

Keeping Music

AT THE HEART OF WORSHIP



Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed.



By Jan Pinborough
Church Magazines

Music has always been—and always will be—at the heart of worship, at church and in the home.

Not many weeks after the Church was organized, the Lord directed Emma Smith to “make a selection of sacred hymns, . . . which is pleasing unto me, to be had in my church” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:11). The Saints needed ways to learn newly revealed gospel truths and to unite in praising God. And hymns would be at the heart of their worship and learning.

Years ago, when my family joined the Church, my parents encouraged us to learn the music of our new faith. I have some vivid memories of that time:

- Memorizing “Prayer Is the Soul’s Sincere Desire” (*Hymns*, no. 145) with my family.
- Hearing “O My Father” (*Hymns*, no. 292) and learning that I have a Heavenly Father and Mother whom I can see again one day.
- Feeling God’s love while singing “My Heavenly Father Loves Me” (*Children’s Songbook*, 228–29)—even though I lived in a desert and had never actually seen a lilac tree!

Fast forward to a sacrament meeting in late February 2020. Several members of our ward were dealing with cancer, and I felt deeply comforted when the ward choir sang “How Firm a Foundation” (*Hymns*, no. 85). A few weeks later, a series of unnerving events came along: quarantines, church cancellations, and a series of earthquakes and aftershocks. And that hymn started playing through my mind again:

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.*

Sometimes it seems like global and personal challenges are growing almost daily. More than ever, we need the spiritual sustenance of hymns, Primary songs, and other sacred music.

No Change in Purpose or Importance

However, as we changed to the two-hour schedule for Church meetings, some wondered if the role of music has been diminished in our worship. The answer is no.

1. Sacred hymns are still part of every sacrament meeting, including helping to prepare our hearts for the ordinance of the sacrament. Choir and congregational singing and other sacred music can still be planned to enrich the meeting, just as before. During the COVID-19 pandemic, sacred music was still an important part of shortened sacrament meetings, even when it was instrumental only.
2. Our children now spend half of their time in Primary learning the gospel through music.
3. In the second hour, there are no opening or closing songs for adult and youth classes. But music can still be used in classes to teach and inspire.
4. It's easier than ever to listen to sacred music on digital devices, using the Church's Sacred Music app.

Less Prescription, More Intention

Still, there have been some misunderstandings. One Easter Sunday, a teacher apologized to her Gospel Doctrine class: “I know we aren't supposed to sing in Sunday School, but I would really like to sing ‘I Know That My Redeemer Lives’ together.” That teacher is probably not alone in this misunderstanding.

In reality, music is still just as essential in our worship as it has ever been. Witness the landmark update currently underway of our hymn and children's song collections. As part of that effort, Church members worldwide submitted a remarkable 16,000 new hymns, songs, and texts.

But with fewer set times for singing in some of our Sunday meetings, we do need to be more thoughtful and intentional in planning and using music.

Two key principles can help us keep music at the heart of our worship:



*Truth is reason; truth eternal
Tells me I've a mother there.*

MUSIC IS A DIVINE LANGUAGE

Angels and God's creations praise Him with song (see Alma 36:22 and Doctrine and Covenants 128:23).

Music expresses faith (see Acts 16:25).

It expresses the joy of conversion and redemption (see Alma 5:26 and Alma 26:13).

And all will sing at the Lord's coming:

"All shall know me, who remain, even from the least unto the greatest, and shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and shall see eye to eye, and shall lift up their voice, and with the voice together sing this new song" (Doctrine and Covenants 84:98; read the text of the song in verses 99–102).

1. *Indispensable in Teaching*

We may think of talks and discussions as the primary means of delivering gospel messages at home and at church. And we may spend most of our time on those elements. But music is not an ornamental extra. It's at the very heart of teaching with power and with the Spirit.

As the Apostle Paul advised the early Saints, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16).

Music can instantly bring the Spirit into a lesson or meeting. Choosing a song to sing during a Sunday School class or a *Come, Follow Me* discussion deserves the same thoughtful, prayerful consideration as the scriptures we choose to read or the part of the lesson we choose to share. Music that is prayerfully chosen can touch hearts, leaving spiritual impressions that may last a lifetime.

2. *"A Prayer unto Me"*

At certain points, we may all experience times when we feel broken, times when the path before us is unclear. Sometimes it may seem

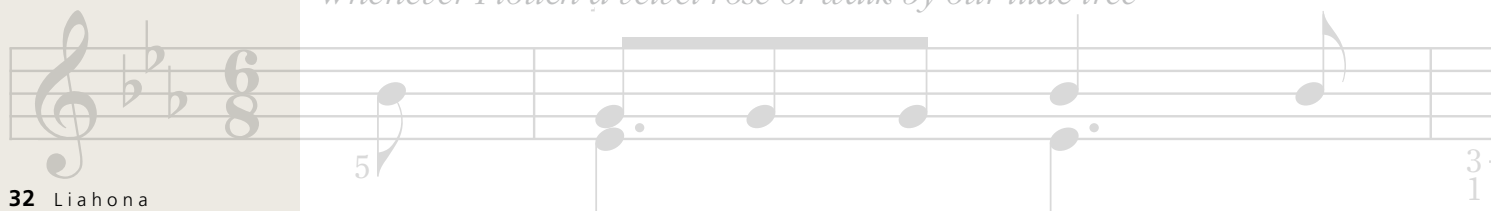
that we just keep throwing the same urgent need heavenward, without any answering response or resolution. At such times, it might be tempting to conclude that God doesn't care or that we're unworthy of His caring. Sometimes we might even feel like giving up on prayer.

For times when we feel a lack of spiritual connection with heaven, here's a comforting truth: Sacred music can actually *be* a form of prayer. The Lord Himself explained this when He assigned Emma to make our first hymnal: "For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, *the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me*" (Doctrine and Covenants 25:12; emphasis added).

And when we sincerely offer the song of our heart to Him, the Lord promised to always answer with a blessing: "And it shall



Whenever I touch a velvet rose or walk by our lilac tree





*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.*



THE POWER OF MUSIC

“Music has power to provide spiritual nourishment. It has healing power. 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.”

President Russell M. Nelson,
President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,
“The Power and Protection of Worthy Music,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2009, 16.

be answered with a blessing upon their heads. Wherefore, lift up thy heart and rejoice” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:12–13).

At one difficult point in my life, I couldn’t discern answers to my heartfelt prayers for a long period of time. A dear friend of mine was going through some difficulties of her own. But as we played and sang hymns and gospel songs together, we often experienced overwhelming feelings of solace and testimony. I now recognize that the Lord was fulfilling His promise. He *was* answering the songs of my heart, again and again. And that really *did* help me lift up my heart and go on.

On Any Given Sunday

On any given Sunday, we can be sure that some in our congregations, some in our classes, and some in our families are in the deep waters of personal affliction. Others will be in peaceful valleys with blessings overflowing. Still others will be just learning the basic truths of the gospel.

When we keep music in its proper place at the heart of our worship, we can help *all* find opportunities to feel the Spirit, to learn gospel truths, and to praise the Lord for His goodness. And we can help *all* have the songs of their hearts answered in the ways that only our loving, eternal Father can do. ■



RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT CASEY