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Songs Sung and Unsung

I plead with each one of us to stay permanently and faithfully in the choir.

“**T**here is sunshine in my soul today,” Eliza Hewitt wrote, “more glorious and bright than glows in any earthly sky, for Jesus is my light.”¹ With radiance in every note, that marvelous old Christian hymn is virtually impossible to sing without smiling. But today I wish to lift out of context just one line from it that may help on days when we find it hard to sing or smile and “peaceful happy moments” do not seem to “roll.” If for a time you are unable to echo the joyous melodies you hear coming from others, I ask you to hold tenaciously to the line in this hymn that reassures, “Jesus listening can hear the songs [you] cannot sing.”²

Among the realities we face as children of God living in a fallen world is that some days are difficult, days when our faith and our fortitude are tested. These challenges may come from a lack in us, a lack in others, or just a lack in life, but whatever the reasons, we find they can rob us of songs we so much want to sing and darken the promise of “springtime in [the] soul”³ that Eliza Hewitt celebrates in one of her verses.

So what do we do in such times? For one thing, we embrace the Apostle Paul’s counsel and “hope for that [which] we see not . . . [and] with patience wait for it.”⁴ In those moments when the melody of joy falters below

our power of expression, we may have to stand silent for a time and simply listen to others, drawing strength from the splendor of the music around us. Many of us who are “musically challenged” have had our confidence bolstered and our singing markedly improved by positioning ourselves next to someone with a stronger, more certain voice. Surely it follows that in singing the anthems of eternity, we should stand as close as humanly possible to the Savior and Redeemer of the world—who has absolutely perfect pitch. We then take courage from His ability to hear our silence and take

hope from His melodious messianic intercession in our behalf. Truly it is “when the Lord is near” that “the dove of peace sings in my heart [and] the flow’rs of grace appear.”⁵

On those days when we feel a little out of tune, a little less than what we think we see or hear in others, I would ask us, especially the youth of the Church, to remember it is by divine design that not all the voices in God’s choir are the same. It takes variety—sopranos and altos, baritones and basses—to make rich music. To borrow a line quoted in the cheery correspondence of two remarkable Latter-day Saint women, “All God’s critters got a place in the choir.”⁶ When we disparage our uniqueness or try to conform to fictitious stereotypes—stereotypes driven by an insatiable consumer culture and idealized beyond any possible realization by social media—we lose the richness of tone and timbre that God intended when He created a world of diversity.

Now, this is not to say that everyone in this divine chorus can simply



start shouting his or her own personal oratorio! Diversity is not cacophony, and choirs do require discipline—for our purpose today, Elder Hales, I would say discipleship—but once we have accepted divinely revealed lyrics and harmonious orchestration composed before the world was, then our Heavenly Father delights to have us sing in our own voice, not someone else's. Believe in yourself, and believe in Him. Don't demean your worth or denigrate your contribution. Above all, don't abandon your role in the chorus. Why? Because you are unique; you are irreplaceable. The loss of even one voice diminishes every other singer in this great mortal choir of ours, including the loss of those who feel they are on the margins of society or the margins of the Church.

But even as I encourage all of *you* to have faith regarding songs that may be difficult to sing, I readily acknowledge that for different reasons *I* struggle with other kinds of songs that should be—but are not yet—sung.

When I see the staggering economic inequality in the world, I feel guilty singing with Mrs. Hewitt of “blessings which [God] gives me now [and] joys ‘laid up’ above.”⁷ That chorus cannot be fully, faithfully sung until we have honorably cared for the poor. Economic deprivation is a curse that keeps on cursing, year after year and generation after generation. It damages bodies, maims spirits, harms families, and destroys dreams. If we could do more to alleviate poverty, as Jesus repeatedly commands us to do, maybe some of the less fortunate in the world

could hum a few notes of “There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today,” perhaps for the first time in their lives.

I also find it hard to sing sunny, bouncy lyrics when so many around us suffer from mental and emotional illness or other debilitating health limitations. Unfortunately, these burdens sometimes persist despite the valiant efforts of many kinds of caregivers, including family members. I pray we will not let these children of God suffer in silence and that we will be endowed with His capacity to hear the songs they cannot now sing.

And someday I hope a great global chorus will harmonize across all racial and ethnic lines, declaring that guns, slurs, and vitriol are *not* the way to deal with human conflict. The declarations of heaven cry out to us that the only



way complex societal issues can ever be satisfactorily resolved is by loving God and keeping His commandments, thus opening the door to the one lasting, salvific way to love each other as neighbors. The prophet Ether taught that we should “hope for a better world.” Reading that thought a thousand years later, war- and violence-weary Moroni declared that the “more excellent way” to that world will always be the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁸

How grateful we are that in the midst of these kinds of challenges, there comes, from time to time, another kind of song that we find ourselves unable to sing, but for a different reason. This is when feelings are so deep and personal, even so sacred, that they either cannot be or should not be expressed—like Cordelia’s love for her father, of which she said: “My love’s . . . richer than my tongue. . . . I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.”⁹ Coming to us as something holy, these sentiments are simply unutterable—spiritually ineffable—like the prayer Jesus offered for the Nephite children. Those who were witnesses to that event recorded:

“Eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard . . . so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father;

“ . . . No tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak.”¹⁰

These kinds of sanctified moments remain unuttered because expression, even if it were possible, might seem like desecration.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a mortal world with many songs we cannot or do not yet sing. But I plead with each one of us to stay permanently and faithfully in the choir, where we will be



able to savor forever that most precious anthem of all—the song of redeeming love.”¹¹ Fortunately, the seats for this particular number are limitless. There is room for those who speak different languages, celebrate diverse cultures, and live in a host of locations. There is room for the single, for the married, for large families, and for the childless. There is room for those who once had questions regarding their faith and room for those who still do. There is room for those with differing sexual attractions. In short, there is a place for everyone who loves God and honors His commandments as the inviolable measuring rod for personal behavior, for if love of God is the melody of our shared song, surely our common quest to obey Him is the indispensable harmony in it. With divine imperatives of love and faith, repentance and compassion, honesty and forgiveness, there is room in this choir for all who wish to be there.¹² “Come as you are,” a loving Father says to each of us, but He adds, “Don’t plan to stay as you are.” We smile and remember that God is determined to make of us more than we thought we could be.

In this great oratorio that is His plan for our exaltation, may we humbly follow His baton and keep working on the songs we cannot sing, until we can offer those “carol[s] to [our] King.”¹³ Then one day, as our much-loved hymn says:

We'll sing and we'll shout with the armies of heaven,

Hosanna, hosanna to God and the Lamb! . . .
*. . . As Jesus descends with his chariot off fire!*¹⁴

I testify that hour will come, that God our Eternal Father will again send to earth His Only Begotten Son, this time to rule and reign as King of kings forever. I testify that this is His restored Church and is the vehicle for bringing the teachings and saving ordinances of His gospel to all humankind. When His message “has penetrated every continent [and] visited every clime,”¹⁵ Jesus will indeed “[show] his smiling face.”¹⁶ There will be plenty of eternal sunshine for the soul that day. For this promised hour to come, I longingly pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. “There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today,” *Hymns*, no. 227.
2. *Hymns*, no. 227.
3. *Hymns*, no. 227.
4. Romans 8:25.
5. *Hymns*, no. 227.
6. Bill Staines, “All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir,” in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Emma Lou Thayne, *All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir* (1995), 4.
7. *Hymns*, no. 227.
8. See Ether 12:4, 11.
9. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*; act 1, scene 1, lines 79–80, 93–94.
10. 3 Nephi 17:16–17; emphasis added.
11. Alma 5:26; see also Alma 26:13.
12. See 2 Nephi 26:33.
13. *Hymns*, no. 227.
14. “The Spirit of God,” *Hymns*, no. 2.
15. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 142.
16. *Hymns*, no. 227.