



# THE Power AND Protection OF WORTHY MUSIC

BY ELDER RUSSELL M. NELSON  
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

**T**hrough music we raise our voices in powerful praise and prayer. Hymns provide a pattern of worship that is pleasing to God. He taught us through the Prophet Joseph Smith to “praise the Lord with singing, with music, . . . and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving” (D&C 136:28).

Who can help but be moved by the lyrics in a hymn such as “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” by English poet Isaac Watts? The message focuses on the Atonement of Jesus Christ:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

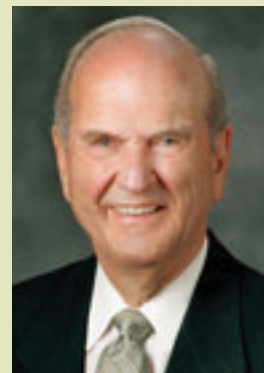
*Forbid it, Lord! that I should boast,  
Save in the death of Christ, my God:*

*All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to His blood. . . .*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, Isaac Watts did demand much from himself. In his lifetime he wrote approximately 600 hymns. Two of his most productive years were between his graduation from school at age 20 and his taking a job teaching when he was 22. At that young age many great hymns flowed from him. Hymns by Isaac Watts in the LDS hymnbook include “Joy to the World,” “Sweet Is the Work,” and “He Died! The Great Redeemer Died.”<sup>2</sup> Even as a small boy Isaac Watts had poetic potential.

“Once, during family prayers, he began to laugh. His father asked him why. [Isaac] replied that he had heard a sound and opened his eyes to see a mouse climbing a rope in



***Fill your minds with worthy sights and sounds. Cultivate your precious gift of the Holy Ghost.***



**W**orthy music has the power to make us humble, prayerful, and grateful. Prophets through all generations have taught the importance of worthy music in our expressions of worship.

a corner, and had immediately thought,

*'A little mouse for want of stairs ran up a rope to say its prayers.'*

"His father thought this irreverent, and proceeded to administer [physical] punishment, in the midst of which Isaac called out,

*'Father, father, mercy take, and I will no more verses make.'*"<sup>3</sup>

The text of another song in our hymnbook, "How Great Thou Art," was written by a young minister in Sweden named Carl Gustav Boberg when he was only 25 years old. After attending a church meeting, he walked two miles along the southeastern coast of Sweden in a thunderstorm. The experience inspired him to write the words, which were later translated into English by Stuart K. Hine:

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds thy hands have made,  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy pow'r thru-out the universe displayed;  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,  
How great thou art! How great thou art!*<sup>4</sup>

On one occasion I was in a mission conference when a missionary, with great compassion and tears in his eyes, asked me, "Why did the Savior have to suffer so much?" I reached for our hymnbook, turned to this song, and answered his question with this verse:

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,  
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,  
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing  
He bled and died to take away my sin.*<sup>5</sup>

### **The Power of Music**

Jesus suffered so much because of His love for you and me. What a message! Worthy music is powerful. It has the power to make us humble, prayerful, and grateful.

Prophets through all generations have taught the importance of worthy music in our expressions of worship. A few citations from the scriptures may serve to illustrate.

An Old Testament scripture bids us to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise" (Psalm 98:4). In the Hebrew language, the meaning of this verse is to literally *burst* forth into song and to *shout* for joy. Contrast that spirit of enthusiasm with scenes we may see at church when some sing only passively and without a spirit of joy.

A New Testament scripture counsels us to have a well of good music within, "speaking to [ourselves] in psalms



and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in [our] heart to the Lord;

“Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:19–20).

Another New Testament verse says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you . . . ; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16).

From the New Testament we also learn that the Lord and His Apostles sang a hymn at the Last Supper (see Matthew 26:30). That tradition continues in our day. Each time members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles meet in the temple, we sing a hymn. It sets a sweet, spiritual tone for our deliberations.

The Book of Mormon teaches that one’s desire to sing praises to the Lord comes with one’s complete conversion to Him. Alma asked this penetrating question: “I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26).

Ammon later exclaimed, “Blessed be the name of our God; let us sing to his praise, yea, let us give thanks to his holy name, for he doth work righteousness forever” (Alma 26:8).

Complete conversion is the key to our experiencing God’s greatest blessings. In the Doctrine and Covenants, we read this expression from the Lord: “For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads” (D&C 25:12).

In the preface to our hymnbook, the First Presidency has provided this statement:

“Inspirational music is an essential part of our church meetings. The hymns invite the Spirit of the Lord, create a feeling of reverence, unify us as members, and provide a way for us to offer praises to the Lord.

“Some of the greatest sermons are preached by the singing of hymns. Hymns move us to repentance and good works, build testimony and faith, comfort the weary, console the mourning, and inspire us to endure to the end.

***Hymns invite the Spirit of the Lord, create a feeling of reverence, unify us as members, and provide a way for us to offer praises to the Lord.***

“We hope to see an increase of hymn singing in our congregations. We encourage all members, whether musically inclined or not, to join with us in singing the hymns. We hope leaders, teachers, and members who are called upon to speak will turn often to the hymnbook to find sermons presented powerfully and beautifully in verse. . . .

“ . . . Latter-day Saints should fill their homes with the sound of worthy music. . . .

“Hymns can also help us withstand the temptations of the adversary. We encourage you to memorize your favorite hymns and study the scriptures that relate to them. Then, if unworthy thoughts enter your mind, sing a hymn to yourself, crowding out the evil with the good.”<sup>6</sup>

Worthy music also has the power to persuade. We learn this lesson from the writings of John Jaques. He was born in England in 1827, a son of Wesleyan Methodist parents. In his youth John earnestly sought the true



religion. He studied intensively with Latter-day Saint missionaries and, at the age of 18, became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

John’s austere father, upset upon hearing this news, wrote:

“I wished you . . . to attend the Wesleyan Chapel. . . .

“They [the Mormons] do not teach you . . . [to] honor and obey your parents. . . .”

He later wrote, “I . . . hope you will give up the idea of belonging to such a party. . . . It is fiction.”

John’s reply, written March 14, 1847, when he was but 20 years of age, included these words:

“Dear Father:

“ . . . I would pray . . . that I may understand the things of the Kingdom of God, and carry my ideas to you. . . .

“Since I have [joined the Church] . . . my eyes have been opened, and I have been able to understand

the truth. I can bear testimony to the truth . . . of the doctrines . . . in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>7</sup>

Three years later, at age 23, John Jaques wrote the words to a hymn we know and love:

*Oh say, what is truth? 'Tis the fairest gem  
That the riches of worlds can produce,  
And priceless the value of truth will be when  
The proud monarch's costliest diadem  
Is counted but dross and refuse.*

*Yes, say, what is truth? 'Tis the brightest prize  
To which mortals or Gods can aspire.  
Go search in the depths where it glittering lies,  
Or ascend in pursuit to the loftiest skies:  
'Tis an aim for the noblest desire.*



*The sceptre may fall from the despot's grasp  
When with winds of stern justice he copes.  
But the pillar of truth will endure to the last,  
And its firm-rooted bulwarks outstand the rude blast  
And the wreck of the fell tyrant's hopes.*

*Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,  
For the limits of time it steps o'er.  
Tho the heavens depart and the earth's fountains burst,  
Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst,  
Eternal, unchanged, evermore.*<sup>8</sup>

John stood firm in his conviction of the truth. He remained true and faithful and ultimately served as assistant to the Church historian from 1889 until his death on June 1, 1900.

Music has a sweet power to promote unity and love in the family. Not only is it an important component of family home evenings, but it can also exert a continuing

influence for good well beyond times when children are small. For my gift to our family for Christmas 2007, I prepared a compact-disc recording of musical memories. I sat at the piano and recorded a variety of music that I had sung or played to the children through the years. They liked it. Some of the grandchildren told me that the CD was “cool.”

Music has power to provide spiritual nourishment.<sup>9</sup> It has healing power.<sup>10</sup> It has the power to facilitate worship, allowing us to contemplate the Atonement and the Restoration of the gospel, with its saving principles and exalting ordinances. It provides power for us to express prayerful thoughts and bear testimony of sacred truths.

Music has power to overcome language barriers. In my experience some of the most moving congregational singing has been rendered in languages that are foreign to me. Yet it spoke strongly to my soul.

The purpose of music in our Church services is not for performance but for worship. Prayerfully selected compositions and excellent performances are appropriate in our worship services when and if members feel a spirit of worship and revelation. Church music should support the Lord and His work and not attract attention to itself.

***It is important that as Latter-day Saints we seek the guidance of the Spirit in selecting the music with which we surround ourselves.***

### **The Protection of Music**

Worthy music is not only a source of power but also of protection. For many years President Boyd K. Packer, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has taught this concept. He has often quoted a statement issued by the First Presidency many years ago: “Music can be used to exalt and inspire or to carry messages of degradation and destruction. It is therefore important that as Latter-day Saints we at all times apply the principles of the gospel and seek the guidance of the Spirit in selecting the music with which we surround ourselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Wherever we are we should carefully choose what we see and hear. We would not knowingly tolerate pornography in our homes, but if we are not careful, we may allow music into our lives that can be just as devastating.

Many youth listen to music that can be described as loud and fast, becoming louder and faster. It aims to





**M**usic has the power to facilitate worship, allowing us to contemplate the Atonement and the Restoration of the gospel, with its saving principles and exalting ordinances.

agitate, not to pacify; to excite more than to calm. Beware of that kind of music.

As you know, continued exposure to loud sounds will, in time, damage delicate organs of hearing. In like manner, if you overindulge in loud music, you will more likely become spiritually deaf, unable to hear the still, small voice. A scripture states, “The Lord your God . . . hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words” (1 Nephi 17:45).

Do not degrade yourself with the numbing shabbiness and irreverence of music that is not worthy of you. Delete the rubbish from your minds and your MP3 players.

Protect your personal standards! Be selective! Be wise!

Do not allow unworthy, raucous music to enter your life. It is *not* harmless. It can weaken your defense and allow unworthy thoughts into your mind and pave the way to unworthy acts. Please remember:

“That which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness. That which is of God is light” (D&C 50:23–24).

Fill your minds with worthy sights and sounds. Cultivate your precious gift of the Holy Ghost.

Protect it as the priceless gift that it is. Carefully listen for its quiet communication. You will be spiritually stronger if you do.

You know the proverb, “As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). As you control your thoughts, you control your actions. Indeed, worthy music can provide power and protection for the soul. ■

*From a Church Educational System fireside address given May 4, 2008, at Brigham Young University.*

**NOTES**

1. B. B. McKinney, ed., *The Broadman Hymnal* (1940), no. 191.
2. See *Hymns*, nos. 201, 147, 192.
3. “Isaac Watts, hymn-writer,” <http://elvis.rowan.edu/~kilroy/JEK/11/25c.html>.
4. *Hymns*, no. 86; see footnote on author’s original words in the hymnbook.
5. *Hymns*, no. 86.
6. *Hymns*, ix–x.
7. Stella Jaques Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques* (1978), 19–21; see also Russell M. Nelson, *The Power within Us* (1988), 90–91.
8. “Oh Say, What Is Truth?” *Hymns*, no. 272.
9. See Jay E. Jensen, “The Nourishing Power of Hymns,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 11–13.
10. See “The Healing Power of Hymns,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2008, 66–69.
11. Boyd K. Packer, “Inspiring Music—Worthy Thoughts,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1974, 25; see also *Priesthood Bulletin*, Dec. 1970, 20; *Priesthood Bulletin*, Aug. 1973, 4.



**HELPS FOR HOME EVENING**

**E**lder Dallin H. Oaks has taught that, “We need to make more use of our hymns to put us in tune with the Spirit of the Lord” (*Teaching, No Greater Call*, [1999] 172). In this article, Elder Nelson refers to “worthy music.” Discuss Elder Oaks’ statement and prayerfully decide the best way to determine for your family what is worthy music. You could play a few examples and discuss how worthy music can be a protection.