

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
2013 ORGAN WORKSHOP
Keynote Address by Robert Cundick

I am honored to address you today as the keynote speaker at this annual BYU Organ Workshop. This event continues to be a superb source of information and inspiration for all participants.

I was very surprised when Don Cook invited me to speak as I do not accept speaking or performance requests because of my physical condition. The spirit falters and the flesh continues to weaken. The only exception is an occasional special funeral, such as my close friend Beverley Sorenson's. I had previously played for her husband Jim's services. The very large congregation was filled with luminaries from throughout the state. I selected the simplest organ music possible and played it very slowly. I felt that I myself was not far from being in a coffin and I'm sure that the listeners agreed.

I'm now almost 87 years of age. I am the oldest living Temple Square organist as well as the oldest living Tabernacle choir organist. Thus, I have lived and experienced a long period of continuing evolution in the music of the Restored Church as it strives to meet the complex needs of a now world-wide presence. Let me share some of my singular musical experiences both past and present.

I started "in the trenches" so to speak when a new Hammond model A electronic organ arrived at our Sandy 2nd ward. It replaced our old hand-pumped reed organ. "This is the instrument of the future", the salesman confidently proclaimed. "Pipe organs will be obsolete in ten years". I was fascinated by the sound which could be synthesized in seemingly endless variety by means of the drawbars. I promptly enrolled in a General Music Committee sponsored 12 week course for beginning organists. Upon the completion, I was called to be a Sunday School organist. I was twelve years old at the time. In those days, organ and even vocal music was performed during the passing of the sacrament. Among other ear-pleasing pieces, I often naively played "Hymn of the Nuns". (This was during World War II.) I remember attending a neighboring ward and hearing "Comin' in on a wing and a prayer. (Tho' there's one engine gone, we will still carry on, comin' in on a wing and a prayer)". Shortly thereafter, the Church abolished all sacramental music. While I was initially shocked, I soon realized that this was an inspired change. Thereafter I have continued to treasure this time in our services when we can contemplate the true meaning of the sacrament in complete (or almost complete) quiet. How I wish that this was the case during the organ prelude as well.

We sang the songs in Deseret Sunday School Songs published by The Deseret Sunday School Union. "Count Your Many blessings", "Did You Think to Pray" and "Dear to the Heart of the Shepherd" were among the favorites. These songs were beloved by the General Authorities. Though they were omitted in later publications, they reappeared in our latest hymnal due to the desire of these elderly brethren. They are now often curiously referred to as "Hymns of the Restoration".

To be prepared for every Sunday School song practice, I spent an entire summer learning to play all of these songs. I would start with the first page and proceed to play each song at a moderate tempo without stopping. I would continue to play each successive song in the same manner until I finished the last page of the book. It was a grueling task but at the end of the summer I could confidently play any of these songs at the correct tempo without mistakes. As a

result I found that I could sight-read most music. This skill has proved to be invaluable throughout my entire career.

After several years of private lessons, my teacher felt that I should study with Alexander Schreiner. Neither my parents or I could afford his very high lesson fees during these Great Depression times. Fortunately, Schreiner accepted me as his only scholarship student.

At the same time I met my wonderful high school music teacher, Donald Olsen. A BYU graduate, he was a fine violinist and a former student of Leroy J. Robertson. He showed me a manuscript copy of The Lord's Prayer. The heavens opened. I was overwhelmed by its glorious sound. This encounter later proved to be a turning point in my life when I entered the U. of U.

After high school in 1945, I served in the Merchant Marine for two years. Following my release, I enrolled at the U. of U. as a freshman music major. Since my service was not included in the GI Bill of Rights, I didn't receive any financial assistance. I continued to be self-supporting, as I had been since high school days. In addition to teaching piano and organ lessons, I played piano in jazz bands.

One of my organ students was Charlotte Ann Clark. She lived just a block away. She was 16 years old. I was 4 years older, but we had much in common. We belonged to the same ward (Sandy 2nd) and had attended the same high school (Jordan High). Moreover, we were both friends and faithful and fully committed Mormons. Mutual admiration slowly became deepest love and she accepted my engagement ring. When she excitedly showed it to her parents, her father asked, "How will he support you?". She confidently replied, "He's a musician!". Her father retorted, "I repeat the question, how will he support you?"

We were married in the Manti Temple. We bought a small home at 424 Douglas Street, very close to the U. campus. I continued my studies while teaching dozens of beginning GI piano students in the U. of U. music department serving as organist at other churches such as 1st Unitarian and United Methodist on Sundays, plus Temple B'nai Israel on Friday nights and Christian Scientist mid-week, to earn a few extra dollars. I was Maurice Abravanel's rehearsal pianist. This was all in addition to being a full-time student and loving husband and father. I did, indeed, support my wife and children very well, much to my father-in-law's amazement. In retrospect I can appreciate his concern for his wonderful daughter. She truly is one-of-a-kind. Without her, I never could have succeeded. My greatest blessing is our eternal marriage. We now have 5 children, 23 grandchildren and 33 great-grandchildren.

As a student at the U. of U. I finally met Leroy Robertson. In his graduate Bach to Contemporary class, he taught me to compose music for the first time in my life. Robertson was a superb teacher. This wonderful internationally famous composer was amazed at the maturity of Three Preludes and Fugues for Piano, which was my first work. Under Robertson's constant inspiration and encouragement, I never looked back. I have continued to compose ever since. I have also stayed in close contact with the family since his death. I continue to make every effort to perpetuate his name and his priceless legacy.

After graduation, we moved to Provo where I taught music theory at BYU. Five years later President David O. McKay called me and my family to England where I was to serve my first mission as organist at the new Hyde Park Chapel in London. One hectic week after our call we arrived to replace Roy Darley, who immediately left to return to Temple Square to resume his work as Assistant Tabernacle Organist.

But where to begin? I hadn't played the organ since we left Salt Lake, except to serve as organist in the Oak Hills 2nd Ward. All I had was a briefcase full of music. I was to play my first recital two days later and continue to play daily recitals 6 days each week. Other professional

organists would ask, "How can you possibly play six different recitals each week without breaking down?" To my consternation, our English ward and branch members would ask, "Is that all you do?"

I began by contacting Robert Munns, who was organist at nearby Holy Trinity Church. He came to my rescue. He taught me appropriate new repertoire and explained British organ design and registration. With almost constant practice and a wonderful patient wife and family, I managed to cope with this formidable challenge. Alexander Schreiner had dedicated the organ and played the initial recitals. He had set a high standard. I felt that I would be on constant trial before a potential audience of world-famed musicians. I was only able to succeed with the constant help of the Lord. Equal amounts of prayer and careful practice was the final answer.

Among many wonderful experiences, I will mention just two:

The first was playing a recital at King's College, Cambridge. My wife thought of King Henry VIII while I practiced in this silent dark, historic chapel. I was awed by the sound of this superb instrument. We were there as Francis Jackson's guests. It was a singular feeling.

The second was playing the organ accompaniment for Zoltan Kodaly's *Missa Brevis* at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Robert Munns conducted his Holy Trinity Choir. Ralph Downes was scheduled as organist but was suddenly needed elsewhere. Robert asked me to deputize, or as we would say, "substitute" for Downes. The reverberation time was enormous. The console is located high above on the central screen. It is reached by a winding staircase. When I was rehearsing before hand, I played and abruptly released a single chord, quickly slid off the bench and raced down the stairs to stand in the center of the nave below. The chord was still sounding! "Use the dome trumpet as sparingly as possible", I had been warned. "We're afraid that it could crack the dome". I had to use it for the final chord of the Kodaly. I could just imagine the possible world headlines: "Mormon organist destroys the dome at St. Paul's Cathedral".

After our English mission, we returned to Provo where I resumed teaching at BYU. A year later, another call dramatically changed our lives. I was teaching a counterpoint class. A secretary threw the door open and excitedly shout, "You must call the office of the First Presidency!" I ran to the phone and returned the call. I was told to come to Pres. Hugh B. Brown's office immediately. When I arrived he told me that Frank Asper would retire. I was to be his replacement but I could only tell my wife until I was sustained at General Conference. Speculation on campus was rampant. I only could say that I wouldn't be excommunicated or called on a another mission. I could say nothing more, I was certain of just one thing I would retire at age 65.

As my close friend, the late Edward L. Hart wrote: "The past returns, the springs of time unwind, and all is present in the heart and mind". So it is at this moment. I have shared my memory and feelings of these past events. In my mind's eye, they are as vivid and real as if they had just occurred.

The Tabernacle organ bench is a never-ending hot seat. The pressure of the work is unrelenting. In addition to live broadcasts, organ recitals, intensive organ practice and trying to be a good husband and father, I was executive head of the Church Music Dept. under Alexander Schreiner as chairman. As such, I designed and printed the Guidebook for Organists and assigned Ralph Woodward to write a Guidebook for Conductors and others to write similar guidebooks.

I also managed to persuade the Primary and Sunday School organizations to agree upon the contents of a new children's songbook. It was titled *Sing With Me*. I composed two new songs and invited such composers as Reid Nibley, Gaylen Hatton, Newell K. Brown, Jay Welch Merrill Bradshaw, Crawford Gates and others to contribute. I included songs from previous

songbooks by both organizations. Finally, I carefully copied the entire contents in pencil manuscript for the printer.

When Alexander Schreiner retired I was now the head organist. I chose John Longhurst as Schreiner's replacement. John became my closest friend and confidant.

I was privileged to work with some great men at the Tabernacle: Alexander Schreiner, Richard P. Condie, Jay Welch and Jerold Ottley. My happiest time was with Jerry. When Jerry became the conductor, we were able to work together as a team conductors, organists and business manager. Although we have all retired, we still meet with these friends and their wives once a month. We are a closely-knit group. We call ourselves "The Emeritabs".

I had many friends and no known enemies among the General Authorities. Many called me "Bob", rather than "Robert" or "Brother Cundick". During our mission in England, Mark E. Petersen and N. Eldon Tanner became our close friends. Upon our return, both these and other General Authority doors were always open to me. Thus, the various worthy projects that John and I undertook had every chance for success.

Among these are the procurement of the Robert Sipe tracker action organ, basement practice organs, harpsichords and Steinway pianos in the Assembly Hall. The only problem was that I personally had to raise the purchase money, which I did. John and I were so involved in the design of the remodeled building we also were responsible for procuring the necessary First Presidency approval for the rebuilding of the Tabernacle Organ by the Schoenstein Company, and the Casavant Organ in the Joseph Smith building.

We initiated the guest organist program and received permission for the appointment of Bonnie Goodliffe and Linda Margetts as Temple Square Organists. They became the first women to hold such a position since Katherine Romney Stewart in 1900. We felt that such a change was long overdue.

In the year 1991 as I had previously vowed, I retired as I was now 65 years of age. Pres. Howard W. Hunter had earlier asked us to serve as hosts at the BYU Jerusalem Center. Nov. 30th was my last day at the Tabernacle. On Pearl Harbor Day, Dec. 7th, just one week later we landed at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. From there we were driven up to the beautiful BYU Jerusalem Center on Mt. Scopus.

Our assignment was to change the public perception of the Center from mistrust to complete trust and appreciation. This we accomplished by improving the hosting procedure and starting a new concert series. The Iron Curtain had now fallen, the USSR had now allowed Russian Jews to leave. Superb new Jewish musicians from Russia were arriving by the plane load almost daily. It seemed that everyone getting off the planes carried an instrument case. The saying was: "If they don't carry a musical instrument case, it's because they are a pianist". As the musical job market was saturated, they were forced to accept menial work in order to survive. We featured them on the series, much to the native Israeli's appreciation. Soon, every fine Jewish musician wanted to appear in concert at the center. We gained the sponsorship of the national music network, Kol Israel, the Jerusalem Rubin Academy of Music and the Jerusalem Symphony. These concerts have continued to be held to this day, even when BYU did not have students at the center. Visitor attendance grew from 9,000 per year to 70,000 when we left.

I was also the catalyst to bring the Tabernacle choir to Israel. Their splendid concerts did much to bolster the Church's image in Israel.

We knew that we had accomplished our assignment when, just before we left, we were standing in a line at the Israel Museum. We heard a fine jewelry-loaded Jewish woman ask her obviously equally wealthy Jewish companion, "My dear, have you attended the marvelous

concerts at our Jerusalem Center? If not, you must!" Her choice of the pronoun "our" was most gratifying. We wanted to cheer aloud!

Richard Condie used to say, "Good Mormons have ants in their pants", meaning that they are "anxiously engaged in a good cause". Your attendance here today is indeed proof of your commitment to organ excellence.

I thank you very much for your kind attention.