

Joining Voices, Uniting Hearts

By Melanie Massey Hoggan



In November of 2007 my husband received a job with U.S. Customs and Border Protection working on the Montana/Canada border. I spent the next four months saying good-bye to a life I had worked hard to build and that I dearly loved—my musical life as a violin teacher in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA.

Each autumn for 12 years I had helped my students prepare Christmas music. In December our performance group shared its music at homeless shelters, women's shelters, banquets, business lunches, and churches throughout the Salt Lake Valley. It was always my favorite time of year. During those years in Salt Lake we had many special

experiences sharing the sacred music of the season and bearing testimony of the birth of Jesus Christ in even the most secular settings.

In February 2008 our family moved to Shelby, Montana, USA, population 3,000. It is the last stop on the prairie before Canada. There we found ourselves surrounded by wonderful, hardy farmers whose families had homesteaded the area 100 years earlier. I earnestly wondered what my new life held in store and what my contribution could be. As fall came around again, my heart began aching for the students I had left behind and the





Christmas music that would continue in Salt Lake without me.

I know the power that music has to break down barriers. I have seen it happen over and over again and have watched even hardened men cry when hearing the sweet music of Christmas. I recall a performance at a women's shelter in Salt Lake where women from the streets came to have their babies. They were unrefined women, but when my students played "Away in a Manger" with beautiful harmony on their small instruments, the women cried as they held their newborns. I could hardly imagine Christmas without music, without reaching out, without making a difference.

During this time, I was prompted to organize a community concert where churches and individuals would come together and each present a piece of Christmas music. The price of admission would be a donation of food for the local food pantry.

Although I felt like this was a wonderful idea, it was also very intimidating. I had only lived in my new area for seven months, and everything was still very new and unfamiliar to me. Moving forward felt like stepping into the darkness, but in October 2008 I began making my first calls.

While some of those I approached were excited about the idea, others were skeptical. Initially, some of the town clergymen were dubious about something promoted by a Mormon because of our theological differences. I could understand this because my own mother was of another faith and opposed to my membership in

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also knew that faith, love, and patience can overcome differences. Still, for a while, it seemed like I wasn't making any progress.

Then, after several dead-end calls on a particular Monday, I pushed back the doubt and made one more call. Someone had told me about a lady named Connie who loved to attend concerts. So I phoned Connie and explained my

idea.

With no hesitation, and with great enthusiasm, she encouraged me forward and said her church would love to participate. Then she gave me the names and numbers of others she thought would also be interested.

With renewed energy, I began calling more people in our community and received more recommendations. Within a few weeks there were more than 40 musicians who were excited to participate as well as several churches.

When the day of the concert arrived, I was very nervous. How would our final rehearsal go? Would anyone attend the concert? Would it work? Would it be too long or not long enough?

Fifteen minutes before the concert was scheduled to begin, I saw that the auditorium was full, that the 350 programs we had printed were already gone, and that there was still a line of people waiting to come in. My heart was pounding.

After the opening prayer, our branch was the first number on the program. There was a hush as the seven women of our branch choir walked out onto a poinsettia-filled stage. As the first strains of the song began, a peaceful spirit filled the auditorium and remained for the next two and a half hours.

Then all the musicians and performers made their way to the stage for the finale. Everyone in the audience stood together and sang "O Little

Town of Bethlehem” and “The First Noel.” We ended by singing “Silent Night,” while two children portraying Mary and Joseph made their way down the center aisle, up the stairs, and to the manger on the stage.

People talked about the concert for months afterward with a feeling of community pride. Everyone had known that their neighbors and friends had talents, but no one had ever seen those talents presented in one place at the same time. Many commented on how good it felt to have the different churches come together for an event, and others said it set the tone for the rest of the Christmas season. However, the most common sentiment was simply that it made people “feel good inside.”

Last December we held our second annual Community Christmas Concert and raised \$2,000 for the local ministerial association’s charitable work. The number of

participants and the amount of community and ecclesiastical involvement continued to grow. The concert seems to be on its way to becoming a tradition in our area—something everyone looks forward to. And still, the biggest reason people say they attend is because of the feeling that is present.

My testimony is that Heavenly Father wants our light and His light to shine. He will give us promptings. When we follow those promptings and have faith to move forward—even when it is uncomfortable—He will work His miracles through us. He is always preparing us for the next miracle. I realize now that my prior musical experiences and accomplishments had simply been preparation for that moment when everyone in our community sang “Silent Night” together.

How grateful I am for a loving Heavenly Father who sees the whole picture and knows where we fit in, where we can contribute, and how we can help bless others. ■

