting in my office packing up to go home, I recalled a scripture from the 84<sup>th</sup> section of the Doctrine and Covenants that I was previously familiar with, but which suddenly took on an entirely new meaning: “And whoso receiveth you, there I will be also, for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.”

I truly believe that what we do at the organ each week matters. When we combine our efforts with the Spirit’s power, we have the ability to strengthen our brothers and sisters in profound and even life-changing ways. I hope and pray that the Lord will be with each of you in your efforts to serve the Lord’s children through your service on the bench of the King of Instruments in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.