

## **BYU Church Music Workshop**

Tuesday, August 3, 2021, 9 a.m., Madsen Recital Hall

James Kasen

### **Intro**

My friends this is a profoundly great honor for me to stand here today, in this room. I thank Brother Don Cook for this opportunity and for his confidence in me. You know, so few of us know the extent to which he has been wearing out his life to teach others how to master this heaven-sent instrument. All of us have reason to be profoundly grateful for him. You know, over the years I have learned that:

When a man or a woman work with their hands, they're a laborer.

When a man or a woman work with their hands and their head, they're a craftsman.

When a man or a woman work with their hands, their head, and their heart, they're an artist.

But when a man or a woman work with their hands, their head, their heart, and their feet, they're an organist.       *(Anonymous)*

### **The Dream**

I doubt seriously there is a single person within the sound of my voice today that doesn't have a dream that involves being an organist. The very beginnings of those dreams tend to be hard to pinpoint. They just seemed to have started and then were one day realized. At the age of five my brother and I began attending mass. At 6 a.m., dad would rouse us, we'd dress and be out the door a few minutes later headed to the Guardian Angel Cathedral just off the Strip in Las Vegas. After 30 minutes of listening to the liturgy of Mass, we would head to Winchell's Donut shop. Once home we'd enjoy the magnificent feast and then play or do whatever only to have Mom announce, "You boys get dressed, we're heading for Church." It was odd to me as a child that one version of religious worship consisted of 30 minutes of ritual followed by the most amazing maple crullers, and another consisted of three hours of church followed by pot roast. While there was wasn't music at the mass we attended, I did so adore the pageantry. However, the LDS church meetings were a different story. It was there that I heard inspiring strains from a gifted organist who knew what to do with a ghastly organ. It seemed to be feeding me musically and those thoughts and desires began growing.

When I was the "ripe old" age of 8, my mother took me to the movie theater to see the then recently released film, *The Sound of Music*. I was so moved by the setting of the

convent, the nuns, their singing and of course, Mother Superior. How I loved it! It was truly something heavenly to me! But when Maria appeared processing down the nave of the Salzburg Cathedral to the glorious strains of that majestic instrument resounding in the background, it was then and there I decided to become a both Catholic and an organist! It was my destiny!

At the age of 16, my dream came into full view while singing with a stake choir at a fund raising dinner in the newly constructed Las Vegas Polara Chapel. It was in October of 1972. There was a large gathering of generous donors seated at tables and enjoying a rather high-end dinner. At a certain point in the evening, the curtains separating the chapel and the cultural hall were slowly opened revealing the sight of a beautiful pipe organ with Ethelyn Peterson at the console energetically playing the strains of Gordon Young's, Prelude in Classic Style. *It was then and there when my senses combined to fill my soul completely up with my dream.* I have heard it said that we do not choose music, it chooses us and that was never truer than at that moment in my life.

Since then, my dream has been a significant driving force. It has inspired me to work hard and to be disciplined in the face of adversity. In spite of those times of inspiration, there have been moments when those feelings have not sufficed. The dream has not always been easy to keep alive let alone manage.

Still, I have felt an unquenchable need to express my deepest feelings through music. Such a yearning, over the years, has demanded that I keep a couple of guiding principles in mind that I feel impressed to share with you today.

### **Two Principles**

The first principle is this. The development of the gift of music and harmony is unquestionably the development of a gift of the Spirit. Because of that fact, it has to be used for the Lord's purposes and not merely for mere self-fulfillment. The second principle is. We must come to realize, respect, and retain a careful understanding of the breadth and the limitations of our gift. Let me further explain.

Regarding the first principle...When a teenager, I received, as many of you, a patriarchal blessing. In anticipation of that, I didn't know if the Lord would speak specifically about music, but I hoped He would. In the end, there were just two sentences, "You have been blessed with the gift of music and harmony. If you will use it in the service of the Lord, it will become an instrument for good and the Lord will bless thee with more gifts and the time and means to develop them." More than a mere patriarchal directive, I was taught a very important truth. The development of the gift of music and harmony is a very serious matter. For me, it would not only take work *but receiving other gifts would depend on how committed I was to developing that gift.* Our dreams can provide us with a certain level of motivation. However, it's important to realize *it won't prove completely adequate in the developmental process.* Such motivation has to be supplemented by a greater motivator; one that does not and cannot fail. That would be pure love; love for

the Lord, love for this children, love for the instrument, and even love for ourselves. I mention love for ourselves, because as part of my gift I was also given weakness that consisted of chronic generalized anxiety. It would be my faithful companion beginning at the age of two and continue into my 60s. To manage agonizing anxiety requires a profound level of compassion for oneself.

The motivation our of our dreams coupled with this unfailing motivation of love will see us through some tough situations. A dear friend told me that in her patriarchal blessing, she was blessed with the gift of discernment. When she afterwards pondered about it, she was quite proud that she had been given such a magnanimous gift. She thought, "Just think of what I can do with that!" What she didn't understand initially was that all gifts of the Spirit come to us in their raw form. There are countless examples of this important fact. Later in life, Jane recalled how the initial pride of ownership eventually vanished as she came to realize that she would have to "go through nearly every hell on earth in order to develop it." No one can be averse to hard work and come to develop any gifts of the Spirit to any significant degree. I hope you'll think about that in those moments when you just can't seem to get your fingers to move in the right direction, when they just don't quite want to "substitute," when you can't seem to get a group of measures to settle into your brain, or when you can't get the instrument to do what you really want it to do. Just remember that adversity is part of the development of the gift.

Regarding the second principle: While earning a second master's degree in Music, my focus was in choral conducting. I had had the blessing of singing of in the Tabernacle Choir and had been called on to help accompany the choir when pieces occasionally required 4-hands and 4 feet. There were also a few times when the three principle organists were busy playing the final piece of a broadcast and I was asked to play the signature piece to get the choir off the air. Those were wonderful experiences! However, in order to finish my master's degree, I knew, at some point, I would need to take a hiatus from the choir to fill an assistantship. I really didn't want to leave. What I hoped would take six months grew into *five years*. It was truly a blessing for me to be mentored by Mack Wilberg, to be one of his student assistants and to share that position with Ryan Murphy. Now, if anyone thinks that being in that position wasn't intimidating, you are terribly misinformed! You see, Mack is a genius and what is even more admirable to me is that he doesn't know it. The same is completely true of Ryan. It didn't take long for me to realize that if I was going to survive as one of Mack's assistants, I had to get a hold of myself and realize where my gift of music and harmony began and ended. I had to learn its depth, its breadth, and its limitations. Once I came to understand that and accept it, the Lord could then help me understand how I could grow my gift to be of use to Him.

All of us have heard Jesus' parable of the talents. There are several interpretations of it. One that I resonate with deals with the portions of talents given to the servants. Some have concluded that that number refers to the number of gifts that the master gave his servants. However, I have come to connect with the insight that it refers to the *degree* of the talent that was given to each of them. As I looked closely at

the extent of Mack's and Ryan's individual gifts, I fell headlong into the trap of comparing. All I could see was that I was terribly lacking. I didn't have perfect pitch. They did. I didn't have a strong piano background. They did. I didn't have the confidence at the keyboard that they did. Their harmonic ears and ability to recreate what they heard in their minds was simply stunning. I didn't have that ability to the same extent. My initial thought was that I was in **way** over my head. Then something happened one day. Mack had accepted a commission to write a cantata honoring the life of Johann Sebastian Bach. He had begun the first movement and after a Men's Chorus rehearsal asked me to go with him to his office. He had something he not only wanted me to hear that he had written but he wanted to know what I thought of it. I was stunned. Why did he need to know what I thought? That experience taught me that real humility is absolutely essential if we're ever going to be of use to the Lord with our gifts. A second experience happened with Ryan. We had a break between two Men's Chorus concerts one evening where Ryan had been almost exclusively accompanying at the piano. Once the chorus was off stage, he pulled me aside and with deep concern said, "Jim, would you please give me a blessing? I don't think I can make it through the next concert." No, he wasn't physically ill. He felt he wasn't connecting with the music and was terribly worried about making some concert-ruining mistakes at the piano. We found an empty practice room and I proceeded to speak for the Lord to bless him. Because of his faith, the Lord did give him what he so badly needed, and the show went on.

These small, but significant experiences taught me that comparing, and the often-accompanying feeling of competing, are dangerous practices to entertain in our minds and hearts. *The development of spiritual gifts will never tolerate the presence of comparing and competing in our minds, our hearts, or our behaviors.* So, as we dream deeply about our desire to be all we can as an organist, we really need to remember to pray to know the allotted portions of our gift and then work hard and rejoice in what the Lord is allotting to us. After all, what he is making of us is far greater than being an organist. He is preparing us for Godhood.

### **A Final Thought**

Now, just a final issue that I have felt impressed to address with you today. One of the great challenges I have faced while teaching students who are studying the organ as well as choral arranging is that some are completely committed to a way of thinking that is a tough hurdle for any instructor to surmount. In the scriptures, the Lord warns us about worshipping the work of our own hands that our fingers have made. (2 Nephi 12:8) When we play or write a piece of music, we are invested in a significant way in creation. But, when we begin thinking that what we have played or written is flawless, precise, and needs no improvement, we have stepped over a line and are on our way to venerating our own creations. That is dangerous territory, my friends. It places us in a position of arrogance, pride, and know-it-all-ism, and such dynamics feed the beast of narcissism which has in our day become a psychological pandemic. We musicians are also often found bearing the label of being temperamental which is something that has

plagued us for centuries. That label has plenty of historical support. When things have not gone our way, we've made our feelings known in some pretty non-diplomatic ways. I remember sitting in this room listening to a lecture on the Aural Skills of Musicianship given by Dr. Don Earl. In the course of that lecture he said, "The organists are the ones that make noise in church." I chuckled but was also a little put off. He wasn't an organist, and he had an opinion about the organ which was not unlike Igor Stravinsky's who was once asked why he had never composed for the organ. His reply? "The monster does not breathe." There are some who simply do not care for organs and there are others that simply do not care for organists and often their opinions are justified.

I remember well an experience in which I did not exactly score any positive points with a bishop. My arrogance was very evident. I was new to the ward. Once he learned that I was an organist, he asked if I would be willing to play for Sacrament Meeting. I told him I would be happy to. As I sat one day rehearsing at the console, it was easy to see that the instrument was on its last legs, and I had to register around a plethora of problems. It was one of **those** organs...you know, one that was installed 25 years earlier and had likely never had a technician sit on the bench since. The flutes sounded like they were stuffed with cotton. The principals sounded like anemic reeds. The strings sounded like weak principals. And the pedals...well the 16' stops made the windows rattle so hard that I couldn't help but wonder if at some point they would shatter and glass was going to come raining down on me. It was just ghastly! I really tried hard to prepare as best I could, and, in the end, the congregation seemed to feel inspired enough to sing. After the meeting was over, the bishop approached me and asked, "What do you think of our organ?" I responded, "Bishop, it is the most anti-worship instrument I think I have ever played." He was stunned. It was almost like I had uttered blasphemy. Seeing his reaction, I asked, "Would you be willing to give me permission to contact FM and see if it can be replaced?" I was then shocked when he said, "Yes!" I followed the prescribed procedures and thankfully it was eventually replaced. As a side note, FM called and asked if I was interested in placing a bid on the old organ. I told him I was sorry, but that I didn't have a fireplace. The only thing that organ was good for was to be used as firewood. He wasn't amused. Sometime later after thinking about that experience, I came to realize that such arrogance had truly earned me the badge of temperamental.

I now hope and pray that those days of immaturity and unkindness are behind me. Such thinking and behaving never really seems to help in any situation. I have since learned that if I'm going to be an instrument in the Lord's hands, I cannot allow the organ to become a tool to offend. It really is wrong for any of us to have our ego-driven agendas taking over our efforts as a musician. Passive aggression isn't something any of us should be proud of. Once I came to care about the highest form of empathy that a person can possess; that of caring deeply about how others experience my behavior, I came to discover another aspect of my gift. I learned that I could write arrangements and compositions, but not just any arrangement. I would be able to explore the depths of texts of the tunes I was arranging as never before. The music I have written has deep

ties to the texts that come from sacred places in my mind and heart. This I would have never have known had I continue with my ego-driven agenda. Thus, I use such techniques as carefully placed consonance and dissonance and intensity of modulations to help express those thoughts and feelings.

A couple of Sundays ago, I was putting some final thought into the program of prelude music I had planned and rehearsed. As I was placing it in my briefcase, I prayed, "Father, today as I worship Thee and Jesus at the console, I pray that my offering will be used to reach just one person if possible. I'll do my best to stay out of the way." After the opening prayer, I received a short text from a sister in the congregation that said, "Hi Brother Kasen! Maggie here from the ward. I really needed to hear, "It is Well with My Soul" today. Inspired. Thank you. It was beautiful." The tears started to come, and I felt so intensely grateful that my prayer was answered and I was used by the Lord.

We can become all that the Lord needs us to become, and we can be incredibly good at it. You and I are creators. We can create things that work against the Lord, or we can become an extension of his creations and learn well what that process is all about. Every one of us has the power to create and that is one of the main reasons we have come to this earth. In addition, we are also blessed to be participants with our Savior in his salvaging efforts. As we learn how music is the "healer's art" (*Hymn #220*), we can do such great and much-needed work. Should we, however, choose to be mediocre in our studies of the organ, we can expect to have mediocre experiences.

In closing, I recommend something for you to ponder. Karl Paulnack, the director of the music division at Boston University once said:

"If we were a medical school, and you were here as a med student practicing appendectomies, you'd take your work very seriously because you would imagine that some night at 2 AM someone is going to waltz into your emergency room and you're going to have to save their life. Well, my friend, someday at 8 PM someone is going to walk into your concert hall and bring you a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again will depend partly on how well you do your craft..."

Consider this adaptation... Some Sunday, someone is going to walk into the chapel and bring with them a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is in indescribable misery. Whether they go out with hope and renewed courage will depend a great deal on how well you and I do our craft; how well we practice, how well we plan and how sincerely we have prayed to create an atmosphere where the Spirit can be felt.

May God grant that each of us will take seriously the responsibility we have to develop the gifts we have been given, to come to know their limits, and to present ourselves over and over to the Lord with willing hearts to be used to do His work. So, for this week, our work is to learn all we can during this workshop. May I encourage you to invest yourself, as much as you can, in all that transpires over these next few days. Go happily

and humbly into your classes and lessons. Grow your motivation and nurture your dream. Be forgiving, and patient, and kind to yourself and to others. Then will we truly come to know how much the Lord has given us individually and how much he really is depending on each one of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.