

THE FIRST MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR RECORDINGS

*The choir's
first audio
recordings paved
the way for future
success as
a goodwill
ambassador for
the Church.*



*Main Image:
The Mormon
Tabernacle Choir
performing in
the Tabernacle,
circa 1914. Left:
The record label
from the 1910
recording ses-
sion featuring
the song “Let
the Mountains
Shout for Joy.”*

By Richard E. Turley Jr.

Assistant Church Historian and Recorder

For a century and a half, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has been a goodwill ambassador for the Church.

Formed in the mid-nineteenth century, the choir rose from obscurity to fame partly because of its many sound recordings—the earliest of which were made a century ago this month. According to the *Deseret Evening News*, an “epoch in musical history” began when the Columbia Phonograph Company captured the majestic sound of the Tabernacle Choir and organ in September 1910.¹

A New Era of Sound Recording

Standing at the crossroads of the American West in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, the historic Tabernacle drew many overland travelers, some of whom commented on the quality of the fledgling choir and the great organ they heard there.² Still, the choir received little formal acclaim until its trip to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 earned it a second-place finish in a choral competition.

Even after that achievement, the choir remained largely unknown because few people around the world heard

it perform. But the growing popularity of recorded music would soon enlarge the choir’s audience.

Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, the year President Brigham Young died. Three major recording giants eventually came to dominate the record industry: Columbia, Victor, and Edison. Each sought to add the world’s best musicians to its growing list of recorded artists.

Yet the early days of sound recording presented many challenges. The microphone had been invented but was not refined enough for recording music.

Instead, artists had to stand in front of a large, flared horn that focused sound into an acoustic recording device. This technology worked well for solo artists and small ensembles but made it hard to record large performing groups.

Columbia was intent on recording such groups and sought to invent a machine for that purpose. By the fall of





Left: The Tabernacle Choir performing at the Chicago World's Fair, 1893. Left inset: Evan Stephens, Tabernacle choir conductor. Right: The Tabernacle Choir at the World's Fair in 1934.



1909 technology had made sufficient progress that the company agreed to record the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and organ. With further development, the company was able to transform a 500-pound recording machine into one that was one-fifth that size—a machine small enough to be transported from New York to Salt Lake City.³ The final product did not arrive until August 29, 1910.

At the time, the choir had a loose membership of 600 people, some of whom took part only on special occasions. Tabernacle Choir conductor Evan Stephens encouraged a good turnout for the recording session, hoping a claim to fame might entice more singers.⁴ Three hundred choir members responded.

Organ Sessions

Recording the organ would be difficult, but Alexander Hausmann, the recording engineer, was undaunted. His greatest challenge was determining where to place the recording machine in the Tabernacle so it would record both loud and soft passages clearly. On Tuesday, August 30, Hausmann tested the machine in a number of positions until he found the location that would work best.

With the device in readiness, Hausmann recorded

Tabernacle organist J. J. McClellan playing several bars of music, which Hausmann then played back to him using a “reproducer.” Satisfied, McClellan performed the closing section of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* overture. It was one of the earliest recordings ever made of a large pipe organ. After the *Deseret Evening News* declared the experiments “a complete success,”⁵ Hausmann and McClellan returned the following night to make 10 “excellent” recordings.⁶

Recording the Choir

Although capturing the organ’s sounds had been an exacting task, recording a choral group the size of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir presented a new set of challenges and entailed relocating the recording machine.

Hausmann, with the aid of his assistant, spent two hours on Thursday, September 1, trying to find the best location for the machine’s two long recording horns. “Finally,” the *Deseret Evening News* reported, “he suspended them from a rope stretched across from gallery to gallery, the flaring bells of the two horns covering [the required area]—the one the sopranos and altos, the other the tenors and basses, the small ends connecting directly with the machine where the choir leader stands at the east of the organ console.”⁷ This meant the machine was positioned

in front of the organ console, “with the two large horns spread out toward the body of singers.”⁸

The actual recording began at 8:00 p.m. At Hausmann’s request, the women took off their hats, and the 300 singers clustered together as closely as they could while facing the horns. Because of the distance of the recording equipment from the organ pipes, McClellan had to play the accompaniment double forte. Meanwhile, soloists Lizzie Thomas Edward and Horace Ensign were arranged “with their faces in one of the horn bells.”

“Of course,” a newspaper critic observed, “fine shading work was out of the question; massive effects were the principal thing.”

As with the earlier efforts to record the organ’s sounds, the first order of business was to capture a few measures of music and play them back. The choir sang a few bars of the initial number to be recorded—“We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet”—and then paused as critics listened at the opening of the “reproducing horn.” When the first recorded sounds of the choir reached the ears of those around the horn, they “expressed their delight, as the work was just what had been hoped for.”

The newspaper reported that the choir members “sang with a vim, a wholesouled vigor, an earnestness, a wonderful unison and attack that carried Professor Stephens and those who were there to listen, almost off their feet.” After the choir recorded its numbers, Hausmann expressed to them his cautious optimism. Record-making, he said, was intricate and included work yet to be done in the factory. Their efforts appeared to be successful, but he would have to see how the recordings turned out in New York.

The *Deseret Evening News* exulted in the story. “What may, without stretch of the imagination, be considered the most interesting event in local musical history, occurred Thursday evening, in the tabernacle,” the newspaper trumpeted. “It was the successful recording for phonographic reproduction, of 12 numbers sung by the tabernacle choir of 300 singers within two hours, by expert Hausmann of the Columbia Phonograph company of New York City.”

For readers unfamiliar with the technology race, the



THE CHOIR’S RECORDING MILESTONES

- 1910:** First acoustic recordings made.
- 1925:** First electrical recordings made.
- 1949–50:** First two albums released. An “album” was originally a collection of individual records (one or two songs to a side) that were packaged together in a binder. New technology later made it possible to reproduce all of the songs from an album on one long-play record, which continued to be called an “album.” The choir’s two albums were released in both formats.
- 1959:** Recording of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which was included on the album *The Lord’s Prayer*, won a Grammy Award.
- 1963:** The 1959 albums *The Lord’s Prayer* and *Messiah* reached gold record status in the United States (U.S.).
- 1979:** The 1963 album *The Joy of Christmas* reached gold record status in the U.S.
- 1981:** The First digital recording, *The Power and the Glory*, released.
- 1985:** The 1965 album *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir Sings Christmas Carols* and the 1970 album *Joy to the World* reached gold record status in the U.S.
- 1987:** *Christmas Sampler*, a musical special starring opera singer Shirley Verrett, received a regional Emmy Award.
- 1991:** The 1989 Hallmark album *Carols of Christmas*, which features the choir as well as other artists, reached platinum record status in the U.S.
- 1993:** The 1992 Hallmark album *Celebrate Christmas!*, which features the choir as well as other artists, reached platinum record status in the U.S.
- 2003:** The choir founded its own recording label, which has issued nearly 30 titles to date.
- 2007:** *Spirit of the Season* released. This Christmas album, which features Norwegian singer Sissel, reached no. 1 on the Billboard Classical Charts and was nominated for two Grammy Awards.

Right: As part of its growth to international recognition, the Tabernacle Choir appeared on the Ed Sullivan show in 1958. Far right: The 1959 recording of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and the Grammy Award won for this recording.



THE CHOIR'S MOST POPULAR SONG

“You’ve got a Pop hit!”¹ The announcement, from Columbia Records’ sales department to its venerable Masterworks classical department, was startling. This was, after all, a reference to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir’s rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” recorded with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Included in the 1959 album *The Lord’s Prayer*, the Civil War-era song was released as a single and was soon played by radio disc jockeys across the United States. For 11 weeks it remained on Billboard’s Top 40 charts, where it eventually reached no. 13.²

“How often . . . does a Masterworks recording land on Top Forty charts of records most-played on popular, even rock and roll, radio station programs????” was the incredulous question posed in a Columbia Records news release.³

In October 1959 the choir performed the song at the end of the closing session general conference. President David O. McKay said the title was not consistent with the message of the conference and introduced it as “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord.” Before the singing commenced, hundreds of people who had gathered outside were allowed to file into the Tabernacle to hear the song.⁴

Later that month, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) informed the choir that it would receive a Grammy Award for “Best Performance by a Chorus.”⁵ In November the choir performed the song at the first ever televised Grammy broadcast, in a program

that featured recording artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Bobby Darin, and Nat King Cole.⁶

NARAS chairman James B. Conkling sent a letter to President David O. McKay after the performance. “From the moment the Choir’s portion of the program began, I have never witnessed such complete quiet and attention from this group,” he wrote. “When the Choir finished there was a silent moment and then an absolute thunder of applause—many of the Academy members rising as if in tribute. And many of us noticed tears on the cheeks of some of the coldest and hardest professionals in the business.”⁷

Renditions of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir have since been included on more than 30 different albums. To this day, it is considered one of the choir’s signature numbers.⁸

NOTES

1. Columbia Records, press release, Sept. 15, 1959, copy at Church History Library.
2. Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* (2000), 442.
3. Columbia Records, press release, Sept. 15, 1959.
4. “LDS Conference Highlights: Visitors Fill Temple Grounds at Closing,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1959, 13.
5. The National Trustees of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences to Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Oct. 27, 1959, Church History Library.
6. Conrad B. Harrison, “S.L. Choir Returns with Record Award,” *Deseret News*, Nov. 30, 1959, A1; Thomas O’Neil, *The Grammys: The Ultimate, Unofficial Guide to Music’s Highest Honor* (1993), 32–35.
7. James B. Conkling to David O. McKay, letter, quoted in David O. McKay, diary, Dec. 1959, Church History Library.
8. mormontabernaclechoir.org (accessed Nov. 12, 2009).

paper explained the significance of Thursday night's recording session: "The achievement is the more remarkable from the fact that for the last four years or more, the three great phonograph companies have been endeavoring to secure acceptable records of large bodies of singers. Fortunes have been expended in all kinds of experiments with mechanisms and horns, principally the latter, but to no purpose."⁹

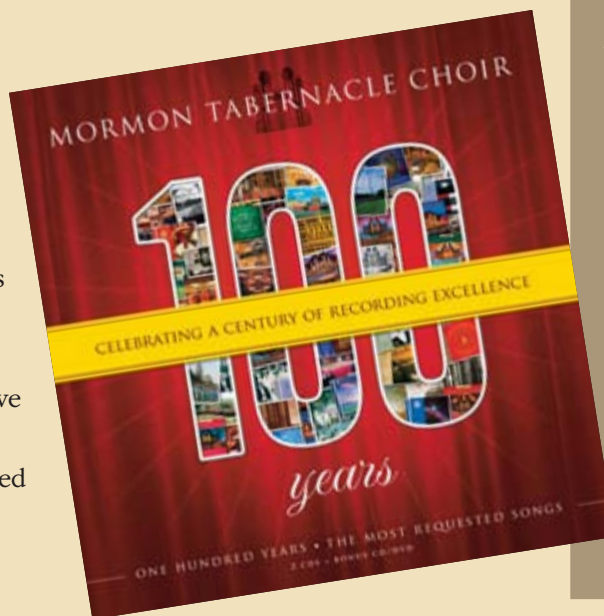
Organ and Violin Recordings

The final recording session in the Tabernacle took place on Friday, September 2. As on the other days, placement of the recording device was a major issue. On this day, the machine was positioned inside the organ case—the wooden structure housing the pipes. Violinist Willard E. Weihe had no choice but to climb inside the case too, so he could play his instrument near the horn flare. Doing so, commented the *Deseret Evening News*, "made performance in unison between violinist and organist difficult and embarrassing."

Despite the challenges, Hausmann reported that he was "entirely satisfied" with his work.¹⁰ In a final tally, the *Salt Lake Herald-Republican* reported that he recorded 12 selections by the choir, 10 by McClellan, 2 by McClellan and Weihe, and 1 by former Tabernacle organist Joseph J. Daynes Sr. Six of the recordings would be discarded due to poor quality, while several others apparently were never issued as records. The rest would be duplicated and distributed for public sale.¹¹

Impact of the Recordings

Though it is not known exactly how many finished discs were sold or how broadly they were distributed, the public response was positive, and listeners reported that the recordings touched hearts. For example, J. A. Vernon, a missionary serving in Larned, Kansas, USA, wrote in a letter dated December 20, 1910: "We recently received some phonograph records containing songs and solos by the Tabernacle choir and organ. On hearing them played, the people become inquisitive, which gives us many opportunities to explain the principles of the gospel."¹²



Left: In June 2010 the Tabernacle Choir released an album celebrating 100 years of recording excellence.

The 1910 recording session significantly expanded the choir's listening audience. Together with a series of concert tours, the sessions helped lay the foundation for a widely distributed set of recordings in 1925, as well as for a nationwide choir broadcast that began in 1929. To this day, millions worldwide listen to the broadcast, known as *Music and the Spoken Word*.

Since those first rudimentary recording sessions in 1910, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has been showcased in more than 175 albums, including 5 that reached gold record status and 2 that achieved platinum recognition. One of the choir's recordings received a Grammy Award in 1959, and another album garnered two Grammy nominations in 2007. More important than awards and honors, however, is the impact of the choir's music upon its listeners. Now through greatly improved technology, the recorded music of the choir continues to move and inspire, just as it did in 1910. ■

NOTES

1. "Big Choir Sings into Phonograph," *Deseret Evening News*, Sept. 2, 1910, 5.
2. See Ronald W. Walker, "The Salt Lake Tabernacle in the Nineteenth Century: A Glimpse of Early Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 31 (Fall 2005): 229–32.
3. "Music and Musicians," *Deseret Evening News*, Dec. 25, 1909, 15.
4. "Records to be Made of the Tabernacle Choir and Organ," *Deseret Evening News*, Aug. 20, 1910, 17.
5. "Cannot Admit Public: Recording of Tabernacle Choir and Organ Numbers Require Still House," *Deseret News*, Aug. 31, 1910, 2; "Music and Musicians," *Deseret Evening News*, Sept. 3, 1910, 15.
6. "Music and Musicians," 15.
7. "Big Choir Sings into Phonograph," 5.
8. "Music and Musicians," 15.
9. "Big Choir Sings into Phonograph," 5.
10. "Music and Musicians," 15.
11. "Last Records Secured," *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, Sept. 3, 1910, 14; "Choir and Organ Records Splendid," *Deseret Evening News*, Oct. 11, 1910, 1; spelling standardized.
12. "Messages from the Missions," *Improvement Era*, Feb. 1911, 353–54.