



1-1-2016

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Marini, Reviewed by Stephen A. (2016) "Michael Hicks, *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol3/iss1/17>

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Michael Hicks. *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015.

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Mormon Studies Review, vol. 3, 2016, pp. 179–183

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Article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18809/msr.2016.0116> Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

THE MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR: A BIOGRAPHY is the most accessible and authoritative history of this unique musical ensemble yet published. Despite the vast number of newspaper articles and performance reviews that have appeared about the celebrated ensemble, there are surprisingly few book-length treatments of its origins and development, and most of them have tended toward hagiographic account and heroic narrative. For more than a half century, the standard work has been *A Century of Singing: The Salt Lake Mormon Tabernacle Choir* (1958), by longtime choir director J. Spencer Cornwall, supplemented in 1979 by Gerald A. Petersen's *More Than Music: The Mormon Tabernacle Choir* and Charles Jeffrey Calman's *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir*. Michael Hicks wrote briefly but penetratingly about the choir in *Mormonism and Music: A History* (1989); his new book, however, mines archival sources including confidential interviews with choir directors and records of the First Presidency, as well as an accumulating bibliography of recent scholarly articles and monographs about the choir to develop a comprehensive and insightful critical perspective on Mormonism's premier public institution.

The broad outlines of the choir's life are well known to Mormons and musicians alike, but Hicks adds details and commentaries that consistently illuminate and sometimes transform the familiar story. Hicks calls this account a "biography" rather than a history or an interpretation, which he narrates as both an insider and an outsider, a professor of music at Brigham Young University who does not seem to have been a member of the choir but has lived his entire life under its musical and cultural aegis. Hicks's biography integrates three principal dimensions of the choir's life: its development as a musical organization, its role as a

religious institution in the LDS Church, and its status as a public expression of Mormonism to the wider world. To each of these areas Hicks brings special strengths, including detailed commentary on repertoire and performance practice under each conductor; close attention to the complex and often-conflicted relations between conductors, their choir presidents, and the First Presidency; and careful description of the choir's landmark performances, tours, broadcasts, and recordings.

The background information in the first chapter of *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir* unfortunately suffers most from overreliance on received Mormon tradition. Hicks casts the earliest Mormon musical debate as a contest between the early American singing school's tradition of music literacy and performance instruction and the restorationist imperative of Alexander Campbell's influential Christian movement that rejected all technical instruction in music for believers as a violation of New Testament mandate. But Campbell endorsed singing school tune books as early as 1835 and urged his followers to achieve the highest standards of sung praise. Where Campbell did challenge Mormon musical practice was in his rejection of all instruments, including organs, in the performance of sacred song. Brigham Young, a vigorous supporter of singing schools, settled the matter by incorporating plans for a huge organ into the design of the 1867 Salt Lake Tabernacle. Hicks also calls "All Is Well," the tune for "Come, Come, Ye Saints," a "pioneer song" and a "trail song" when it was in fact a singing school tune published in B. F. White's *Sacred Harp* in 1844 and later, in a version closer to Mormon usage, in William Hauser's *The Hesperian Harp* (1848). More puzzling still is the complete absence of any reference to Emma Hale Smith, who compiled the first collection of Mormon hymn texts, in a study of the choir for whom the performance of hymns in worship has been an essential part of its repertoire and mission.

Once the story turns to the construction of the 1867 Tabernacle and the permanent organization of the choir, however, Hicks's narrative sparkles. Of particular interest is the replacement of American singing school music and performance practice by European theory and repertoire—and an abiding Victorian taste for a large-scale choral

sound—brought by British converts John Charles Thomas and George Careless, who took on leadership of the choir in its earliest years. Young’s enthusiastic endorsement of these changes set a surprising and lasting mandate of popular European classical repertoire for this most American of ensembles.

The core of Hicks’s biography is his examination of a century of remarkable innovations and legendary conductors beginning with the appointment of Evan Stephens as choir director in 1890. Under Stephens the still-obscure choir triumphantly took the second-place prize in the national “eisteddfod,” or singing competition, at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Hicks shows that President Wilford Woodruff endorsed the high cost, unprecedented travel, and national exposure that the contest risked as “a chance to garner massive good will with outsiders” (p. 40) at a time of the church’s protracted struggles over polygamy and Utah statehood. The church subsequently promoted the choir’s success as a mission and public relations strategy, a controversial mandate that still persists today. Hicks also details Stephens’s dismissal by President Joseph F. Smith in 1916 as the first of several such incidents in which a conductor’s sense of artistic ambition and institutional autonomy has been brought to ground by the church’s insistence that the choir serve first and foremost as a musical and spiritual resource for the Mormon community.

Under Tony Lund, Stephens’s successor, the choir made its decisive advance into national radio broadcasting. Once again the church was the initiator, creating station KSL in Salt Lake City and endorsing the choir’s first live local broadcast in 1924. Five years later the choir embarked on what would be the most important single episode in its history, the national network Sunday broadcast eventually known as *Music and the Spoken Word*, first on NBC, then on CBS, where it still thrives. Hicks provides rich details about network competition for the program, the choir’s developing choral style and repertoire for radio performance, and behind-the-scenes conflicts after 1939 between Lund’s successor Spencer Cornwall, organist Alexander Schreiner, host and homilist Richard Evans, and choir president Ike Stewart, who represented church interests.

By 1952 the Tabernacle Choir was on its way to becoming “America’s choir,” as Ronald Reagan later called it, a position coveted, as Hicks demonstrates, by church presidents from Heber Grant to David McKay and symbolized by a European tour in 1955 and performances at the inaugurations of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush. Audio technology also brought the choir to its zenith as a recording ensemble. Already a pioneer in stereophonic recording, the choir under conductor Richard D. Condie released its spectacularly successful version of Handel’s *Messiah* with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1959, followed by a Grammy award-winning performance of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in 1960. A string of subsequent popular Christmas recordings eventually developed into today’s series of annual televised and video-formatted holiday performances. Hicks’s detailed account of the ongoing artistic and commercial rivalries behind this media expansion offers an eye-opening perspective on the business side of the choir empire.

Hicks’s concluding chapter follows the careers of conductors Jay Welch, Jerold Ottley, Craig Jessop, and current director Mack Wilberg, checked and balanced by the aggressive leadership of church presidents Spencer Kimball and Gordon Hinckley and choir presidents Oakley Evans, Wendell Smoot, and Mac Christensen. During the 1980s and 1990s the choir under Ottley undertook an increasingly frenetic schedule of staple choir performances; church leadership, on the other hand, mandated a return to traditional hymns in Mormon worship, at one point restricting the choir to singing only hymn arrangements at general conference. After Jessop’s appointment as conductor in 1999, an institutional transformation began with the creation of the Orchestra at Temple Square to accompany the choir and the Bonneville Corporation, the choir’s own recording label. Although the choir continued to expand into secular repertoire and venues, its corporate management became more tightly controlled by the church. With the appointment of Mormon composer Mack Wilberg as conductor in 2008, Hicks suggests,

the choir had in a sense come full circle to Evan Stephens's era in which "homemade" music and church mission should prevail despite continuing popular success. Hicks's final assessment, an insightful and useful one, is that "the Choir's ongoing career" might best be understood as "the simple persistence of three distinct ideas: a brand, a system, and a spectacle" (p. 169).

Michael Hicks's book demythologizes much of the legendary lore surrounding the choir without in any way diminishing its extraordinary achievements. He replaces that lore with carefully documented accounts of what actually makes up the choir's daily life—its rehearsals, choral technique, and repertoire; the politics of its artistic leaders, in-house managers, and church overseers; and the ongoing struggle to find a stable mission that will enable an internationally celebrated performance ensemble to harmonize with changing demands of the globalizing church it serves. *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography* is required reading not only for Mormons and musicians, but for anyone who wants to learn about the realities of world-class music making in a hierarchical religious community.

Stephen A. Marini is Elisabeth Luce Moore Professor of Christian Studies and professor of religion in America and ethics at Wellesley College. He is the author of *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Harvard University Press, 1982/2000) and *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 2003/2013) and general editor of *The Norumbega Harmony: Historic and Contemporary Hymn Tunes and Anthems from the New England Singing School Tradition* (University Press of Mississippi, 2003). He has also served recently as series advisor for the PBS documentary *God in America* (2010) and as contributing editor for sacred music for *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2013).