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Sounding Mormonism

Sharon J. Harris and Peter McMurray

Introduction

The restoration, or founding of the LDS Church, begins with a sonic battle of wills: “My toung seemed to be swolen in my mouth, so that I could not utter.” In this opening scene of Mormonism, the young prophet-to-be, Joseph Smith, tries but fails to pray aloud as his tongue is tied by the devil. 1 When he finally succeeds in speaking, he sees a divine vision, accompanied by an inaugural command: to hear, or more precisely (in the canonical account of that event), “Hear Him!” Thus Smith is called to hear the words of Jesus Christ, who is hovering over his head in the woods of upstate New York. Though referred to as “the first vision,” this event is simultaneously steeped in sound and silence, in speech and its impossibility. Indeed, the only other direct quotation from the canonical account is Smith quoting Jesus quoting himself talking about preachers: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (JS—H 1:19; compare Matthew 15:8). Put differently, the restoration begins not merely with sound but with a nascent yet critical theory of embodied voices, a tied tongue, duplicitous

sound, and the multilayered ventriloquism that constitutes revelatory utterance, even for Jesus.

What is most striking, then, is not simply that the first vision is as much audition as vision—that is, that revelation entails sound as well as image—but rather that from the very first moment, Mormonism has been produced through sound while simultaneously theorizing about its relationship to sound. A scholarly focus on sound in Mormonism is thus the most basic of media-theoretical gestures—a shift from what to how, from text to process, from message to medium. It turns out to be surprisingly easy to recover such a sonic history of Mormonism. Sound and sound media played a central role in making Mormonism from the very beginning, whether as overt commentary about voices, mouths, and lips or as other forms of noncorporeal sound including trumpets, temples and tabernacles, scriptures and song.

In this brief essay, we introduce a handful of sound objects and practices that chart an obviously incomplete course through Mormon history. Our argument is a rather simple one: these objects do not merely sound; rather, through their sounding they shape what Mormonism as a medium and as an accretion of audiovisual mediums and techniques has been and may yet become. While some of these objects will be familiar to most readers, whether coming from the discipline of Mormon studies or media studies, this brief excavation of Mormonism and its cultural acoustics traces out important new terrain for both disciplines. The point is not simply to name these objects but to “sonify” them—to render them (correctly, if sometimes not obviously) as audible. We might call this a sonic archaeology of Mormonism, to use the language of recent media theory. We take mediums and media

practices like translation and revelation, temples and physical books (especially hymnals), and even late polygamy that are too often imagined as lacking important sound and media functions and we hear them afresh. As a note, such emphasis on religious sound need not mean a return to the devotionalism of figures like Walter Ong, whose important theorizing of an earlier version of sound studies was nevertheless founded on religious ideas of “real presence.” More circumspect possibilities exist for fusing religious and sound/media studies together, as we show—and hear—in this material microhistory of Mormonism and its resonance.

Seer stones

Apart from the golden plates that Joseph Smith found and translated to produce the Book of Mormon, perhaps no object inspires the same curiosity and puzzlement within (and beyond) Mormonism. The LDS Church recently published photographs of a seer stone that Joseph Smith apparently used during much of his translation of the Book of Mormon, as well as during earlier money-digging ventures. This notion of “translation” remains a central point of contention not only between approaches to Mormonism more generally, see John Durham Peters, “Recording beyond the Grave: Joseph Smith’s Celestial Bookkeeping,” *Critical Inquiry* 42/4 (Summer 2016): 842–64; see also Mason Kamana Allred, “Mormonism and the Archaeology of Media,” in this issue of MSR.


Mormons and non-Mormons but also within the Mormon community, from B. H. Roberts’s investigation of the book’s historicity to recent studies and seminars on the mechanics of translation. But from the perspective of media and sound studies, the seer stone raises a very different set of issues. First of all, what was the relationship between image and sound, between the visual and the oral/aural? David Whitmer recounts that Smith saw light appearing as well as a kind of parchment simulacrum, then read English words to his scribe, who then repeated it back. The stone elicits a bodily response—Smith hunching over a hat containing the stone to block out the light—as well as visual and aural sensations (seeing words, dictating them, hearing them repeated back) that allow for a complex, embodied form of information processing and transmission. Given the centrality of dictation throughout Smith’s prophetic life, it is little surprise that Oliver Cowdery would fixate on Smith’s lips and

Figure 1 Joseph Smith’s seer stone. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen and Richard E. Turley Jr. Church History Library, Salt Lake City.


6. David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ (Richmond, MO: printed by the author, 1887), 12.
mouth in his classic account of their revelatory collaboration (Joseph Smith—History, 1:71n).\(^7\)

“Adam-ondi-Ahman”

Two women instigated new musical sounds for Mormonism on September 14, 1835. The high council in Kirtland, Ohio, discussed the creation of the first Mormon hymnal, compiled by Emma Smith, and on that same day Elizabeth Ann Whitney burst into song and into tongues, singing of Adam-ondi-Ahman in an unknown language.\(^8\) Emma included an earlier hymn text in her compilation about Adam-ondi-Ahman, written by William W. Phelps. Although Joseph Smith first dictated the name Adam-ondi-Ahman in a revelation three years before, it was not until 1835 that he identified the name as referring to the valley where Adam blessed his posterity. As new converts moved to Kirtland, both Phelps’s and Whitney’s hymns helped solidify the idea of Adam-ondi-Ahman as the location where the Latter-day Saints would gather and meet with Father Adam. Connected to Emma Smith’s hymnal project and sung at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the musical declaration “Adam-ondi-Ahman” is an early expression of uniquely LDS nomenclature that, in its unusualness, indicates a distinct people with distinct sounds. “Adam-ondi-Ahman” also

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inaugurates the tradition of disseminating and generating theology through hymnody, along with the declaration of a Heavenly Mother in “O My Father” and the need to atone for the blood of Joseph Smith’s martyrdom in “Praise to the Man.” Of this pattern Mormon scholar and feminist Claudia Bushman has said, addressing other participants in Mormonism, “If you feel like writing poetry about the church, please do. It turns into doctrine.”

In spite of its status as a new religion, Mormonism closely adheres to older, oral models of scripture. Much of Mormon holy writ was first spoken, as with the translation of the Book of Mormon, many revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, and addresses by current prophets and apostles in the church’s semiannual general conferences. As these hymns illustrate, such revelatory texts may even be sung.

The Kirtland Temple

The temple is the great multimedia experience in LDS worship. Temple ceremonies today combine acting, costumes, paintings, murals, symbols, film, music, ceremonial dress, anointing oil, water, call and response, gesture, and the spoken word, which may be live or prerecorded, broadcast via speakers, voiced through veils, translated in multiple languages, and transmitted

Figure 3 Sketch by architect William Weeks of angel weather vane placed atop Nauvoo Temple, January 1846. Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

9. Claudia Bushman, Neal A. Maxwell Institute Summer Seminar meeting, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, June 18, 2014.
through headsets. Early temples also hosted multiple media formats, even of the supernatural variety. Accounts of the dedication of the temple in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836 describe experiences of visions, angels, lights, and cloven tongues of fire. Sounding media featured a rich array of saints’ voices from “an excellent choir of singers”12 to those speaking in tongues—“forty speaking at once,” from the stentorian oration of Sidney Rigdon to the hosanna shout of one thousand attendees.13 Remarkable for its account of silence as well as utterance is the story of a two-month-old infant who remained quiet through the entire eight-hour proceedings except during the hosanna shout when the child joined in: “[W]hen they shouted amen it shouted also for three times then it resumed its nursing without any alarm.”14 In addition to these earthly voices were heavenly voices. The voice of Jehovah was described “as the sound of the rushing of great waters” (D&C 110:3), and when the first washing ordinances were administered weeks earlier, Joseph Smith recorded, “[T]he gift of tongues, fell upon us in mighty power, angels mingled their voices with ours.”15 More than bringing numerous media to the temple, these accounts of the Kirtland Temple dedication depict the temple as the medium itself. The temple mediates between earth and heaven, between the human and divine, and between the living and the dead. It produces transformative and transformed sounds and voices that are otherwise inaccessible.16


Mormons have understood the temple as a kind of heavenly antenna for capturing and transmitting otherworldly voices. The multimedia approach of temple worship reinforces this model, and all types of media are used to boost the signal.

Headphones

Inspired by what he deemed to be the poor acoustics of the Salt Lake City Tabernacle, Nathaniel Baldwin set out to invent an amplified loudspeaker in the early 1900s. After doing so, he set out to build a better telephone speaker, which in turn became the basis for the first functional headphones.17 As the United States geared up for World War I, the military placed a large order for Baldwin’s headphones, creating such a massive demand that Baldwin began to rapidly expand his business, based in East Millcreek in the Salt Lake Valley. Baldwin’s headphone story points to several different important trajectories in Mormon sound and media history. First, Baldwin was one of a handful of contemporary acousticians and inventors, including the better-known Harvey Fletcher and Vern Knudsen, who became key figures at Bell Labs in the 1930s and ’40s.18 That same lineage of Mormon acousticians might


include Stanley Smith Stevens, the founder of Harvard’s famous Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory, joint home to the world’s first anechoic chamber. In addition, we might situate Baldwin within a small cohort of early twentieth-century inventors including John Browning and Philo T. Farnsworth, whose inventions (machine gun and television, respectively) brought about significant shifts in modernity more broadly with their tools of warfare and entertainment. Baldwin’s headphones are both, embodying Friedrich Kittler’s dictum that “the entertainment industry is, in any conceivable sense of the word, an abuse of military equipment.” Finally, though he was himself monogamous, Baldwin had been a supporter of post–Second Manifesto polygamy (after the LDS Church completely renounced it in policy and practice), and he used his business success to employ many of the leaders of the early Fundamentalist Latter-day Saint movement. Baldwin’s headphones thus serve as a reminder that plural marriage has its own technical apparatus—a tangle of sealings, oaths, kinship ties, manifestos, and systems of subterfuge. Indeed, polygamy has always been a media operation.

The Book of Mormon

In 2011 the creators of South Park, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, teamed up with Robert Lopez to write *The Book of Mormon* musical. The musical received rave reviews as though it were a groundbreaking exploration of Mormon life. But from the perspective of Mormon media

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21. The theme of sexuality as a media operation (or “cultural technique”) is central to the late work of Friedrich Kittler, but it also appears indirectly in Mormon studies, as in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s accounts of quilting among polygamist families in *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 336–60.
studies, or even Mormon music, it stands in dialogue with a half century of musical productions, pageants, and plays that similarly attempt to make sense of Mormonism through song, dance, and the machinery of the modern theater. The Hill Cumorah Pageant dates back nearly a century, and a number of musicals were composed in the intervening years, including productions sanctioned by the LDS Church and also others created by members or, eventually, artists such as Parker, Stone, and Lopez. Productions like the Hill Cumorah Pageant involve members reenacting scenes from the Book of Mormon, raising interesting issues concerning the performance of race (i.e., a mostly white cast performing as Lamanites) that emerge repeatedly in LDS Church films and performances. But in a more substantial way the musicalization of the Book of Mormon fits into an even older tradition within Mormonism in which the Book of Mormon is a sonic object: it is less codex than utterance, from its dictation to its text to its reception among Mormons as an object to be read aloud (e.g., as family scripture study), memorized and recited, quoted from, “ponderized,” set to Primary songs, and eventually even recorded as an audiobook.

Conclusion

These resonant objects all point to a long, audible past of Mormonism. Similarly, our efforts to tell that history—to sketch out a sonic historiography—are not particularly new either. In September 1842 Joseph Smith dictated a letter to be read in his absence at the “Grove” in Nauvoo, Illinois. This epistolary sermon would later become section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation composed of multilayered, proxy dictations (from God to Smith, Smith to his scribe, and eventually to a proxy preacher/orator) about dictations and other voices (in temple ceremonies, in the church’s history), as John Durham Peters points out in his recent discussion of Smith’s “media theology.” If section 128 lays bare a media theology of “celestial bookkeeping,” its concluding verses underscore just how central a role sound plays in that process. Indeed, Smith recounts an abbreviated history of the restoration as sound, what Peters calls a “sonic time-lapse of the history of the church.” Smith asks, “Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! A voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth; glad tidings for the dead; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy” (D&C 128:19). Smith then specifically refers to visitations from the angel Moroni, the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon plates, and priesthood restoration, among other events. Within a few verses, Smith not only recounts Mormonism’s history, but he folds into that history allusions to the history of everything, from the creation (“sons of God shout for joy”) through a lineage of archangels from Michael/Adam to Christ’s “glad tidings” to the present and beyond to the resurrection, when “the dead [will] speak forth anthems of eternal praise” (vv. 20–24). Sound has not only produced Mormonism, but it has also occasionally produced Mormon history.

By the same token, Mormonism’s extensive, if rather unorthodox, engagements with sound and media have long offered fertile ground for scholars, performers, and inventors of sound to explore. Helen Keller

offers a prime example of such attraction to the unique, even strange, vibrations of Mormonism’s sonic worlds. While visiting Salt Lake City in 1941, she requested to hear the pioneer anthem “Come, Come, Ye Saints” played on the Salt Lake Tabernacle organ.26 Mormon poet Emma Lou Thayne, who was in the audience, recounts how Keller went to the back of the organ with its five manuals and eight thousand pipes and put her hand on the console. She faced the audience, “all alone . . . her right arm extended, leaning slightly forward and touching the organ, with her head bowed.” As Alexander Schreiner played the hymn, Thayne writes, “Helen Keller stood there—hearing through her hand and sobbing.”27 Like Joseph Smith using a seer stone to translate from plates sitting across the room, Thayne also heard and saw by sensory proxy through Keller’s experience of the organ. Thayne tells of seeing her ancestors drawn from across Europe to Mormonism and of hearing their own singing and chorus: “That tabernacle, that singing, my ancestors welling in me, my father beside me, that magnificent woman [Keller], all combined with the organ . . . —whatever passed between the organ and her passed on to me.”28 Paradoxically, in the Tabernacle, a building renowned for its unique acoustics, neither Keller nor Thayne was moved by normative forms of aurality. Mormonism’s speculative, universalist streak seems well suited to embrace such noncochlear auditions so that both “he that hath ears to hear,” as well as she that possesses other means to encounter sound, may hear.

Whether through Joseph Smith’s sonic historiography or Helen Keller’s hearing through the body, mediation in Mormonism is both inescapable and a locus of sacred epiphany. Mormonism lays bare its reliance on sound and media for its production and instead reclaims them as sites of salvation. Thus, books and bodies, temples and stones, and hymns, headphones, and musicals produce and sound out

27. Thayne, Place of Knowing, 45.
28. Thayne, Place of Knowing, 45–46.
Mormonism, rendering them all as objects requiring us to listen. Echoing Smith’s question in D&C 128, what do we hear?

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