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Mormons, Opera, and Mozart

Gideon O. Burton

One of the world's great operatic works, *The Magic Flute* is the subject of this issue of *BYU Studies*, which presents a variety of perspectives from scholars and performers who have enjoyed and explored Mozart's masterpiece both critically and personally. It may seem unusual for *BYU Studies* to devote so much attention to a single operatic work, but opera is itself an inclusive art form, inviting the very sort of interdisciplinary study to which this periodical is committed.

While this opera has pleased diverse audiences from well before the beginnings of Mormonism, Latter-day Saint points of view open up the work in interesting ways. For example, Latter-day Saint doctrines help to highlight certain themes salient in *The Magic Flute* (such as the marital union of man and woman), and Mormon history shares some common cultural moments with thematic elements in the opera (such as parts of Freemasonry). Because of their history, doctrine, and sensibilities, Latter-day Saints respond to this opera uniquely, and the encounter brings something new to an established masterpiece. At the same time, this reflection reveals something back to Latter-day Saints about who they are and how their culture responds to great art: we read *The Magic Flute*, and *The Magic Flute* reads us.

There is a longstanding Mormon tradition of studying, appreciating, and encouraging the musical and dramatic arts. From the nineteenth century that tradition has specifically included opera. Even amid the persecutions and relocations of early Mormon history, Latter-day Saints devoted themselves to building theaters and opera houses, and to filling them with local and visiting performers. In Nauvoo the Seventies Hall served as a

venue for musical theater productions, and soon after the Mormons' arrival in the Great Basin many buildings specially constructed for theater and opera were erected, from the famous Salt Lake Theater to Provo's first opera house, Cluff Hall (built in 1857), to Logan's Thatcher Opera House, to Ogden's Grand Opera House (1890), to the far-flung opera house in Manassa, Colorado (1911). Even small towns such as Beaver, Utah, could brag of having an opera house (fig. 1).

These theaters were often the venue for socials, community meetings, dancing, and non-operatic theater, but opera proper was also taken seriously in Mormon culture. At the turn of the twentieth century, the first Mormon opera company was founded by siblings Emma Lucy Gates and Cecil Gates, grandchildren of Brigham Young. The Emma Lucy Gates Opera Company featured its namesake in leading roles, and Cecil conducted the orchestra.¹ This company staged operas for several seasons in the Salt Lake Theater, such as the performance in 1915 of *Camille*, which was praised from the pulpit during general conference by President Seymour B. Young of the First Council of Seventy and held up by Elder Richard R. Lyman at a later general conference as a model of an earlier generation that had played well their part "in this great work."²

Indeed, the performance and patronage of opera has been a point of distinction in Mormon culture down to the present day. Elder Thomas E. McKay took time during the General Conference in 1943 to point out that an unnamed Church member in Paris, "a young lady, is singing leading opera roles in France and Switzerland."³ Her name was not so important as the fact that Latter-day Saints were playing significant roles in the world of European opera. In 1947, Metropolitan Opera singers were announced as a significant component of the centennial pioneer celebration. Commissioned for the same occasion was the opera-pageant *The Promised Valley* by Crawford Gates, "depicting through song and pageantry the history of the pioneers as told or experienced in the imagination of the author and musician through the people who made the trek."⁴ Though more of a folk musical than a serious operatic work, this production nevertheless demonstrated to generations of those who saw this perennial favorite that the Mormon past was given dignity when expressed through formal narrative singing. In a more serious vein, Leroy Robertson's *Book of Mormon Oratorio* (1953) represented a high point in Mormon musical development. Its recorded performance was published broadly, and productions of it continue to this day.

Collectively, these are modest efforts, of course. Mormons have not established an extensive tradition of composing or staging original operas. But many talented opera singers of the faith have achieved national and



FIG. 1. The Opera House in Beaver, Utah.

international renown. Emma Lucy Gates “was the first Mormon artist to hit the ‘big time,’ performing throughout Europe and America and appearing with the Berlin State Opera.”⁵ Tenor Glade Peterson “thrilled European opera audiences, where he [was] the Zurich Opera’s leading tenor for nearly ten years.” He sang in most major European opera houses, including the Munich Opera House, the San Francisco Opera, the Salzburg Festival, and “Santa Fe’s prestigious season,” and he was the first Mormon to star at La Scala, in Milan. Peterson was “the Church’s male counterpart to Emma Lucy Gates.”⁶ Baritone Roy Samuelsen, who makes his home at Indiana University’s opera center, sang the part of Sarastro in a production of *The Magic Flute*. Lawrence P. Vincent (who provides in this issue a memoir of singing in *The Magic Flute*) spent much of his career as a tenor before audiences in Vienna (fig. 2). Ariel Bybee, mezzo soprano, has sung at the most significant venues and in the best roles. Her nearly two-decade career at the Metropolitan Opera has kept her among the best-known and best-loved American opera singers of the late twentieth century. Bybee, who has most recently been teaching at the Lee Strasberg Institute and the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, joins such musicians as Clayne W. Robison, director of opera at Brigham Young University for twenty years, in the



FIG. 2. The Vienna Opera House, as seen c. 1890. In his essay on pages 36–40 in this issue, tenor Lawrence P. Vincent describes performing the role of Tamino in *The Magic Flute* at this venue.

effort to train future professional singers. They follow a long tradition of Mormons teaching the appreciation of music in general and of opera in particular. Another well-known Mormon singer who sustains this sort of cultural commitment to opera is Michael Ballam, who in working to promote the Utah Opera Company and musical education for children has appealed to Mormon leaders' statements anticipating great artistic achievement among Latter-day Saints.

Opera represents a high point of Western cultural achievement, and so it has been natural for the Latter-day Saints, so intent upon refinement, education, and artistic development, to appreciate this multifaceted art form. In recent years operatic selections have been featured in Mormon Tabernacle Choir recordings: "The Lord Victorious" from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, "Hail, Bright Abode" from *Tannhäuser*, "Triumphal Scene" from *Aida*, and the popular "Anvil Chorus" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. But well before such recordings, the careers of famous opera singers were often noted in the pages of the *Contributor*, the *Improvement Era*, and Latter-day Saint newspapers. These performers were held up as models of refinement

for the Young Men's and Young Women's Mutual Improvement Associations, and there is evidence that the attention given to opera did indeed whet the Mormon musical appetite. The loftiest achievements of the world's musicians have taken their place in the Latter-day Saint imagination, being gradually grafted into Latter-day Saint cultural ambitions during the nineteenth century. An 1882 article in the *Contributor* is telling in this regard. "The Musician's Dream" dramatizes a daydreaming musician:

Thoughts of our present musical state—what it *is* and what it *might be*—filled his mind, and he murmured to himself, why have we no Handels, or Mozarts. . . . The musical art must be planted and nourished before noble champions like the great ones of Germany, past and present, can spring up. We must first become a musical people in very deed, not only lovers of it, but practical workers.⁷

The anonymous author goes on to fantasize a future in which accomplished renderings of Mozart and other masters will be celebrated but then eventually yield to the strains of original compositions by Latter-day Saints, equally soul stirring. Connecting this distant ambition to the present, the dreamer foresees this evolution of musical accomplishment taking place by means of the choirs of the YMMIA and the ongoing studied appreciation of past masters.

Mozart, in particular, has served Latter-day Saints as a benchmark of musical achievement. As Mormons have organized their educational and cultural institutions, Mozart has been held up as a paragon for their future success. Michael Hicks, historian of Mormon music, explains:

As part of his dream to have the Saints bring their treasures to Zion from throughout the world—and especially from Europe—[Brigham] Young directed James Smithies to oversee a new "Deseret Philharmonic Society" in 1855. This association would "promote the love and study of harmony throughout the Territory," especially the harmony of sacred choral music. The society's secretary, Jonathan Grimshaw, sent out a call to converts coming to Deseret that "we are much in want of the Oratorios of Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, etc.; the Masses of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, etc., and new works of merit."⁸

Latter-day Saints did indeed come to enjoy these musical forms and to appreciate Mozart and his fellow composers. In a paean to German culture at the beginning of his April 1950 general conference address, Elder Levi Edgar Young declared that "German music particularly has been of enduring joy to us, for in this very Tabernacle where we are assembled, the creations of Bach, Mozart, Wagner, Haydn, and the oratorios and operas of Handel have been heard with deep appreciation of the masters."⁹ Indeed, Mozart's works have not only been performed during cultural presentations in central Church venues, but anthems and solos by Mozart have been performed

during general conferences, including “Alleluia” from the motet “Exsultate, Jubilate”; “Gloria”; and “Jesu, Word of God.”

Among musical masters admired by Latter-day Saints, Mozart has a long and varied presence, figuring into Mormon thinking and the Latter-day Saint experience on many levels. “Though in the Outward Church Below,” long a part of Mormon hymnody, kept Mozart’s lilting tune an ongoing part of Latter-day Saint worship.¹⁰ Other works by Mozart have been included in German and French Mormon hymn books.¹¹ In Church periodicals, Mozart’s life and childhood have been discussed and dramatized in order to model to the youth of Zion the possibilities of great achievement by those who are young and even to exemplify the God-given faculty of memory.¹²

Most commonly, Mormons have made direct connections between the inspirational nature of classical music (in its effects or in its origins) and the inspired nature of their own faith. In a 1991 *Church News* editorial, Michael Ballam reported compiling a list of the works “considered by the world as great classics, such as Beethoven’s ‘9th Symphony,’ Brahms’s ‘Requiem,’ Bach’s ‘St. Matthew Passion,’ and Mozart’s ‘Magic Flute.’” Ballam noted that these important pieces of inspiring music were “either written or discovered within 50 years of the target date of 1830,” the date of the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹³ Regardless of the specific choices in his listing, it is culturally noteworthy that Ballam associated these celebrated musical achievements of the world’s artists with that historical time period during which Mormons believe the heavens opened wide for the latter days. To a church that believes firmly and centrally in divine revelation, it is not hyperbole to speak of inspired music.

In a similar vein, Latter-day Saint author Karl C. Sandberg sees in Mozart’s mode of composition a parallel to the inspired translating methods used by Joseph Smith: “Mozart often found appearing in his mind whole musical ideas, which he then worked into their orchestrated form. When he wrote them down, he appeared to be taking dictation from the muse.”¹⁴

Mormon belief that music plays an inspirational role akin to revelation was eloquently expressed by B. H. Roberts, who said that “a Mozart, a Beethoven, or a Handel, . . . may . . . call out from the silence those melodies and the richer harmonies that lift the soul out of its present narrow prison house and give it fellowship for a season with the Gods.”¹⁵ The alignment of divine inspiration with great music is as old as Orpheus, of course, but in Mozart, Latter-day Saints have found resonances particular to their own vision of evolving human potential and their own story about how God’s gifts—whether scriptural or musical—have come and still come to his children.

Gideon O. Burton (gideon_burton@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of English at Brigham Young University, where he teaches Renaissance literature, literature of the Latter-day Saints, and rhetoric. He earned his PhD at the University of Southern California. He is Associate Editor of *BYU Studies* and also maintains the Mormon Literature Database at BYU's Harold B. Lee Library.

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2. Seymour B. Young, in *Eighty-Sixth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 103; Richard R. Lyman, in *Ninety-First Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921), 143.

3. Thomas E. McKay, in *114th Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1943), 61.

4. David O. McKay, in *117th Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947), 117.

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